Martin Heidegger, Russia, and Political Philosophy

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Author: Leonid Savin

Translator: Jafe Arnold

The works of Martin Heidegger have recently been met with heightened interest in a number of countries. While interpretations of his texts vary widely, it is interesting that Heidegger’s legacy is constantly criticized by liberals across the board, regardless of where and what the object of criticism is – be it Heidegger’s work as a university professor, his interest in Ancient Greek philosophy and related interpretations of antiquity, or his relationship with the political regime in Germany before and after 1945. One gets the impression that liberals intentionally strive to demonize Heidegger and his works, yet the profundity and depth of this German philosopher’s thought gives them no break. Clearly, this is because Heidegger’s ideas harbor a message which is relevant to the creation of a counter-liberal project that can be realized in the most diverse forms. This is the idea of Dasein applied to a political perspective. We will discuss this in more detail below, but first it is necessary to embark on a brief excursion into the history of the study of Martin Heidegger’s ideas in Russia.

In the Soviet Union, Martin Heidegger’s ideas were not known to the general public, primarily because the peak of his activities coincided with Nazi rule in Germany. Heidegger himself, like many ideologists of the conservative revolution in Germany, criticized many aspects of National Socialism, but in the Soviet period any philosophy that did not follow the Marxist tradition was treated as bourgeois, false, and harmful. Perhaps the only exception is the work of Vladimir Bibikhin, although his translations of Heidegger’s Being and Time and Time and Being were published in Russia only after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Moreover, these translations have been repeatedly criticized for having too simplistic of an approach, incorrect terminological interpretations, linguistic mistakes, etc. Bibikhin’s lecture courses on early Heidegger at Moscow State University were delivered only in 1990-1992, i.e., during late Perestroika when the horizons of what was permissible in the USSR were expanding. That being said, it bears noting that a circle of followers of Martin Heidegger’s ideas had formed in the academic sphere in Moscow in the 1980’s. A similar situation took shape in St. Petersburg, which later found manifestation in translation and publishing activities.

Starting in the late 1990’s, other works by this German thinker began to be translated and published. The quality of translations improved considerably (and was done by different authors), and Heidegger’s legacy began to be taught at different Russian universities. Heidegger’s main philosophical concepts became obligatory for students at faculties of philosophy. However, the study of philosophical ideas does not mean that students will become philosophers or appeal to certain such concepts with regards to political processes. Plato and Aristotle are studied from the school-bench early on, but who is seriously engaged in using these philosophers of Ancient Greece’s ideas in discussing socio-political issues today?

Interest in the ideas of Martin Heidegger in the context of Russian politics was triggered in the early 2000’s by the various articles and presentations of the Russian philosopher and geopolitician Alexander Dugin.

Later, these materials were systematized and presented in voluminous texts. In 2010, the publishing house “Academic Project” released Alexander Dugin’s book, Martin Heidegger: The Philosophy of Another Beginning, which was logically succeeded in the following year by Martin Heidegger: The Possibility of a Russian Philosophy. In 2014, both works were released by the same publishing house in a single volume entitled Martin Heidegger: The Last God. Dugin’s interpretation of Heidegger’s ideas is tied to the history of Russian ideas, Orthodox Christianity, and a special path of state development including the theory of Eurasianism.

Needless to say, recounting Heidegger’s philosophical doctrine in a short journal publication would be senseless. Hundreds of volumes have been published in Germany alone which include whole works, lectures, and diaries. For our scope, let us focus merely on some provisions which, in our opinion, are applicable in a political context.

Firstly, it is worth pointing out that Heidegger employed many neologisms to describe the unfolding of time and being. One such key concept is Dasein, which is often translated as “being-here”. The French philosopher Henry Corbin translated this term as “human reality”, but for the sake of genuine, complete understanding, this and many other of Heidegger’s terms are best left untranslated. They should be provided in the original alongside something similar in one’s native language. Other possible variations should also be considered. For example, das Man expresses inauthentic Dasein that has fallen into banality, whereas in authentic existing, Dasein has the property of being-towards-death – Sein zum Tode – which represents existential terror. Terror is counterposed to fear, which imbues the world with external things and the internal world with empty worries. Interesting to note in this regard is the fact that modern Western policies and liberalism as such are built on fear. This tendency dates back centuries and is directly connected to the formation of Western (European) philosophy.

