Heidegger & the Jewish Question

Greg Johnson

An abridged version of this essay was presented as a lecture at the inaugural meeting of the Scandza Forum in Stockholm on May 20, 2017. I want to thank the Scandza Forum and all who attended.

Martin Heidegger is one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th and now 21st centuries. Thus it is a problem that Heidegger was both a National Socialist and an anti-Semite, which are thought-crimes under the post-War intellectual dispensation.

The world has known that Heidegger was a National Socialist since 1933, but until recently, his precise attitude towards Jews was somewhat mysterious. Toni Cassirer, the wife of Jewish philosopher Ernst Cassirer, claimed in her autobiography that the Cassirers were aware that Heidegger was anti-Semitic in the late 1920s.[1]

However, whatever Heidegger’s attitudes toward Jews were at the time, they were not impediments to carrying on extramarital affairs with Hannah Arendt, who was Jewish, and Elisabeth Blochmann, who was half-Jewish, or having cordial and mentoring relationships with Jewish teachers, students, and colleagues.[2]

During the Third Reich, Heidegger became Rector of the University of Freiburg, helping to purge the institution of Jewish students and faculty, although he protested against more vulgar manifestations of anti-Semitism and protested the sacking of certain Jewish faculty because it would make Germany look bad on the international stage.[3]

On June 30, 1933, after he had become Rector, Heidegger visited Karl Jaspers and his Jewish wife in Heidelberg. According to Jaspers, when he dismissed the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion as a forgery, Heidegger replied, “Nonetheless, there is a dangerous international alliance of Jews.”[4] Heidegger was right of course to dismiss the “forgery” canard. The Protocols, like the dialogues of Plato, are a literary presentation of ideas whose truth depends on their correspondence with reality. Thus it is thus simply irrelevant to protest that they are not really verbatim transcripts of actual conversations.

After the war, Heidegger was forced to undergo de-Nazification. He was characterized as Nazi fellow-traveler and banned from teaching until 1951. Heidegger enraged Jews by refusing to treat the holocaust as a morally and metaphysically unique event. Instead he compared it to other wartime atrocities and claimed that it had to be understood as a manifestation of the modern mindset that sees all of reality as material for human manipulation and control.[5] Also controversial was his decision in 1953 to publish a 1935 lecture course, Introduction to Metaphysics, in which he characterized “the inner truth and greatness” of the National Socialist movement as “the encounter between global technology and modern humanity.”[6]

New light was thrown on Heidegger’s attitudes toward Jews beginning in 1989, when a 1929 letter from Heidegger to Victor Schwoerer, the vice-president of the Notgemeinschaft der Deutschen Wissenschaft, was discovered. In the letter, Heidegger spoke of the necessity of promoting talented German scholars in order to combat the “Jewification” (Verjudung) of German intellectual life.[7] In 2005 a line from a letter from Heidegger to his wife Elfride, dated October 18, 1918, came to light. Heidegger writes, “The Jewification of our culture and universities is certainly horrifying, and I think that the German race really should summon up the inner strength to find its feet again.”[8]

These two letters clearly indicate that Heidegger opposed increasing Jewish influence on German cultural life almost fifteen years before Hitler’s rise to power, and more than a decade later not only did his attitude remain unchanged, he was taking active steps to combat Jewish power. His desire to see the “German race” fight back against Jewish influence and his willingness to actually cultivate and promote German scholars to counter Jewish influence explains his enthusiasm for National Socialism and his willingness to help implement National Socialist policies at the University of Freiburg.

However, in the Winter Semester of 1932–1933, before Heidegger openly embraced the party and became Rector at Freiburg, he wrote a letter to Hannah Arendt about rumors that he was an anti-Semite. After detailing all the favors he was doing for Jews during his sabbatical, he writes:

Whoever wants to call that “raging anti-Semitism” is welcome to do so. Beyond that, I am now just as much an anti-Semite in university issues as I was ten years ago in Marburg, where, because of this anti-Semitism, I even earned Jacobsthal’s and Friedländer’s support. To say absolutely nothing about my personal relationships with Jews (e.g., Husserl, Misch, Cassirer, and others). And above all, it cannot touch my relationship to you.[9]

Heidegger’s claim that he is “just as much an anti-Semite in university issues as I was ten years ago” was meant to be taken as sarcasm by Arendt, implying that he was not an anti-Semite then or now. Why else would he cite the support of two Jewish colleagues, archaeologist Paul Jacobsthal and classicist Paul Friedländer?

But another reading is possible: The statement could also be taken at face value. Heidegger really was anti-Semitic with regard to university issues in Marburg and in Freiburg, as would soon become clear. Heidegger had merely concealed his anti-Semitism from his colleagues—as he was concealing it from Arendt herself in this very letter. But when Hitler came to power, dissimulation was no longer necessary. Arendt herself certainly felt deceived. In later years, she declared that “Heidegger was notorious for lying about everything.”[10]

Beginning in 2014, a flood of new light on Heidegger and the Jews was cast by the publication of the first three volumes of Heidegger’s Black Notebooks.[11] A fourth volume appeared in 2015.[12] These volumes encompass writings from 1931 to 1948. Jews and Judaism are mentioned in only 25 places in the 1,753 pages of the Black Notebooks published so far—fewer than ten pages, if we are generous in providing context—beginning in 1938 and ending circa 1948.[13]

But in Heidegger scholarship—as in politics, culture, and academia at large—the Jewish tail wags the dog. Thus the question of Heidegger and the Jews has become the topic of a flurry academic conferences, articles, and books, as well as articles in the middlebrow press.[14] These discussions are filled with the language of contamination and contagion. Anti-Semitism is treated as an intellectual form of lice or typhus, and scholars earnestly debate whether they or their students can catch cooties from reading Heidegger. When the hubbub about anti-Semitism dies down, however, I think the world of letters will eventually conclude that the Black Notebooks is one of Heidegger’s richest and most compelling works.

Indeed, I suspect that Heidegger, his family, and his publishing house Vittorio Klostermann handled the publication and promotion of the Black Notebooks in a quite cunning manner. Heidegger surely knew that these volumes would be highly controversial, so he specified that they be published last in his collected works—like an unexpected verb at the end of a long, meandering German sentence that suddenly charges everything that came before with new meaning and life. If there was going to be a controversy about Heidegger and anti-Semitism, best to wait until Heidegger scholars were maximally invested in his work. Moreover, the decision to leak the most inflammatory passages on Jews before the publication of the Black Notebooks was a masterstroke of marketing, for the predictable controversy in the press made the Black Notebooks philosophical best-sellers.

