**Heidegger, Martin (1889-1976)**

Born in Meßkirch, Germany, Martin Heidegger is renowned as a leading twentieth-century philosopher of existentialism and phenomenology with far-reaching influence in the western world. Heidegger helped advance – at the same time as he radicalized – the phenomenological project initiated by his mentor, Edmund Husserl. The publication of his magnum opus, *Sein und Zeit* (1927; *Being and Time*), a work ranked by his student Emmanuel Levinas as one of the five greatest texts in the history of western philosophy, established Heidegger as a major voice in European philosophy. Demolishing the claims and pretensions of the Cartesian subject, this work also gave expression to the groundless nature of *Dasein* (‘being-there’), its inexorable projection towards the nothingness of its being and its struggle for authenticity, ideas that would shape the work of Alberto Giacometti, Paul Celan, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Heidegger’s relationship to modernism is simultaneously complementary and conflicted. Following in the wake of Friedrich Nietzsche’s sweeping philosophical attack, Heidegger’s work looms large as one of the most important philosophical critiques of the western tradition, inspiring a wide-range of modernist and postmodern artists and theorists. Yet his mature work also exhibits a notable conservative streak that runs counter to some of the experimental and innovative thrust of modernist culture. Moreover, despite its unparalleled creativity and inventiveness, modernism also retained elements of an unquestioned rationalism that Heidegger rigorously rejects. The pronounced Cartesianism of Le Corbusier and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, as well as the structuralist theories of Lévi-Strauss, is indicative of a form of modernist expression that is indelibly marred by essentialist preconceptions. For Heidegger, these modernist endeavours are uncritically embedded in a philosophical vision dating back to Plato’s preoccupation with conceiving a timeless intellectual and moral geometry. For Heidegger, the western obsession with order and abstractness reaches its apex with Descartes’ *mathesis universalis* – the consummation of the rationalist dream for a grand unified theory of reality. Certain strands of modernism fail to recognize their own complicity with the western obsession with reason, perfect clarity and certainty.

As a consequence of his growing interest in mysticism, Heidegger’s reservations with modernity became accentuated over time. What may have begun as a focused critical concern with the Cartesian subject eventually turned into a stronger allergic reaction against the modern age *in toto*. For the later Heidegger, the constant and incessant search for novelty that characterizes modernism is itself a symptom of an unbridled subjective will. From the 1940s onwards, even Nietzsche’s thought is held up as an example of human assertion and violence towards nature and the earth as a whole. Much of the anti-humanist thrust of the later Heidegger’s legacy left its mark on an entire generation of mostly French post-structuralist thinkers, including Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. While embracing certain aspects of his radical critique of western thought, these authors nevertheless have kept their distance from the more deeply conservative undercurrents in Heidegger’s later philosophy and have also criticized Heidegger’s quiet complicity with and sympathies for the Nazi regime.

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**List of works**

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**References and further reading**

Pippin, R. B. (1991) *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture,* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Zimmerman, M. E. (1990) *Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, and Art,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.