Let us add that another one of Dasein’s properties is spatiality, as space depends on Dasein, while on the other hand it is not a function of time. Dasein conditionally exists between the outer and inner, the past and present, the margin and the instant. Dasein has existential parameters – being-in-the-world (In-der-Welt-Sein), being-in (In-sein), being-with (Mit-sein), care (die Sorge), thrownness (Geworfenheit), Befindlichkeit (attunement, sofindingness, disposedness), fear (Furcht), understanding (Verstehen), discourse (Rede), and mood (Stimmung).

Another important element of Heidegger’s philosophy is the fourfold encompassing Sky, Divinities, Earth, and Mortals – which are depicted in the following manner: the Sky in the upper left, the Divinities (immortals) in the upper right, mortals (people) in the bottom left, and the Earth in the lower right. An axis runs between people and gods and another between Sky and Earth. The center of the fourfold is the most authentic modus of the existence of Dasein.

It should also be noted that Heidegger distinguishes between past and that which has passed, what is present and what is now, and the future and what is forthcoming. Dasein, according to Heidegger, must make a fundamental choice between the forthcoming and the future, i.e., the choice of authentic existing and directly confronting being (Seyn). Then the forthcoming will become the future. If Dasein chooses inauthentic existence, then the forthcoming will only be forthcoming, and therefore will not come into being.

Upon describing all of these elements of Heidegger’s philosophy in detail, Alexander Dugin poses a question: can one speak of a specific Russian Dasein? What are its existentials? In what does it differ from the European Dasein? Dugin arrives at the conclusion that a special Russian Dasein does exist, and not only a Russian one, for at the heart of each civilization lies a particular “thinking presence”, Dasein, which determines the structure of a given civilization’s Logos. As follows, every people (civilization) has its own special set of existentials.

And here we can find the political dimension of Dasein as Dugin sees it in his proposed concept of the Fourth Political Theory. Dugin focuses on three political theories claimed to be universal – Liberalism, Marxism and Fascism (National-Socialism). Each of them has their own subject of history.

Historical experience has proven that the Western liberal world has tried to forcibly impose its will upon all others. According to this idea, all public systems of the Earth are variants of the Western – liberal – system1 and their distinctive features should disappear before the approach of the conclusion of this world epoch.2.

Jean Baudrillard also states that this is not a clash of civilizations, but an almost innate resistance between one universal homogeneous culture and those who resist this globalization.3.

Apart from Liberalism, two more ideologies are known for having tried to achieve world supremacy, namely: Communism (i.e. Marxism in its various aspects) and Fascism/National Socialism. As Alexander Dugin rightly notes, Fascism arose after the first two ideologies and disappeared before them. After the disintegration of the USSR, the Marxism that was born in the 19th Century has been definitely discredited as well. Liberalism, based mainly on individualism and the atomistic society, human rights and the Leviathan-State described by Hobbes, emerged because of bellum omnium contra omnes4 and has long held on.

Here it is necessary to analyze the relation of the aforesaid ideologies in the contexts of their contemporary times and the loci from which they emerged.

We know that Marxism was a somewhat futuristic idea – Marxism prophesied the future victory of Communism at a time that nonetheless remained uncertain. In this regard it is a messianic doctrine, seeing the inevitability of its victory that would usher the culmination and end of the historical process. But Marx was a false prophet and this victory never eventuated.

National Socialism and Fascism, on the contrary, tried to recreate the abundance of a mythic Golden Age, but with a modernist form5. Fascism and National Socialism were attempts to usher in a new cycle of time, laying the basis for a new Civilization in the aftermath of what was seen as a cultural decline and death of the Western Civilization (hence the idea of the Thousand-Year Reich). This was abortive too.