In 2016, excerpts from Heidegger’s correspondence with his brother Fritz dealing with National Socialism, the Second World War, and related topics were published. A similar wag-the-dog phenomenon can be observed in this publication. Although the letters make only passing and anodyne references to Jews, they were published as Martin Heidegger und der Antisemitismus.[15] The volume is co-edited by Rabbi Walter Homolka and Arnulf Heidegger, one of Martin Heidegger’s grandsons. The book contains 127 pages of letters and 262 pages of scholarly essays on Heidegger and anti-Semitism.

So what do the Black Notebooks say about Jews? Heidegger’s remarks fall into four broad categories. Sixteen of the 25 references refer to Jewish intellectuals and movements, certain Jewish individuals, and Judaism as a religion. The remaining nine refer to Jews as a nation.

Jewish Intellectuals & Movements

In discussing doctrines of human nature, Heidegger refers to the “Christian-Jewish doctrine . . . that define[s] man immediately on the basis of his relation to a ‘God’ . . .” (1938; GA 94: 475-76; trans. Polt). Elsewhere, Heidegger speaks of rejecting the “anthropological determination of man, and with it, all previous anthropology—Christian Hellenistic-Jewish and Socratic-Platonic” (1938–1939; GA 95: 322; trans. Polt). Heidegger also wonders if thinking of human beings as a people (Volk) tacitly accepts the “Hellenistic-Jewish ‘world,’” i.e., worldview, that he wishes to question and transcend (1938–1939; GA 95: 339; trans. Polt).

There is nothing specifically anti-Semitic about these references to intellectual traditions. Heidegger rejects Jewish thinking, but he does not single it out. He hyphenates Jewish ideas with Christianity and Hellenistic thought and places these hyphenated constructs on a par with Socratic-Platonic thinking, which he also rejects. Moreover, it is not really anti-Semitic to reject Jewish ideas if one thinks they are false. It would only be anti-Semitic if one rejected them simply because they are Jewish, and obviously that is not what Heidegger is doing here.

In a remark on the völkisch outlook, Heidegger asks, “Is it an accident that National Socialism has stamped out ‘sociology’ as a term? Why was sociology gladly pursued by Jews and Catholics?” (1938–1939; GA 95: 161; trans. Polt). There is nothing specifically anti-Semitic about this remark either. Heidegger is not singling out Jews but placing them alongside Catholics. Heidegger’s likely answer to the question he raises is that both Jews and the Catholic church are international rather than national communities, thus they are attracted to sociology as a universal science.

In a remark on his critique of Cartesianism in Being and Time, Heidegger mentions that “it has been exploited just as strongly by Jews as by National Socialists, without being grasped in its essential core . . .” (1938–1939; GA 95: 168-69; trans. Polt). Again, there is nothing anti-Semitic about this remark. Heidegger is putting some Jews and some National Socialists on the same plane, as having a superficial understanding of his critique of Cartesianism.

In a remark on self-knowledge, Heidegger argues that the very idea of self-reflection is superficial, “even after one has pushed Jewish ‘psychoanalysis’ aside” (1938–1939; GA 95: 258; trans. Polt). Again, there is nothing specifically anti-Semitic about this remark. Heidegger’s point is that National Socialist critics of “Jewish ‘psychoanalysis’” fail to question the idea of self-reflection and thus end up on the same plane.

Heidegger makes a similar point elsewhere, mentioning Freud by name:

One should not get all too loudly indignant about the psychoanalysis of the Jew “Freud” if, and as long as, one cannot at all “think” about each and every thing other than by “tracing” everything as an “expression” of “life” back to “instincts” and “the atrophy of instinct.” This way of “thinking,” which in advance excludes all “being” whatsoever, is pure nihilism. (circa 1941; GA 96: 218; trans. Polt)

Here Heidegger is again criticizing National Socialist thinkers who indignantly condemn “the Jew ‘Freud’” yet themselves reduce psychology to instincts.

I think it is reasonable to read Heidegger’s very Nazi-sounding use of the phrase “the Jew ‘Freud’” as sarcastic echoing of Nazi cant.[16] This is reinforced by putting Freud’s name in scare quotes, which may mean that Heidegger believes the unnamed National Socialist writers are attacking a straw man, not Freud’s actual teachings.

In a reflection on “dogmatism, be it ecclesiastical-political or state-political,” Heidegger observes the tendency of the authorities to attribute any dissent from dogma as the work of “the enemy for it (for the dogmatism)—be it the heathens and godless ones, or the Jews and communists.” Given that “the Jews and communists” are the enemies, the dogma in question is clearly National Socialism. What’s more, Heidegger identifies himself with the dissidents, not the dogmatists.

Mentions of Jewish Individuals

In addition to Freud, Heidegger mentions several other Jewish individuals in the Black Notebooks.

In one passage Heidegger mentions two Jewish swindlers, Iwan Baruch Kutisker and Julius Barmat, who, according to the Nazis, epitomized the Weimar Republic:

What is the difference between the following occurrences? Barmat and Kutisker make good business for themselves out of the postwar democracy; with the help of the National Socialist world view, primary school teachers turn into “philosophers” with whom a serious person would never bother. There is no difference; for in the latter case the historical essence of National Socialism is grasped as little as is, in the former case, the historical essence of parliamentary democracy. (1941; GA 96: 234; trans. Polt)

Here Heidegger is saying that two Jewish swindlers no more reveal the essence of parliamentary democracy than unnamed German academic frauds reveal the essence of National Socialism. This is actually a critique of National Socialist propaganda and a refutation of an argument against liberal democracy, although it also amounts to an analogous defense of National Socialism.

In another passage, Heidegger writes, “At the same time, the ‘cunning’ of Bolshevist politics comes to light. The Jew Litvinov surfaces again. . . .” (June, 1941; GA 96: 242; trans. Polt). This may well be an unironic use of the Nazi trope.

Judaism as a Religion

In a remark on Karl Barth, Heidegger writes, “The Phariseeism of Karl Barth and his associates exceeds even the ancient Jewish Phariseeism, by the degree that is necessarily posited by the modern history of being” (GA 95: 395-96; 1938–1939; trans. Polt). Here again, no anti-Semitic judgment is intended. Indeed, Heidegger puts the Jewish Pharisees on a higher rung than a German Christian theologian.

