

Caught in the Trap of His Own Metaphysics

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The history man: Disillusioned with Nazi education policy, Heidegger worked out his own project for German renewal (credit: Getty)

Martin Heidegger's *Black Notebooks* — the intellectual scrapbook the philosopher began keeping during the Nazi years — are, on any showing, a major publication, and will be indispensable not just for understanding Heidegger, but also for any account of the intellectual landscape during the early Nazi years. Ultimately, the notebooks show that we have to rethink both of the standard theories: either that Heidegger's Nazism was continuous with his philosophy and therefore somehow disqualifies him from serious philosophical consideration, or that it was an aberration unconnected with his philosophy and can therefore be ignored by intellectuals. The *Notebooks* make clear that his National Socialism was very much of a piece with his philosophy — but also that it was all but alien to the militaristic blood-and-soil socialism that later became identical with the term Nazism.

The recent publication comprises three volumes of notebooks: a 600-page volume spanning the years 1931-38, a 450-page volume from 1938-39, and a further 300-page volume written in 1939-41. The part of most immediate interest, from which we had expected the most controversial material, is the first, which covers the years of Heidegger's direct involvement with the party. This turns out to be an honest journal — overweening, earnest, comic, even strangely touching — of the failure of the philosopher's university rectorship at Freiburg and its aftermath, with meaty new information about his vision for philosophy, the university and Germany.

We already knew that Heidegger's institutional involvement with the Nazi party — in particular, his agreement to become rector of Freiburg University in 1933 — was motivated less by political enthusiasm than by a long-held ambition for university reform. The inadequacy of modern universities (which, Heidegger complained, were becoming mere polytechnics), and the squeezing of philosophy departments by efficiency reviews on the

one hand and church control on the other, had worried him since the beginning of his university career. At the time of Heidegger's rectorship, the Nazi party had not yet developed a unified education policy, and it is clear from his inaugural address and the letters surrounding his acceptance of the post that Heidegger was hoping to seize the moment to put into action the intellectual renewal he had been writing and lecturing about for a decade. That he was soon disillusioned becomes clear both in a series of disappointed letters to friends (complaining that a very differently-minded candidate had been appointed minister of education and that he, Heidegger, had not been invited to any education policy meetings at the higher level), and in his premature resignation from the rectorship in early 1934. Heidegger never dabbled in party business again.

What the *Notebooks* add to this account are details both of Heidegger's increasing disgruntlement with party politics and of the philosophical ideas underpinning his own ambition for reform. As far as the former is concerned, it is remarkable how sharply he criticises the party even at the height of his political engagement. Critics have often dismissed as retrospective whitewashing Heidegger's 1945 profession that by taking up the rectorship he had "hoped to counter the advancement of the threatening supremacy of the party apparatus and the party doctrine". But the 1933-34 notebooks bristle with abuse about the obstinate, supercilious anti-intellectualism of the party and the fact that the party leadership is dictating tedious and ineffectual institutional reshuffles (including *Gleichschaltung*, the subjugation of universities to National Socialist political aims) that do nothing towards true reform.

Equally interesting is the positive aspect of Heidegger's criticism: a vision of renewal that resituates the call to an authentic life issued in *Being and Time* within a romantic nationalism familiar from Fichte, Hegel and Hölderlin, and precariously projected on to the Nazi movement. Six years earlier, in his philosophical runaway hit *Being and Time*, Heidegger had tried to reform his countrymen's relationship to both philosophy and life, arguing that the "question of Being", far from being a metaphysical curio, was in fact at the heart of every human existence. Being human, he argued, simply meant being able and called to recognise the infinite possibilities but also the terrible precariousness of existence, and to "stand in the storm" of that exposure, rejecting the false security both of appetite-driven drifting and of socially dictated roles.

When he opens his philosophical journal of 1931-32, it is with the dejected refrain that no one "gets" *Being and Time*: instead of changing their lives, people sit in cafés prattling about authenticity and publish half-baked articles about anxiety. How, Heidegger asks again and again, can his project — which should elicit a consciously lived life, not more chatter — be actualised, and not merely by one or two exceptional individuals, but among a whole generation of young Germans?

His despondency lasts until the end of his 1931-32 notebooks. Then, in the autumn of 1932, Heidegger pricks up his ears at the young Hitler's grave talk about the greatness of the German people, and the need for discipline, suffering, and the shedding of false securities in order to realise its potential. In November 1932, Heidegger writes excitedly to his friend Rudolf Bultmann (who was never a Nazi, and later joined the regime-resisting Confessing Church) that National Socialism might be a movement with enough driving force to instil in Germany as a whole the kind of conscious life he envisions. Bultmann agrees that although he regrets National Socialism's consolidation into a political party, the "actual movement was, and perhaps still is, something great, with its instinct for the ultimate, its feeling of solidarity, and its discipline".

