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On Richard Wolin's "Earth and Soil: Heidegger and the National Socialist Politics of Space"

Wolin's chapter undertakes a reading of Heidegger's analyses of spatiality in light of the intellectual milieu of nazism, with its sources in *Lebensphilosophie* ("the philosophies of life") and the general right leaning criticisms of modernity. Two distinct arguments, however, are run together in Wolin's reading, which are acknowledged as distinct: first, that Heidegger's use of a certain set of terms and tropes relating to space demonstrate conscious affinities of the author with the general ideologies of fascism and proto-fascist modernism; and secondly, that Heidegger's philosophy is in its essence of a kind with such thinking and has no legitimacy of its own, but rather only as part of a reaction against modernity and rationalism. That there is a distinction between these arguments is elided by Wolin. I believe he has compellingly made a case for a greater involvement of Heidegger with far right ideology; but a poor case for the theoretical illegitimacy of Heidegger's work, and the intrinsic superiority of his own theoretical visions. I do not think Wolin's interpretation of Heidegger stands up: but its challenge, especially as a work of historical scholarship, is a great one.

The facts Wolin puts forward are, broadly, summarized thusly: throughout the entirety of his philosophical oeuvre, Heidegger makes use of a set of related terms – *Raum* ("space"), *Erde* ("Earth"), *Volk* ("people"), *Heimat* ("homeland", and, most ominously *Boden* (one half of the slogan *Blut und Boden*, "blood and soil") – that are also to be found in the rhetoric of both active Nazi ideologues and the general intellectual and cultural milieu from which this ideology is often thought to have grown. All of these terms have in common their relation to an imaginary of *Bodenständigkeit*, "rootedness" in Wolin's translation; an imaginary of belonging to a primordial source in the Earth. "Heidegger's defense of ontological rootedness betrayed a long-standing German Romantic prejudice concerning the unique spiritual confluence between the Volk, on

the one hand, and Heimat, Boden, Landschaft (landscape), and "Mother Earth," on the other" (250).

Wolin notes the presence of and privilege accorded to these terms in many of Heidegger's vaunted analyses of human spatiality. "In his Kassel lectures...", Wolin writes, "in which Heidegger outlined the research program of existential phenomenology, he stressed *Bodenständigkeit's* indispensability as a methodological desideratum" (254). One finds such rhetoric, unsurprisingly, in major war time works such as *Introduction to Metaphysics* and *The Origin of the Work of Art*, but Wolin notes the prevalence of related rhetoric even as far back as Heidegger's earliest philosophical writing in 1919, in which Heidegger writes about a science of the primordial, "an *Urwissenschaft*: a 'science of origins' that was engaged in a phenomenological quest to 'disclose' (*entdecken*) a primordial substratum of Being an archaic stratum that "Platonism" and Western metaphysics" had concealed (249).

The Heideggerian imaginary of *Bodenständigkeit* is, Wolin demonstrates, writ large all throughout the works of the prominent ideologues of *Lebensraum* and Germany's violent imperial expansion, as well as proponents of anti-semitic mythos, knowledge of which Heidegger cannot be said to have been innocent of. For instance, he was, we learn, friends with Alfred Baumler<sup>1</sup>, one of the foremost Nazi intellectuals, as well an admirer of Hans Grimm's massive *lebensraum* screed titled, significantly, *Volk ohne Raum*.

Wolin stresses the essential link between this imaginary and that Jewish antisemitism and racial exceptionalism.

He [Heidegger] held that geopolitical differences entailed racial differences: they accounted for a Volk's "ontological specificity," or "*Seinsart*." In Heidegger's eyes, Germany's ontological superiority -- its loftier "*Seinsweise*"--justified the Third Reich's geopolitical and territorial entitlements. Conversely, Heidegger denigrated "unrooted" peoples. He adjudged them ontologically deficient, insofar as they

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<sup>1</sup> Baeumler, both for his writings on myth and his influential Nietzsche interpretation, is a recurrent presence throughout Wolin's piece. The link to Heidegger is drawn out most explicitly in the subsection "The Heidegger-Baumeler Alliance," Wolin 297-302

lacked a symbiotic relationship with their environment. As paragons of such ontological deprivation, Heidegger singled out "Jewish nomads," who, "having been made nomadic by the desolation of wastelands and steppes," lacked a fixed relationship to "space" and 'soil.'" (263)

Wolin thus opposes contemporary readings of Heidegger's thinking on space which recognize in it an "emancipatory" strain. Against such readings, Wolin says boldly that "An attentive reconsideration of the developmental trajectory of Heidegger's topography of "space" and 'soil,' *Raum* and *Boden*, belies the suggestion that his approach to *Raumpolitik* culminated in a dialectic of emancipation" (246). Against the more contemporary theoretical readings, Wolin writes that