Heidegger mentions Judaism in a number of post-war reflections from 1946 to 1948. Around 1946 he writes:

“Prophecy” is the technique for fending off what is destinal in history. It is an instrument of the will to power. That the great prophets are Jews is a fact whose secret has not yet been thought through. (Note for jackasses: this comment has nothing to do with “anti-Semitism,” which is as foolish and abominable as Christianity’s bloody and, above all, non-bloody attacks on “heathens.” The fact that Christianity even brands anti-Semitism as “un-Christian” is part of its highly developed and refined power technique.) (GA 97: 159; trans. Polt)

In this passage, Heidegger himself denies anti-Semitic intent or import. While his comment on the Jews places them in a class by themselves, his comment on anti-Semitism places it in the same company as the Church’s anti-heathenism, which Heidegger clearly rejects. Of course, he is only speaking here of Christian religious anti-Semitism, which leaves open the door to other types.

In 1947 or 1948, Heidegger writes, “God is the God of Abraham, the God of Jesus. But there is no God of be-ing” (GA 97: 357; trans. Polt). A few pages later we read, “On the doctrine of gods.—Jehovah is the god who presumed to make himself the chosen god, and not to tolerate any other gods beside himself. . . .” (GA 97: 369; trans. Polt). And a few pages after that, we find:

What if the god of the philosophers were still more divine than the god of Abraham, who tolerated no others of his kind aside from himself, and whose son Jesus sent all who did not love him to Hell and let them roast there? What sort of god is it who denies divinity, and who has none of the generosity of pure joy at his kind and at their inexhaustible richness? (A note on Pascal.) (GA 97: 409; trans. Polt)

Finally, in a note from around 1948, Heidegger simply states, “The modern systems of total dictatorship stem from Judeo-Christian monotheism” (GA 97: 438; trans. Polt).

None of these passages are specifically anti-Semitic. Indeed, they apply to Christianity as much as Judaism. The first alludes to Pascal, and the third mentions him by name. Heidegger is clearly critical of the biblical God, but his remarks are no more anti-Jewish than anti-Christian. And the last remark is also as anti-Nazi as it is anti-Judeo-Christian.

Some Preliminary Conclusions

Of the sixteen references to Jews and Judaism that we have examined so far, only one might be anti-Semitic, namely “the Jew Litvinov.”

There are six references to the Jewish or Judeo-Christian religion, one of which is explicitly anti-anti-Semitic, one of which places Jews above a German Christian, three of which are as much about Christianity as Judaism, and one of which is as anti-Nazi as it is anti-Judeo-Christian.

Jews are mentioned alongside communists as enemies of the National Socialist state, which Heidegger is taking to task for state-political “dogmatism.”

There are references to “Christian-Jewish,” “Christian Hellenistic-Jewish,” and “Hellenistic-Jewish” conceptions of human nature, the latter two of which Heidegger places on the same rung as the “Socratic-Platonic” conception.

Some Jews are placed on the same rung as some National Socialists in misunderstanding Heidegger’s critique of Cartesianism. Other Jews are placed on the same rung as some Catholics in advocating the science of sociology. National Socialist psychologists are placed on the same rung as Freud because they too embrace self-reflection as a model of knowledge and instincts as an explanation of psychological states. Even the Jewish swindlers Barmat and Kutisker are placed on the same level as unnamed National Socialist educational careerists.

A clear pattern is developing here. In twelve out of sixteen passages, Heidegger places Jews, Judaism, and Jewish thought on the same level as Christianity, the Greeks, and German National Socialists. In all these cases, Heidegger rejects the Jewish as well as the non-Jewish terms as equally problematic.

In the passages where Heidegger places Jews and National Socialists on the same plane, his primary target is National Socialists, for whom the cruelest barb is to be compared to Jews. But Heidegger’s problem with the Jews is not that they are Jews, but that their ideas are as false and superficial as their National Socialist counterparts.

With this pattern in mind, we will now examine Heidegger’s remarks on Jews as a people.

Notes

1. Toni Cassirer, Mein Leben mit Ernst Cassirer (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2003), p. 187.

2. See Richard Wolin, Heidegger’s Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

3. The best overall account of Heidegger and the Rectorate is still Hugo Ott’s Martin Heidegger: A Political Life (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

4. Quoted in Thomas Sheehan, “‘Everyone Has to Tell the Truth’: Heidegger and the Jews,” Continuum, vol. 1, no. 1 (1990), p. 35, quoting and translating Karl Jaspers, Philosophische Autobiographie, expanded edition (Munich: Piper, 1977), p. 101.

5. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, Martin Heidegger and the Holocaust (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997) and Mahon O’Brien, Heidegger, History, and the Holocaust (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

6. See part 4 of Collin Cleary, “Heidegger: An Introduction for Anti-Moderns,” <https://counter-currents.com/2012/06/heideggeran-introduction-for-anti-modernists-part-4/>

7. See Ulrich Sieg, “Die Verjudung des deutschen Geistes. Ein unbekannter Brief Heideggers,” Die Zeit 52 (December 22, 1989).

8. Martin Heidegger, Letters to His Wife, 1915–1970, ed. Gertrud Heidegger, trans. R. D. V. Glasgow (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 28.

9. Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger, Letters, 1925–1975, ed. Ursula Ludz, trans. Andrew Shields (New York: Harcourt, 2004), pp. 52–53. This letter was first published in 1998.

10. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 247.

11. Martin Heidegger, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 94, Überlegungen [Ponderings] II–VI, ed. Peter Trawny (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2014), Gesamtausgabe, vol. 95, Überlegungen VII–XI, ed. Peter Trawny (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2014), and Gesamtausgabe, vol. 96, Überlegungen XII–XV, ed. Peter Trawny (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2014).

12. Martin Heidegger, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 97 Anmerkungen [Notes] I–V, ed. Peter Trawny (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2015).

13. In “References to Jews and Judaism in Martin Heidegger’s Black Notebooks, 1938–1948,” Richard Polt translates 25 passages from The Black Notebooks and an additional passage from The History of Beyng, <https://www.academia.edu/11943010/References_to_Jews_and_Judaism_in_Martin_Heidegger_s_Black_Notebooks_1938-1948>

14. See Andrzej Serafin, “A Reception History of the Black Notebooks,” Gatherings: The Heidegger Circle Annual, vol. 5, Heidegger’s Black Notebooks (2015), <http://www.heideggercircle.org/Gatherings2015-06Serafin.pdf>

15. Walter Homolka and Arnulf Heidegger, eds., Heidegger und der Antisemitismus: Positionen in Widerstreit. Mit briefen von Martin und Fritz Heidegger (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2016).

