



Herbert Marcuse and Martin Heidegger: An Exchange of Letters

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*Herbert Marcuse and Martin Heidegger: An Exchange of Letters**

Letter from Marcuse to Heidegger of 28 August 1947

4609 Chevy Chase Blvd.
Washington 15, D.C.

Lieber Herr Heidegger,

I have thought for a long time about what you told me during my visit to Todtnauberg, and I would like to write to you about it quite openly.

You told me that you fully dissociated yourself from the Nazi regime as of 1934, that in your lectures you made extremely critical remarks, and that you were observed by the Gestapo. I will not doubt your word. But the fact remains that in 1933 you identified yourself so strongly with the regime that today in the eyes of many you are considered as one of its strongest intellectual proponents. Your own speeches, writings, and treatises from this period are proof thereof. You have never publicly retracted them — not even after 1945. You have never publicly explained that you have arrived at judgments other than those which you expressed in 1933-34 and articulated in your writings. You remained in Germany after 1934, although you could have found a position abroad practically anywhere. You never publicly denounced any of the actions or ideologies of the regime. Because of these circumstances you are still today identified with the Nazi regime. Many of us have long awaited a

* The two letters from Herbert Marcuse to Martin Heidegger were published in *Pflasterstrand* (Frankfurt) 279/280 (1 Jan.- 5 Mar. 1988): 46-8 (first publication, 1985). The translator would like to thank the editor of *Pflasterstrand*, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, for permission to reprint. A copy of the letter from Martin Heidegger to Herbert Marcuse may be found in the Herbert Marcuse-Archiv, Staatsbibliothek, Frankfurt am Main. The letter from Martin Heidegger appears here in print for the first time.

statement from you, a statement that would clearly and finally free you from such identification, a statement that honestly expresses your current attitude about the events that have occurred. But you have never uttered such a statement — at least it has never emerged from the private sphere. I — and very many others — have admired you as a philosopher; from you we have learned an infinite amount. But we cannot make the separation between Heidegger the philosopher and Heidegger the man, for it contradicts your own philosophy. A philosopher can be deceived regarding political matters; in which case he will openly acknowledge his error. But he cannot be deceived about a regime that has killed millions of Jews — merely because they were Jews — that made terror into an everyday phenomenon, and that turned everything that pertains to the ideas of spirit, freedom, and truth into its bloody opposite. A regime that in every respect imaginable was the deadly caricature of the western tradition that you yourself so forcefully explicated and justified. And if that regime was not the caricature of that tradition but its actual culmination — in this case, too, there could be no deception, for then you would have to indict and disavow this entire tradition.

Is this really the way you would like to be remembered in the history of ideas? Every attempt to combat this cosmic misunderstanding founders on the generally shared resistance to taking seriously a Nazi ideology. Common sense (also among intellectuals), which bears witness to such resistance, refuses to view you as a philosopher, because philosophy and Nazism are irreconcilable. In this conviction common sense is justified. Once again: you (and we) can only combat the identification of your person and your work with Nazism (and thereby the dissolution of your philosophy) if you make a public avowal of your changed views.

This week I will send off a package to you. My friends have recommended strongly against it and have accused me of helping a man who identified with a regime that sent millions of my co-religionists to the gas chambers (in order to forestall misunderstandings, I would like to observe that I was not only an anti-Nazi because I was a Jew, but also would have been one from the very beginning on political, social, and intellectual grounds, even had I been “100 per cent aryan”). Nothing can counter this argument. I excuse myself in the eyes of my own conscience, by saying that I am sending a package to a man from whom I learned philosophy from 1928 to 1932. I am myself aware that is a poor excuse. The philosopher of 1933-34 cannot be completely different than the one prior to 1933; all the less so, insofar as you expressed and grounded your enthusiastic justification of the Nazi state in philosophical terms.

Letter from Heidegger to Marcuse of 20 January 1948

Lieber Herr Marcuse,

I received the package mentioned in your letter of August 28. I believe that I am acting in accordance with your wishes and in a way that will reassure your friends if I allow its entire contents to be distributed among former students who were neither in the Party nor had any association whatsoever with National Socialism. I thank you for your help also on their behalf.

If I may infer from your letter that you are seriously concerned with [reaching] a correct judgment about my work and person, then your letter shows me precisely how difficult it is to converse with persons who have not been living in Germany since 1933 and who judge the beginning of the National Socialist movement from its end.