During the 1930s, Heidegger's recourse to a semantics of "Earth" and "Soil"- *Erde* and *Boden* - reflected his ontological-historical "Turn" from the existential ontology of Being and Time to the "metaphysics of German Dasein. This reorientation of Heidegger's *Denkweg* was accompanied by a heightened infusion of mythical, chthonic, and obscurantist themes in his work. (248)

Wolin does not allow any deferral to the primacy of the conceptual – of the philosophical over the ideological, to echo Wolin's subtitle – in his reading of such passages<sup>2</sup>. Affirmations of the Germans "the most metaphysical people"<sup>3</sup>, avowals of the privileges of state founders in the exercise of violence<sup>4</sup>, excoriations of homelessness among "Jewish nomads," are not read as incidental, but rather as forming an ideological bond with Heidegger's most fundamental concepts, and with nazi ideology as a whole. The most chilling piece of evidence cited by Wolin to this end, and the most emblematic of what Heidegger stands here accused, is the allusion

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<sup>2</sup> Wolin's denial of any possibly accidental or contingent character to Heidegger's anti-semitic remarks in, for instance, The Black Notebooks relative to his other writings is one of Wolin's most insistent points: the following passage is characteristic: "Far from being contingent or adventitious, Heidegger's aversion to Jewish influence was an existential judgment: a conviction that was largely predicated on his ontology of rootedness. Heidegger regarded Jewish "rootlessness" as an emblem of Jewish perdition: an ontological stain that permanently consigned the Jewish people to "inauthenticity," insofar as Heidegger embraced "rooted- ness" as a sine qua non for "authenticity." (248)

<sup>3</sup> Wolin 270-271 gives an extended interpretation of this passage in light of Nazi ideology

<sup>4</sup> The section "'State Founders' as 'Violent Ones'" (271-275) analyzes this notion in light of Heidegger's reading of Carl Schmitt

which Heidegger makes to a *völlige Vernichtung*, a “complete annihilation,” of the domestic enemy.<sup>5</sup>

I do not think it would be responsible intellectually simply to dismiss these as incidental, to not answer the questions raised by such facts. While such matters will always be ones of speculation and interpretation rather than of concrete fact, it seems implausible, in light of this evidence, that Heidegger was unaware of the commerce between his terms and those of the far right milieu. It is indeed necessary to take such things in their full gravity. But Wolin's argument is not confined to the facts, nor even to the thesis simply of their mutual relevance, but includes a profounder theoretical claim that is never spelled out but always implicit: that Heidegger's philosophy is not something only involved in, but is in deeper sense *exhausted* by – has no legitimacy apart from – its purported ideology; an ideology which Wolin identifies with the opposition to his own conception of rationalistic humanism.

When, for instance, Wolin takes readers to task for not understanding the potential historical sources of Heidegger's arguments about spatiality, he seems implicitly to disallow that legitimate philosophical questions about the category of space and all its problems and ambivalences are even addressed. Perhaps I am being unfair, exercising too much of my own suspicion. At one point, Wolin even acknowledges that references to *Bodenständigkeit* are “not inherently reducible to his support for Nazism” (253). Yet such remarks are rare; there is no significant allowance that Heidegger was writing about many of the things he purported to write about; about, for instance, the determination of entities within a fundamental ontology, about the rethinking of basic philosophical and experiential categories, about the particular historicity attendant upon philosophical discourse, about the relation of language to being. Wolin acknowledges in his opening paragraph the unique territory in which Heidegger sought to work

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<sup>5</sup> Thus, some eight years prior to the Wannsee Conference, at which the “Final Solution” to the Jewish question was set in motion, Heidegger, inspired by this amalgamation of Schmitt and Heraclitus, donned the mantle of a prophet of “völlige Vernichtung” or “total annihilation.” (268-269)

when he remarks that “the paradigm of Existenz consciously abandoned the presuppositions of transcendental subjectivity in favor of the embodiment and situatedness of the knowing subject” (245). Yet Wolin continuously assimilates this philosophical project to the crudest *lebensphilosophie*. Surely, Wolin knows that Heidegger was not a vitalist; that a criticism of Bergson forms a major part of *Sein und Zeit*, and that even during his period as an avowed party member, “biologism” (as represented by Klages, with whom Wolin identifies Heidegger at several points) was a prominent philosophical *bete noir* for Heidegger<sup>6</sup>. *Lebensphilosophie ist nicht mehr*, goes a regular Heideggerian refrain, *als Pflanzenbotanik*; “a philosophy of life is no more than botany of plants”; that is, the whole *lebensphilosophie* is misjudged in its essence. Do these observable facts about Heidegger’s own philosophy simply not register? None of this is to make the case for “salvaging” some part of Heidegger that one would want to separate from the “corrupted” parts. Very possibly, being done with Heidegger *tout court* may be the most philosophically prudent move one could make. But that upon which decision is to be made is not even present in this chapter.