16. Heidegger spoke of “the Jew Fränkel” in a manner that cannot be interpreted as sarcastic in a report written in 1933 to stab Eduard Baumgarten, a former colleague, in the back. The report was ignored because it was so obviously written out of hatred. See Victor Farías, Heidegger and Nazism, ed. Joseph Margolis and Tom Rockmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p. 210.

Heidegger & the Jewish Question, Part 2

Greg Johnson

1,291 words

Part 2 of 4

Part 1 here. Part 3 here. Part 4 here.

Heidegger discusses “Jewry” (Judentum, Judenschaft), meaning Jews as a people, in nine places in the Black Notebooks. I will also discuss a tenth reference to Jews as a people that was discovered in the manuscript called Die Geschichte des Seyns (The History of Beyng, 1938-40) and published in 2014. All of these passages are anti-Semitic in an unproblematic fashion. They fall into three rough categories: descriptions of Jewish misbehavior, explanations of Jewish misbehavior, and remarks on fighting against Jewry.

Four passages fall into the first category.

1.

One of the most secret forms of the gigantic, and perhaps the oldest, is the tenacious skillfulness in calculating, hustling, and intermingling through which the worldlessness of Jewry is grounded. (1938–1939; GA 95: 97; trans. Polt)

Here Heidegger remarks on how diaspora Jewry, because of its rootlessness and predominantly commercial form of life is uniquely adapted to the conditions of modernity, which Heidegger characterizes by “worldlessness” and “the gigantic” (das Riesige). Heidegger believes that both meaning and measure are endowed by rootedness in a particular language, culture, and homeland. Rootlessness, therefore, leads to worldlessness (a void of meaning) and the gigantic (an abolition of limits; bigger is always better; new is always improved). Both worldlessness and the gigantic are forms of nihilism that are characteristic of modernity.

2.

World Jewry, incited by emigrants allowed to leave Germany, is pervasive and impalpable, and even though its power is widespread, it doesn’t need to participate in military actions, whereas all that remains to us is to sacrifice the best blood of our own people. (circa September 1941; GA 96: 262; my trans.)

In this passage, Heidegger expresses the belief that diaspora Jewry, stirred up by Jews forced out of Germany by the National Socialists, are responsible for the strange alliance of Soviet communists and Anglo-Saxon capitalists fighting against Germany. Furthermore, Heidegger remarks that Jews are warmongers, masterfully inciting gentiles to fight their battles for them.

3.

Through this “history,” the essence of history comes to the brink of a decision, for the first time, between nothing and be-ing—the imperialistic-bellicose way of thinking and the humanistic-pacifist way of thinking are only “dispositions” that belong to each other, each brought forward in different ways as a pretext, “historiological”—“history”-making “dispositions” in whose realms no decisions are possible anymore—because they are just offshoots of “metaphysics.”

Thus both can be used by “international Jewry” to proclaim and accomplish one as a means for the other—this machinational “history”-making entangles all players equally in their webs—(circa 1940; GA 96: 133; my trans.)

In the first paragraph of this passage, Heidegger alludes to an idea that recurs in some of his other remarks about National Socialism and Jewry. Heidegger had hoped that National Socialism heralded a fundamental turning point in Western civilization, which he here characterizes as a decision between “nothing and be-ing,” which is really the most fundamental choice of all.

For Heidegger, it was a choice between cosmopolitan rootlessness, unbounded nihilism, and the conquest of nature versus rootedness in culture, tradition, and homelands; an acceptance of finitude and uncertainty; and a sense that we are part of the natural world, charged with being its guardians, not its exploiters and consumers.

Heidegger, however, was deeply disappointed in National Socialism. As the Third Reich unfolded, he came to see it as just another form of modern technological civilization, fighting over much smaller stakes like the difference between imperialism and pacificism. Heidegger saw these as merely alternatives within modernity, whereas he was hoping for an alternative to modernity. As he puts it, imperialism and pacifism are both “just offshoots of ‘metaphysics,’” by which Heidegger means the Western tradition from Plato to Nietzsche, the outcome of which is the modern technological nihilism that he hoped National Socialism would go beyond.

Heidegger does not, however, think that the metaphysical ideas of thinkers like Plato and Nietzsche are actually the causes of the modern world. Heidegger does not think that philosophers and poets are the “unacknowledged legislators of mankind,” who create the blueprints according to which history is built. Instead, Heidegger thinks that philosophers and poets are merely the first people attuned to changes in history and culture that cannot be meaningfully reduced to human intentions and purposeful activity and are fundamentally mysterious and unpredictable. For Heidegger, philosophy is not “behind” historical change, historical change is “behind” philosophy. Moreover, Heidegger believed that we cannot get “behind” historical change. It cannot be explained. It just happens. The idea that the human mind is behind historical change is sometimes called “humanism.” Heidegger’s idea that historical change is behind the human mind is thus referred to as his “anti-humanism.”

This explains the distinction in the passage above between history and “history” in quotes. When Heidegger uses history without quotes, he is referring to his own anti-humanist conception of history. When Heidegger places history in quotes, he is referring to the humanist conception of history as something that human beings create according to blueprints that they think up. The idea that mankind can make history according to our designs is just another manifestation of technological nihilism, which in the Black Notebooks Heidegger calls “machination” (Machenschaft), which connotes plans and schemes as well as technological manipulation and control.

The fact that human beings cannot really make history does not, of course, prevent them from trying. The unfolding political and environmental catastrophes of the 20th and 21st centuries are all exercises in what Heidegger calls “machinational ‘history’-making.” But Heidegger claims that the very idea that mankind can understand and control everything is not something that we can understand and control. We don’t understand why we think we can understand everything. We can’t control the idea that we can control everything. The idea that human reason makes us masters of the world is, ironically, a groundless mania that entralls us. Machinational “history”-making is an inscrutable dispensation from what Heidegger here calls the “decision regions” of genuine history. To speak of decision in this context, however, is misleading, because there is no subject or will behind history. It is a decision without a decider.

All those who fight over issues framed within the context of modernity—Jew and German alike—are equally entangled in its web. But because “international Jewry”—Heidegger himself puts the words in quotes, which indicates a reluctance to make the phrase his own—is a rootless and calculating people, it is uniquely adapted to modernity. Thus Jews are equally capable of using imperialism and pacifism as means to their ends in the struggle for power. Jews, moreover, have a systematic advantage over Germans and other rooted peoples in struggling for power within the context of global technological nihilism.