Bultmann's sympathetic response may seem shocking; but in reality, it merely shows how unspecific the National Socialist programme still was in the early Thirties. To Heidegger,

as to many other intellectuals at the time, it seemed less an innovation than a return to the great nationalist tradition of the 19th century.

The nationalism of the educated middle classes had, from its beginnings in the Napoleonic Wars, been a glorification of the German national "spirit" (*Geist*) as nothing less than a pure expression of the quasi-divine "world spirit" which would, in its self-realisation, perfect the world. This nationalism was, at heart, a matter of education as much as of political or military action, and played into the rise of the German research universities. In 1808, Fichte published his conviction that it was in the Germans that "the seed of human perfection is most decisively planted, and to whom progress in this development is entrusted". "If you perish in this your essence," he warned his countrymen, "then all hope of the entire human race for salvation from the depths of its evils perishes with you." In 1821, Hegel declared that Germany's ascendancy would mark the "absolute rule" of spirit, in which "all peoples would find their salvation". This spiritual or intellectual nationalism was so deeply rooted that during the First World War it was exploited to romanticise German militarism: "This army," Pastor Karl König preached, "is an embodiment of our national spirit"; and the philosopher Adolf Lasson chimed in, "Our army and navy too are a spiritual power."

After the sluggish and depressed Weimar years, many intellectuals, including Heidegger, saw in the National Socialist movement a potential renewal of this spiritual-intellectual vision, and in Hitler's promised Reich the quasi-messianic kingdom envisioned by Fichte and Hegel. At the beginning, Nazi leaders encouraged these projections: "the Third Reich" as an epithet for the Germany of the future was not just a reference to the two preceding "German" empires, but also to Joachim of Fiore's apocalyptic periodisation of history, in which the empires of God the Father (Old Testament) and the Son (New Testament and Church) would be followed by an apocalyptic "third empire" of the Holy Spirit.

Heidegger had hinted at such hope for renewal in the last part of *Being and Time*, and spelled it out in the Thirties: again and again in the *Black Notebooks*, he refers to the "distant calling" of the German people to an unprecedented "depth of existence and breadth of horizon", spearheaded by an "intellectual elite strong enough to give new shape to the tradition of the Germans". In 1932, Heidegger looked to Adolf Hitler to rally such an elite.

But Hitler had struck out on a different course. Dismissing as a bourgeois obfuscation the old, "spiritual" understanding of the German nation, he defined *Volk* instead as "a substance of flesh and blood" requiring racial purification and *Lebensraum*. If this people was to have a religious outlook at all, it would be in the form of the "religion of blood" delivered in Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century*. Rosenberg located the fatal flaw of Christianity in its disregard for the "law of blood": "the stream of blood-red, real life, which rushes through the veins of all true peoples and every culture" and "alone enables the creation and maintenance of values". Heidegger, too, by now dismissed Christianity as an ossified system that evaded rather than encouraged spiritual effort; but his hope was for a people trained in radical questioning and intellectual striving, not steeped in blood-and-soil nationalism.

Heidegger was neither unaware of, nor embarrassed by, this conflict with the party line, though he probably underestimated the Nazis' commitment to it. His 1933-34 notebooks are full of scorn for the "vulgar Nazism" peddled by the media and politicians, with its mix of "ethical materialism" and "dull biologism". The definition of the Volk as a biological organism, he thought, reduced it to an absurdity — "a giant squid rolling around in space, only to be washed up, when it has rolled around enough, at the edge of nothingness." What the people needed was a "spiritual-intellectual Nazism", addressing them as a community with a spiritual-intellectual calling. In his 1933 rectoral address, audaciously

entitled "The Self-Assertion of the German University", Heidegger tried just that, folding the military service and labour service introduced by Hitler back into the three-tiered structure of Plato's ideal republic, administered by philosopher kings, workers and soldiers: "The three commitments — through the people to the destiny of the state in its spiritual-intellectual mission — are equally aboriginal to the German character. The three services springing from them — labour service, military service, and intellectual service — are equally important and of equal rank."

But if Heidegger hoped to use the spark of the ongoing political revolution to light the fire of a second, spiritual-intellectual one, he was disappointed. The diary entries of 1933-34 are full of frustrated complaints: his colleagues are using *Mein Kampf* as a template on which to churn out flimsy "re-evaluations" of old texts; the students are neglecting their studies to hang out on factory floors; and the party leadership is enforcing ineffectual institutional reforms and dismissing his ideas. Over the course of the academic year 1933-34, Heidegger increasingly felt that his rectoral duties, at which he had never been very good, were keeping him from his "true intellectual task", the reform of philosophy. In April 1934, he wrote in italics: "*I stand at the end of a failed year.*"