Wolin’s theoretical tendentiousness is most clear in later sections, in which Heidegger’s supposed irrationalism is contrasted with that of various advocates of what Wolin variously identifies with “reason,” “the enlightenment,” “the west,” and “humanism,” and all of whom are allowed to totally judge Heidegger’s thought without challenge. Wolin writes the following: “Whereas Kant’s moral philosophy foregrounded the nexus between moral autonomy and human freedom, Heidegger, in his haste to disqualify the ideal of self-positing subjectivity, consigned human being to new forms of heteronomy” (305). The implication seems to be that “autonomy” has its ideal already given to it, and that any philosophical challenge to this is *necessarily* heteronomy. There is reference for instance to Heidegger’s repudiation of “language as critique” and “the defetishizing powers of language,” as well “the pivotal role that ‘discourse’ (*Rede*) plays in demystifying dogmatic claims to social authority,” as if all these were absolute

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<sup>6</sup> This is a major theme of Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche

normative grounds, challenge to which can only be irrationalist deviation. In the same breath, he poses the following conditional: "If, as Hans Blumenberg claimed, the 'legitimacy of the modern age' is necessarily tied to the project of human self-determination, Heidegger's 'ontological fatalism' presents itself as a stumbling block to the goal of emancipation in all of its modalities and manifestations" (432). I do not accept this conditional, at least not on the face of it; nor the implication of a privileged relation between "rationalism" and human freedom that has been brought to light by "modernity" in "the west" as an unique light of universal history. I have nowhere read from Wolin a criticism expressing precisely WHY Heidegger's critiques of rationalism – its inadequacies to what it would apprehend, its arbitrariness and basically accidental historical emergence, the injustice by which it calls itself necessary and original, and its dreary consequences in a century of population control and atom bombs – is inadequate; only that it is must be assimilated to Baumeler and ultimately Hitler. It is Wolin here who seeks to frighten us with "chthonic" depths. Wolin finally expresses his horror with Heidegger

When pressed in the "Letter on Humanism" to explicate the difference between Being and beings, Heidegger embraced a standpoint that, with breathtaking frankness, glorified humanity's subordination to nameless and mysterious Higher Powers. "Man does not decide whether and how beings appear, whether and how God and the gods or History and Nature come forward into the lighting of Being, come to presence and depart," Heidegger avowed. The advent of beings lies in the destiny of Being. (305)

I do not hear anything of frightening determinate forces in this passage. This passage, from the first writing of Heidegger's I ever read, speaks to me now as it did then: as a beautiful affirmation of human experience as something not enclosed in the narrow confines of its perspectives, something which does not have to take itself as the ultimate, Protagorean measure of things. By contrast, Wolin's insistence on "humanism" and the ideals of "reason" seem to me to have no little power to license, not simply conformity and coercion, but terror and violence; to this end, it is significant that among Wolin's heroic advocates of reason is Stalinist

ideologue György Lukács, whose deranged screeds on behalf of “reason” shamelessly defended state led heteronomy in the name of just this unassailable “humanism.”

If nothing else, Wolin’s discourse at least puts me in mind of what Foucault wrote of a certain “simplistic and authoritarian alternative” proposed as “blackmail of the enlightenment”: “you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism... or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then to try to escape from its principles of rationality (which may be seen... as good or bad)” (313). For myself, there is far more to say about Heidegger than an assignment of one of two oppositions.

Yet while I do not share Wolin’s faith in “reason” (and by extension, his distrust of any spurious “unreason”), I at least feel sympathy with the question he asks implicitly in presenting “Heidegger in ruins:” to what extent is the work, not simply of philosophers, or even intellectuals broadly – but of all responsible, discursive individuals answerable to their life and history, both the ones they confront and the ones they inherit. I cannot argue that Heidegger was not, in the light of such facts as Wolin presents, a profoundly irresponsible human being, one who has much to answer for. Yet neither can I accept Wolin’s conclusions about his philosophy; a philosophy which remains, however uneasily for my conscience, one of the very baedekers by which I navigate the confusion and horror these my times – a horror in which (I would never want to dispute) Heidegger had his share.

Works Cited

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