In the Black Notebooks and contemporary writings, Heidegger characterizes the outcome of machinational “history”-making as “global criminality” (Verbrechen). In 1941, he declared that:

The authentic experience that has been allotted to today’s generation, but which it was not able to take over, see through, and lay back into its essential inception, is the unrestricted outbreak of the unconditioned criminality of the modern human essence, in accordance with its role in the empowerment of power into machination. Criminality [Verbrechen]: that is no mere breaking up [Zerbrechen], but the devastation of everything into what is broken. (1941; GA 96: 266; trans. Polt)

This provides the context for passage number 4, from the manuscript of The History of Beyng:

4.

One would need to ask in what the peculiar predetermination of Jewry [Judenschaft] for global criminality is grounded. (Quoted in Peter Trawny, Heidegger und der Mythos der jüdischen Weltverschwörung [Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2014], p. 51; trans. Polt)

Heidegger treats it as a matter of fact that Jews have a marked predisposition for global criminality. But as a philosopher, he cannot be comfortable merely noting this fact. He wants to understand it, which is the subject of our next installment.

Heidegger & the Jewish Question, Part 3

Greg Johnson

1,711 words

Part 3 of 4. Part 1 here. Part 2 here. Part 4 here.

Heidegger treats it as a matter of fact that Jews have a marked predisposition for “planetary criminality.” But as a philosopher, he cannot be comfortable merely noting this fact. He wants to understand it, which is the subject of the next three passages.

All three of these passages touch upon the question of whether Jews are best understood as a biological race or as a nation. Heidegger is clearly skeptical that anything essential about Jewry can be understood in simple biological terms. For Heidegger, Jews are first and foremost a people, defined by a common cultural heritage and a common destiny that cannot be meaningfully reduced to or explained by biological race.

5.

Jewry’s temporary increase in power is, however, grounded in the fact that Western metaphysics, especially in its modern development, furnishes the starting point for the diffusion of a generally empty rationality and calculative ability, which in this manner took up residence in the “spirit,” without being able to grasp the hidden decision realms on its own. The more originary and primordial the prospective decisions and questions, the more they remain inaccessible to this “race.”

In the first sentence above, Heidegger states straightforwardly that Jewry’s “temporary increase in power” is grounded in the modern spirit of technical-instrumental rationality. Since Jews have long lived as a rootless, commercial diaspora people, they found themselves uniquely adapted to the spirit of the modern age and thus naturally rose to positions of power. Heidegger believed this power is “temporary,” because he believed that modernity’s days are numbered.

Jews are not, however, merely objects of the historical process. They are also agents. Modernity cleared the way for them, but their own will to dominate pushed them into positions of power, and once there, they used that power to push the modernization process further. Thus Jews as a people also bear responsibility for intensified globalization.

Heidegger’s views should be contrasted to conspiratorial accounts of Jewish power like the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion. For Heidegger, the Protocols and other conspiratorial views of history are naively “humanistic.” They presuppose that “machinational history-making” really is possible. They posit that some human beings have the immense power and knowledge necessary to create history according to their own designs—whereas the vast majority of humanity has no power or responsibility in this area. For Heidegger, however, the ultimate causes of historical change lie outside our powers of understanding and control. Thus Jews did not create the modern world as an exercise in machinational history-making. But because of their superior adaptation to modernity, they now enjoy more power and more responsibility than any other nation for the present unfolding of modernity.

Heidegger’s claim that empty rationality and calculation have taken up residence in the realm of the “spirit” (a term Heidegger himself puts in quotes) and are unable to grasp the “hidden decision realms” is a reference to his idea that the modern conviction that we can understand and control everything is the product of historical forces that we can neither understand nor control, and which are thus invisible to the modern mind. Because Jews as a people are the vanguard of rootlessness and calculation, they are the least capable of grasping the hidden realm from which historical change emerges.

Heidegger then offers parenthetically an example of this Jewish blindness to the ultimate origins of historical change: his own mentor and the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl.

(Thus Husserl’s writing on phenomenological observation while dismissing psychological explanation and historical settlement of opinions is of lasting significance—and yet it goes nowhere near the regions of essential decisions, but rather presupposes the historical tradition of philosophy throughout; the necessary consequence is reflected immediately in the swing to neo-Kantian transcendental philosophy that eventually makes a progression to a Hegelianism in the formal sense inevitable. My “attack” against Husserl is not directed against him alone and indeed inessentially—my attack goes to the neglect of the question of Being, i.e., the essence of metaphysics as such, on the ground of which the machination of beings can determine history. The attack grounds a historical moment of the highest decision-making between the primacy of beings and the grounding of the truth of Be-ing.) (circa 1939; GA 96: 46; my trans.)

One has to ask, however, if Husserl, who was Jewish, was really any blinder to Heidegger’s concerns than, say, Kant, who was German? At the end, Heidegger makes it clear that his objection is not to Husserl as a Jew, or Husserl specifically, but to the overall neglect of the question of Being, which in this context refers to the ultimate cause of historical change, and to philosophizing within the framework of the metaphysical tradition, which gives rise to modernity. Heidegger’s attack on the metaphysical tradition is an attempt to find an alternative to modernity, a new beginning for Western man.

6.

The idea of an understanding with England in terms of a distribution of imperialist “prerogatives” misses the essence of the historical process, which is led by England within the framework of Americanism and Bolshevism and at the same time world Jewry to its final conclusion. The question of the role of world Jewry is not racial, but the metaphysical question of the type of humanity that can accept the world-historical “task” of uprooting all beings from Being. (GA 96: 243; my trans.)

Hitler admired the British Empire and wished to preserve it. Hitler also wanted to create an empire in Eastern Europe at the expense of Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. He hoped that Germany and Britain could reach an agreement not to fight with one another or interfere with one another’s imperial projects. Thus in this passage, Heidegger is criticizing Hitler’s thinking as superficial. As in passage number 3, above, Heidegger thinks that the struggle between empires, like the struggle between imperialism and pacifism, is superficial because it fails to understand that all of these options lie within the framework of modernity and are thus not alternatives to it.

For Heidegger, the “essence of the historical process” in modernity is the unbounded expansion of nihilism. In this passage, he speaks of “the world-historical ‘task’ of uprooting all beings from Being.” For Heidegger, “Being” refers to the realm of meaning, thus “uprooting” beings from Being means uprooting them from the realm of meaning, and the loss of meaning is nihilism.