Regarding the main points of your letter, I would like to say the following:

1. Concerning 1933: I expected from National Socialism a spiritual renewal of life in its entirety, a reconciliation of social antagonisms and a deliverance of western *Dasein* from the dangers of communism. These convictions were expressed in my Rectorial Address (have you read this *in its entirety?*), in a lecture on "The Essence of Science" and in two speeches to students of [Freiburg] University. There was also an election appeal of approximately 25-30 lines, published in the [Freiburg] student newspaper. Today I regard a few of the sentences as misleading [*Entgleisung*].

2. In 1934 I recognized my political error and resigned my rectorship in protest against the state and party. That no. 1 [i.e., Heidegger's Party activities] was exploited for propaganda purposes both here and abroad, no. 2 [his resignation] hushed up for equally propagandistic reasons, failed to come to my attention and cannot be held against me.

3. You are entirely correct that I failed to provide a public, readily comprehensible counter-declaration; it would have been the end of both me and my family. On this point, Jaspers said: that we remain alive is our guilt.

4. In my lectures and courses from 1933-44 I incorporated a standpoint that was so unequivocal that among those who were my students, none fell victim to Nazi ideology. My works from this period, if they ever appear, will testify to this fact.

5. An avowal after 1945 was for me impossible: the Nazi supporters announced their change of allegiance in the most loathsome way; I, however, had nothing in common with them.

6. To the charges of dubious validity that you express "about a regime

that murdered millions of Jews, that made terror into an everyday phenomenon, and that turned everything that pertains to the ideas of spirit, freedom, and truth into its bloody opposite,” I can merely add that if instead of “Jews” you had written “East Germans” [i.e., Germans of the eastern territories], then the same holds true for one of the allies, with the difference that everything that has occurred since 1945 has become public knowledge, while the bloody terror of the Nazis in point of fact had been kept a secret from the German people.

Letter from Marcuse to Heidegger of 12 May 1948

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Lieber Herr Heidegger,

For a long time I wasn't sure as to whether I should answer your letter of January 20. You are right: a conversation with persons who have not been in Germany since 1933 is obviously very difficult. But I believe that the reason for this is not to be found in our lack of familiarity with the German situation under Nazism. We were very well aware of this situation — perhaps even better aware than people who were in Germany. The direct contact that I had with many of these people in 1947 convinced me of this. Nor can it be explained by the fact that we “judge the beginning of the National Socialist movement from its end.” We knew, and I myself saw it too, that the beginning already contained the end. The difficulty of the conversation seems to me rather to be explained by the fact that people in Germany were exposed to a total perversion of all concepts and feelings, something which very many accepted only too readily. Otherwise, it would be impossible to explain the fact that a man like yourself, who was capable of understanding western philosophy like no other, was able to see in Nazism “a spiritual renewal of life in its entirety,” a “redemption of occidental *Dasein* from the dangers of communism” (which however is itself an essential component of that *Dasein*!). This not a political but instead an intellectual problem — I am tempted to say: a problem of cognition, of truth. You, the philosopher, have confused the liquidation of occidental *Dasein* with its renewal? Was this liquidation not already evident in every word of the “leaders,” in every gesture and deed of the SA, long before 1933?

However, I would like to treat only one portion of your letter; otherwise my silence could be interpreted as complicity.

You write that everything that I say about the extermination of the Jews applies just as much to the Allies, if instead of “Jews” one were to insert “East Germans.” With this sentence don’t you stand outside of the dimension in which a conversation between men is even possible — outside of Logos? For only outside of the dimension of logic is it possible to explain, to relativize [*auszugleichen*], to “comprehend” a crime by saying that others would have done the same thing. Even further: how is it possible to equate the torture, the maiming, and the annihilation of millions of people with the forcible relocation of population groups who suffered none of these outrages (apart perhaps from several exceptional instances)? From a contemporary perspective, there seems already to be a night and day difference in humanity and inhumanity in the difference between Nazi concentration camps and the deportations and internments of the post-war years. On the basis of your argument, if the allies had reserved Auschwitz and Buchenwald — and everything that transpired there — for the “East Germans” and the Nazis, then the account would be in order! If however the difference between inhumanity and humanity is reduced to this erroneous calculus, then this becomes the world historical guilt of the Nazi system, which has demonstrated to the world what, after more than 2000 years of western *Dasein*, men can do to their fellow men. It looks as though the seed has fallen upon fertile ground: perhaps we are still experiencing the continuation of what began in 1933. Whether you would still consider it to be a “renewal” I am not sure.

Translated by Richard Wolin