This failure dashed Heidegger's optimism that the National Socialist movement would catalyse his hoped-for "turn of the age". But it changed nothing about that hope itself, and in the following six years, during which he published nothing, he worked out his vision for German renewal. He eventually transformed it into a revolutionary account of the whole history of Western philosophy which — lifted from its nationalist soil — would make his name in the English-speaking world. The notebooks of the years 1935-41 are therefore a hugely exciting publication: a live record of Heidegger's famous ideas taking shape. But for the moment, any assessment of their significance for understanding the so-called "late Heidegger" is likely to be displaced by the tyranny of the urgent: his repeated mention of the "tenacious dexterity of calculation and banking and shuffling that constitutes the foundation of the Jews' worldlessness". These references are of urgent concern not so much as evidence of a privately-held anti-Semitism—which was too common in the history of the Christian West to be a reliable criterion for hindsight discrimination — but as threads in the cloth of his philosophical experiments. The notebooks of these years are no diary or chronicle: there are few dates and no direct references to current events. Heidegger's references to the Jews are not political asides, but part of his philosophical project.

In the middle years of the Nazi regime, Heidegger distilled his objections to the soulless efficiency of the party into a criticism of "technology", by which he meant not a branch of science or a type of equipment, but a way of engaging with the world: to think "technologically" is to see the world as nothing but a source of raw material to be sorted, tallied up and deployed at will. But this denial of one's own rootedness in a shared world cannot long go well: by the technocrats' own logic, they themselves are soon reduced to mere resources to be used up and disposed of.

Heidegger now directed the revolutionary vision that he had hoped to pursue within Nazism against this technological tyranny. Against Hitler's National Socialism, he pitched the romantic nationalism of Friedrich Hölderlin, who — following Fichte and Hegel — envisioned the Germans as a people called to school the world in a different attitude to the world: a poetic disposition of attentive letting-be that allowed the self to become a "clearing" on which the light of Being might fall and show forth beings as they are. In a gesture of indirect resistance, Heidegger lectured enthusiastically about this Hölderlinian nationalism in Freiburg.

At the same time, the heuristic of "technology" allowed Heidegger to escape the deadlock of competing nationalisms by exposing Nazism as not very special, but in fact quite similar

to "Bolshevism" and what Heidegger called "Americanism": another machine for grinding down the rich inner life of the world into a mass of homogenous, useful material. More ironically, Nazism turned out to be itself an instance of the mentality that it projected on to the Jews: a deracinated "worldlessness" resulting from a "tenacious dexterity of calculation and banking and shuffling".

The conclusions that Heidegger drew from this last point were not as radical as we might hope: he questioned not the stereotype of the calculating Jews but only their uniqueness. He himself speculated that the Jews might have a role to play in the technological crisis of the modern world, though he never specified what. What Heidegger thoroughly rejected, however, was any description of the Jews as a "race": "The question of the role of World Jewry", he insisted, "is not a racial one, but the metaphysical question of a form of humanity" characterised by deracination and instrumental reasoning. It would be absurd to assume that this "form of humanity" could be eradicated by eliminating a particular group of people. On the contrary: such calculated extermination would only perpetuate the technological logic that Heidegger was calling his compatriots to abandon. That logic could only be overcome, as Heidegger wrote, by "suffering and danger and knowledge".

All this creates the strong impression that Heidegger's thinking about the Jews is governed not by a pragmatic but by a poetic logic. His "Jew" is not Hitler's *Untermensch* but Shakespeare's Shylock: on a practical level, an outsider advantaged by the commercial ambitions of the city; but on a more profound literary level, a personification of that city's own dangerous tendency to see in fellow human beings nothing more than so many pounds of flesh. This "poetic" logic aims to resist the instrumental logic of his technocratic surroundings. But within these surroundings, Heidegger's literary armchair approach is also his great weakness. The real danger of his comments about the Jews is not merely that they are racist but that they seem to hold out an abstract, poetic typology as a replacement for political awareness: by reducing the Jews to a poetic type, he becomes deaf to their practical plight. This sometimes takes grotesque forms: though he would never advocate or condone Hitler's and Himmler's "final solution", for example, Heidegger seems to find a measure of poetic justice in the Nazis' calculating reduction of the Jews to a "race" as matching the Jews' own reductive tendency towards racial thinking. He is, as Hannah Arendt later put it to Günter Gaus, "caught in the trap of his own ideas".

This does not force us to dismiss Heidegger's project, but to recognise its blind spots. On the one hand, his analysis of the Nazi regime is eerily accurate: Nazism is neither the unique good its masters proclaimed nor the singular evil we sometimes lazily imagine, but merely a particularly efficient working out of the devastating human tendency to strip others of their humanity. On the other hand, his critique of technology, though it put Heidegger in ideological opposition to the party, left him practically complicit with it: by substituting poetic justice for legal justice, he gave away any criterion by which to condemn the calculated technological extermination of the supposedly technologically-minded Jews. Perhaps his own call to a poetic appreciation of the world, for all its rejection of a forceful "enframing" of the world, is simply another version of the human tendency to remake the world in the image of our own fantasies.

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