Heidegger sees both Bolshevism and Anglo-American capitalism as merely different forms of the same technological nihilism. For Heidegger, an understanding with Britain is not possible, since Britain was not merely opposed to Germany’s imperialistic aims. Because Britain was an individualist, commercial-exploratory-imperialist seafaring civilization, she played a leading role in the global propagation of rootlessness and nihilism. Such a Britain could not allow a Germany that stood for rootedness, nationalism, and hierarchy and against globalization and leveling. Thus Britain used Hitler’s invasion of Poland as the pretext to start the Second World War, and was central to creating the alliance between Anglo-American capitalism and Soviet communism against German National Socialism.

But Britain is not the only nation in the vanguard of nihilism. World Jewry exceeds even Britain in rootlessness, commercialism, and calculation. Thus of all nations, the Jews are the best adapted to the spirit of modernity to rise to a position of leadership. This is why Heidegger says that that “question of the role of world Jewry is not racial, but . . . metaphysical.” Jews enjoy power and influence in modernity because of their long cultural adaptation to being a diaspora people and their collective will-to-power and sense they are destined for world rulership. Racial factors like IQ can’t hurt, but they do not explain why Jews gravitated toward banking, the media, and culture-creation, while other market-dominant diaspora peoples gravitated toward cheap hotels and hardware stores. Jews are powerful because they are “the type of humanity that can accept the world-historical ‘task’ of uprooting all beings from Being.” Jews then, really are a “chosen people” after all: “chosen” by the historical process to spread technological nihilism to the four corners of the earth.

7.

The Jews, with their marked talent for calculation, have “lived” longer than anyone by the principle of race, which is why they are resisting its consistent application with utmost violence. The establishment [Einrichtung] of racial breeding [eugenics] does not stem from “life” itself, but from the overpowering of life through machination. What it pushes forward with such a plan is the complete deracialization of all peoples by clamping them into a uniformly constructed and tailored establishment [Einrichtung] of all beings. At one with de-racialization is the self-alienation of peoples—the loss of history—i.e., the decision realms of Be-ing. (circa 1939; GA 96: 56; my trans.)

Here Heidegger observes a classic Jewish double standard. Jews have practiced racism and eugenics longer than any other nation, yet they oppose the racism and eugenics of other peoples. But Heidegger’s main point is that eugenics is not a manifestation of the life force, but of the domination of life by modernity, i.e., by technological nihilism. But if eugenics is a manifestation of technological nihilism, then one cannot use eugenics to fight against it.

If eugenics is a manifestation of technological nihilism, what does it lead to? Heidegger speaks of uniformity and deracialization, but he does not really explain them. Perhaps, though, we can understand them along the following lines. If people can choose the traits of their children, will they choose to make them more fit or less fit for functioning in the modern world? Clearly the tendency will be to make children more adapted to modernity. But modernity is rootless, globalized, calculating, and nihilistic. Thus any people that practices eugenics in the modern age will tend to deracialize itself and to converge toward the creation of a homogeneous global modern man. In other words, there will be a tendency to become more and more like Jews. Which means that eugenics is a form of nihilism, not an alternative to it. The better adapted we are to modernity, the further we are from understanding the sources of modernity and its alternatives, namely “the decision realms of Be-ing.”

How, then, can we fight against technological nihilism without falling back into it? This is the topic of Heidegger’s last three passages, which we will examine in our final installment.

Heidegger & the Jewish Question, Part 4

Greg Johnson

3,067 words

Part 4 of 4. Part 1 here. Part 2 here. Part 3 here.

As Heidegger’s letters on resisting the “Jewification” of German life indicate, he was not merely interested in understanding Jewish power, he also wished to combat it. Heidegger wished, however, to counter Jewish power on the most fundamental level, namely by fighting against the rootless, nihilistic modern world in which Jewish power flourished and for a new beginning, a rooted, meaningful world in which Jewish power would wither. He wanted to drain the swamp in which the mosquitoes flourish. Thus Heidegger constantly emphasizes the futility of fighting modern nihilism by means of modern nihilism.

8.

To appropriate “culture” as a means of power and thus to assert oneself and affect a superiority is at bottom Jewish behavior. What follows from this for cultural politics as such? (1938–1939; GA 95: 326; trans. Polt)

Heidegger is referring here to at least three well-known Jewish phenomena.

First, there is the appropriation of European culture by Jewish collectors, connoisseurs, performers, and scholars, which—regardless of any genuine appreciation—is regarded as a “means of power,” i.e., a pathway of Jewish upward mobility, of self-assertion and a desire for superiority within the status system of gentile society.

Second, there is the Jewish deconstruction of gentile culture. Jews have played a leading role in producing and promoting the deconstruction of European painting, sculpture, music, and literature, as well as religion, social structures, and sexual mores.

Third, Jews have played a leading role in producing and promoting a shallow, synthetic mass popular culture—films, popular music, comics, and the like—which has been weaponized with propaganda promoting rootless cosmopolitanism and nihilism.

Jewish cultural appropriation, deconstruction, and weaponization are all deeply inauthentic and manipulative relationships to culture. But, then again, it is not their culture.

For Heidegger, we do not so much “have” a culture as culture “has” us. This is the meaning of Heidegger’s concept of “Ereignis,” which is often translated as “appropriation.” We are appropriated or enthralled by culture. An authentic relationship to culture is a form of identification and belonging—in essence, rootedness—that does not allow us to objectify, manipulate, construct, or deconstruct it. A synthetic, weaponized culture is no culture at all. It is simply propaganda, a specific form of machinational history-making. But Heidegger’s remark can also be read as caution against National Socialist cultural politics falling into the same machinational and nihilistic Jewish pattern.

9.

. . . maybe in this “struggle”—which struggles over goallessness itself and which hence can be only the caricature of “struggle”—the greater groundlessness will “triumph,” which is bound to nothing and makes everything serviceable to itself (Jewry). (1938–1939; GA 95: 96-97; trans. Polt)

The “struggle” (Kampf) that Heidegger mentions here is the political, economic, cultural, and ideological battle between Germany and her opponents—primarily the British and international Jewry—that eventually led to the outbreak of the Second World War. Heidegger places this “struggle” in quotation marks to indicate that he thinks that it is only a superficial “caricature of ‘struggle.’”

Heidegger states that the present “struggle” is a caricature of real struggle because it is merely “over goallessness itself,” i.e., nihilism without bounds. For Heidegger, the true struggle is between modernity and the new beginning for European man that he hoped National Socialism heralded. The fake struggles of his time, however, all take place on the plane of modernity. They are over alternatives within modernity, not alternatives to modernity. For Heidegger, the true struggle is against nihilism, not between different versions of it.

If this is the case, however, then Heidegger raises a chilling question: if the fake “struggle” of our time is between different forms of nihilism, wouldn’t the most nihilistic party have a systematic advantage? Other things being equal, wouldn’t the purer nihilists “triumph”? (Heidegger also puts “triumph” in scare quotes to indicate that victory on the plane of nihilism is just as superficial as the struggle for it.)

Heidegger calls the most nihilistic party the “greater groundlessness,” meaning the least rooted and thus the most lacking in meaning and measure. The greater groundlessness is “bound to nothing,” meaning that it has no limits on its possible actions, which means that it can “make everything serviceable to itself.” The more grounded a nation, the more it is bound to a specific identity, and the fewer things it can make serviceable to itself. Pure nihilists have no scruples, so they are willing to do anything to win. Impure nihilists are hampered by their residual scruples. Therefore, other things being equal, the purer nihilists will win. Heidegger indicates parenthetically that Jewry is the most nihilistic party in the current “struggle,” thus the Germans are at a disadvantage.

The third and final passage is very clearly from a notebook. Heidegger’s remarks are unusually cryptic, his thoughts jump from topic to topic without making the connections clear, and he entertains ideas that are not entirely consistent with his published views.

10.

The anti-Christian [der Anti-christ], like every “anti,” must stem from the same essential ground as that against which it is “anti”—that is, the same essential ground as “the Christian” [“der Christ”]. The Christian stems from Jewry [Judenschaft]. In the timeframe of the Christian West, that is, of metaphysics, Judaism is the principle of destruction. What is destructive in the reversal of the completion of metaphysics—i.e. of Hegel’s metaphysics by Marx. Spirit and culture become the superstructure of “life”—i.e. of economics, i.e. of organization—i.e. of the biological—i.e. of the “people.”

When what is “Jewish” in the metaphysical sense combats what is Jewish, the high point of self-annihilation in history has been attained—supposing that the “Jewish” has everywhere completely seized mastery, so that even the fight against “the Jewish,” and it above all, becomes subject to it.

On this basis one must assess what it means, for thinking that enters the concealed, inceptive essence of the history of the Occident, to meditate on the first inception among the Greeks, which remained outside Judaism and thus outside Christianity. (circa. 1942–1945; GA 97: 20; trans. Polt)

Here Heidegger at least seems to ponder the possibility that all forms of opposition are futile, if indeed all opposition “must stem from the same essential ground as that against which it is ‘anti.’” But perhaps Heidegger is overstating his case here. For is it really true that all opposition to Christianity somehow secretly affirms Christianity? Or is this true of only certain forms of opposition, such as secular liberal critiques which affirm and intensify Christian values?

Heidegger’s thought process then jumps to the topic of Jewry. Christianity is a product of Jewry, but it is unclear what connection this has to the previous point about anti-Christianity. Is Christian opposition to Jewry futile because Christianity stems from Jewry? Perhaps, but Heidegger’s initial point is about anti-Christianity, not anti-Semitism.

Heidegger then jumps to a particularly pregnant statement: “In the timeframe of the Christian West, that is, of metaphysics, Judaism is the principle of destruction.”

First, what does Heidegger mean by equating metaphysics and the timeframe of the Christian West? This is only a rough equation, since Western metaphysics emerged in ancient Greece, centuries before the emergence of Christianity, but Christianity and Greek metaphysics became fused in late antiquity.

Second, in what sense is Judaism the principle of destruction within the age of metaphysics and the Christian West? It would make more sense and be more consistent with Heidegger’s other statements if he spoke of Jewry as a people rather than Judaism as a religion. Judaism is present in Christianity at the beginning, but the principle of destruction manifests itself near the end of Christianity and metaphysics, i.e., in the emergence of modernity, i.e., the age of rootlessness and unbounded technological nihilism, the metaphysically “Jewish” age in which Jewry rises to power and drives modernity to its completion.

Heidegger’s next remark seems to be an illustration of this principle: Marx’s inversion of Hegel’s metaphysics, transforming the realm of spirit and culture into a superstructure upon an economic basis. But Heidegger then equates Marxist materialism with other philosophies that treat spirit and culture as manifestations of more basic material forces.

The first material force is “life,” which Heidegger himself puts in quotes. This is an allusion to Nietzsche and the tradition of “life philosophy” (Lebensphilosophie) that took its bearings from Nietzsche. Then Heidegger cites two more materialist principles: the “biological” and the “people” (Volk), the latter term in quotes as well. This is an obvious reference to National Socialism.

Thus Heidegger is equating Marxism, Nietzscheanism, and National Socialism insofar as they are all forms of cultural materialism. Beyond that, Heidegger is equating materialism—and thus Nietzscheanism and National Socialism—with Judaism, the “principle of destruction” within the “timeframe of the Christian West.”

In the next paragraph, Heidegger paints National Socialist anti-Semitism as a combat between “what is ‘Jewish’ in the metaphysical sense,” i.e., National Socialism, and “what is Jewish” in the factual sense, namely world Jewry itself. By putting “Jewish” in scare quotes, Heidegger distances himself from the usage of the word. He is using the word as National Socialists use it. But he is saying that they don’t really know what they are talking about. What National Socialists call “Jewish” is simply modernity: rootlessness, globalization, and technological machination. But Heidegger’s point is that National Socialism itself is “Jewish” in that sense of the word. The National Socialists thought they were fighting for rootedness and nationalism, but they unwittingly adopted the very ideas they rejected.

Thus National Socialist anti-Semitism, and the war in general, is “the high point of self-annihilation in history.” It is “self-annihilation” because the opposed forces are the same insofar as they are both modernist, that is to say “Jewish,” one in the metaphysical sense, the other in the factual sense.

To be clear, Heidegger is not saying that Jews in the factual sense are annihilating themselves, but that National Socialists and Jews are metaphysically the same (modern), so that in annihilating Jews, National Socialists are annihilating themselves. At first, Heidegger hoped that National Socialism would annihilate modernity. Later, he came to see the Second World War as modernity’s annihilation of itself.

If in modernity, everything is what National Socialists call “Jewish”—rootless and nihilistic—then all resistance to what is Jewish (in a metaphysical or a factual sense) will be “Jewish” as well. Which means that resistance is futile. But again, Heidegger is overstating his case, for here he is leaving out the possibility of a genuine alternative to modernity, and we know that he believed that such an alternative—a new beginning—was possible.

This possibility is hinted at in the final paragraph. The argument of the previous paragraph takes place entirely on the plane of modern nihilism, and on that plane, it futile to resist one form of nihilism with another. In the final paragraph, however, Heidegger’s discourse shifts to another plane. This shift is signaled by his reference to the “thinking that enters the concealed, inceptive essence of the history of the Occident,” the realm from which metaphysics, modernity, and a new beginning might emerge.

How can such thinking contribute to a new beginning? Heidegger’s only suggestion here is to “meditate on the first inception among the Greeks, which remained outside Judaism and thus outside Christianity.” We can free ourselves from the Judeo-Christian cultural legacy by reconnecting with the other origin of the Western civilization, namely pagan Greece. But this is not the whole story for Heidegger, because the ancient Greeks are also the source of the metaphysical tradition that gives rise to modern nihilism. Thus, we must attune ourselves specifically to the pre-Socratic, pre-metaphysical Greeks like Heraclitus.

Heidegger’s reflections on the apparent futility of fighting against modern nihilism within the framework of modern nihilism, against Jewry within the framework of “metaphysical” Jewishness—as well as his suggestion that a genuine form of resistance is possible by drawing upon hidden resources outside the frameworks of metaphysics and the Christian West—raise two questions.

First, although Heidegger eventually came to see National Socialism as a form of modern nihilism rather than an alternative to it, does this mean that he believed that National Socialism and the Second World War were entirely illegitimate and futile exercises, compared to the other options available on the political plane? Heidegger correctly believed that the Second World War was set in motion by the organized Jewish community, which created a coalition of Soviet Communists and Anglo-Saxon capitalists. From the start, the war was a clash between technological titans, and although spiritual and ideological factors played a role, its outcome ultimately depended on the technical-instrumental capacity to muster and deploy human and natural resources in the most destructive way possible. Clearly, such a war could only advance rather than overthrow the modern world.

But did Heidegger believe that Germany could have fought any other way? Did Heidegger think that the Germans should not have fought at all? Did Heidegger think that Germany should have produced fewer bombs and more editions of Heraclitus and Hölderlin? Clearly not. From a Heideggerian point of view, National Socialism was a disappointment only because it did not amount to the radical new beginning Heidegger had hoped for. But given that the battle ultimately took place on the technological plane, the Germans clearly had to take a gun to a gunfight.

In the reflections on the war from around September 1941, from which passage no. 2 is taken, Heidegger seems to accept that there is at least a kind of conditional or provisional legitimacy of viewing the war in realistic terms, on the plane of clashing versions of nihilism.[1] And Heidegger is clearly on Germany’s side. It might be futile to fight against bad metaphysics with guns, but one can still win a war with them. And clearly, if Germany had developed the atomic bomb before the Allies, and used it, she could have won.

The Second World War is over. The interwar fascist movements—which I call the Old Right—were defeated. But the New Right is continuing the battle on the metapolitical plane: creating and propagating new ways of seeing the world and dwelling in it. We are still fighting for nationalism against globalization, for rootedness against cosmopolitanism, for identity against homogeneity, individualism, consumerism, and inauthenticity. We are fighting for a world in which every people has a homeland, Jews included, but in which the deracinating, leveling, and homogenizing forces of cosmopolitan ideologies, global capitalism, transnational elites, and international Jewry have no power.

But this brings us to a second question: Given Heidegger’s historical anti-humanism, can an individual or a movement do anything at all to produce historical change? Heidegger holds that movements to make and remake history are premised on a false understanding of how history works. Man cannot understand or control history. Thus we cannot engineer a new historical age. Of course, that does not stop people from trying. So isn’t it a danger that people who take Heidegger to heart will simply stop trying to fight, surrendering the world to be trashed by nihilists who have no such scruples?

But, properly understood, Heidegger’s historical anti-humanism does not lead to passivity and quietism.

First, for Heidegger, humanism is a false theory of man’s relationship to history. But historical change and human agency are real. Heidegger wishes to discard the false theory and replace it with a better one. He does not wish to abandon human agency and historical change as such, except insofar as they are influenced by a false self-understanding. Human agency may not be what the humanists say it is, but it still exists, thus it is still possible to fight for a better world.

Second, although Heidegger does believe that man cannot understand and control historical change, he also holds that the relationship of man and historical-cultural meaning is one of mutual dependence: man cannot exist without meaning, and meaning cannot exist without man. Individually and collectively, humanity might be unable to control history, but by the same token, we do sustain cultural and historical meaning. Thus we have some power in the relationship. As I put it in another essay:

The present dispensation may have claimed and shaped us, but it still needs us to sustain it. That means that each individual faces choices that sustain or undermine the present dispensation.

We sustain it whenever we participate in the global technological system, whenever we demand things that are faster, cheaper, easier, and more available. We undermine it whenever we prefer the local to the global, the beautiful over the useful, the earthy over the plastic, distinct peoples over monoculture and miscegenation, the acceptance of reality over the striving for power, the unique over the mass-produced, the ecosystem over the economic system, etc. . . . When enough of us live as if the new dispensation is already here, perhaps it will arrive.[2]

Third, there is a sense in which Heidegger’s anti-humanism is empowering to dissidents. On the humanist account, a dissenting idea is just the beginning of historical change. One must then create a movement and struggle for power just to get into the position to remake society according to one’s blueprint. In this fallen world, that is a daunting and depressing prospect indeed.

On the Heideggerian account, however, your dissenting idea is not just a quirk of an isolated brain but a sign that cultural change is already underway. The humanist thinks that he is a solitary genius who creates ideas separate from humanity and history and must impose his designs upon them. The Heideggerian knows that he is always-already immersed in collective historical meaning. So if he is thinking dissenting thoughts, others probably are as well, and more will follow, for they are all simply responding to changes in the Zeitgeist. For Heidegger, philosophers and poets are not the hidden legislators of mankind, but simply those most sensitive to coming changes. This is why Heidegger occasionally slips into the prophetic voice.

But if the change we desire is already on the way, does this mean that we can simply sit back and let history do our job for us? No, because some of us are not just called to dissent, we are called to fight. But we go forth into battle with the assurance that the change we fight for is already in some sense real, and it is coming to meet us.