Liberalism (like Marxism) proclaimed the end of history, most cogently described by Francis Fukuyama (as “the End of History and the Last Man)6. Such an end, nonetheless, never took place; and we have instead a nomadic-like “information society” composed of atomized, egoist individuals 7 that consume avidly the fruits of techno-culture. Moreover, tremendous economic collapses are taking place worldwide; violent conflicts occur (numerous local revolts, but also long-term wars on an international scale); and disappointment dominates our world rather than the universal utopia promised in the name of “progress.”8

From such an historical perspective, it is possible to understand the links between the emergence of an ideology within a particular historical epoch, or what has been called the zeitgeist or “spirit of the age.”

Fascism and National Socialism saw the foundations of history in the state (Fascism) or race (Hitlerian National socialism). For Marxism it was the working class and economic relations between classes. Liberalism on the other hand, sees history in terms of the atomized individual detached from the complex of cultural heritage and inter-social contact and communication. However, nobody has hitherto considered as the subject of history the People as Being, with all the richness of intercultural links, traditions, ethnic features and worldview.

If we consider various alternatives, even nominally ‘socialist’ countries have adopted liberal mechanisms and patterns that have exposed regions with a traditional way of life to accelerated transformation, deterioration and outright obliteration. The destruction of the peasantry, religion and family bonds by Marxism were manifestations of this disruption of traditional organic societies, whether in Maoist China or the USSR under Lenin and Trotsky.

This fundamental opposition to tradition embodied in both Liberalism and Marxism can be understood by the method of historical analysis considered above: Marxism and Liberalism both emerged from the same zeitgeist in the instance of these doctrines, from the spirit of money.9

Several attempts to create alternatives to neo-Liberalism are now visible – such as the political Shia in Iran, where the main state goal is the acceleration of the arrival of the Mahdi and the revision of socialism in Latin America (reforms in Bolivia are especially indicative). These anti-Liberal responses, nonetheless, are limited within the borders of their relevant, single statehood.

Ancient Greece is the source of all three theories of political philosophy. It is important to understand that at the beginning of philosophical thought, the Greeks considered the primary question of Being. However, they risked obfuscation by the nuances of the most complicated relation between being and thinking, between pure being (Seyn) and its expression in existence (Seiende), between human being (Dasein) and being in itself (Sein).10

It is noteworthy that three waves of globalization have been the corollaries of the aforementioned three political theories (Marxism, Fascism, and Liberalism). As a result, we need after them a new political theory which will generate a Fourth Wave: the re-establishment of (every) People with its eternal values. In other words, Dasein will be the subject of history. Every People has its very own Dasein. And, of course, after necessary philosophical considerations, political action must proceed.

Let us continue the preceding discussion about Heidegger’s ideas in Russia in the context of politics. It is significant that in Russia in 2016, Heidegger’s notebooks, Ponderings II-VI, known as his “Black Notebooks 1931-1938”, were published by the Gaidar Institute – a liberal organization which Russian conservative circles consider to be a network of agents of Western influence. Yegor Gaidar was the author of the liberal economic reforms in Russia under President Yeltsin and held the post of Minister of Finance in 1992. Gaidar was also acting Prime Minister of the Russian Federation and acting Minister of Economics in 1993-1994. Due to his reforms, the country was subject to inflation, privatization, and many sectors of the economy were ruined. The latter work of Heidegger’s is considered his most politicized, in which he speaks not only of philosophical categories, but of the role of the Germans in history, upbringing and education, as well as the political project of National Socialism. The Gaidar Institute most likely intended to discredit Heidegger’s teachings with such, but the opposite has happened, as the publication of Heidegger’s diaries has been met with widespread interest.

Paradoxically, in this work Heidegger criticizes Liberalism in the following manner: “The ‘liberal’ sees ‘connectedness’ in his own way. He sees only ‘dependencies’ – ‘influences’, but he never understands that there can be an influencing which is of service to the genuine basic stream of all flowing and provides a path and a direction.”11 Let us present a few more quotations from this work which, in our opinion, are of interest with regards to our approach.

“The metaphysics of Dasein must become deeper in accord with the innermost structure of that metaphysics and must expand into the metapolitics ‘of’ the historical people.”12

“The worthiness for power out of the greatness of Dasein – and Dasein out of the truth of its mission.”13

“Education — the effective and binding realization of the power of the state, taking that power as the will of a people to itself.”14

“At issue is a leap into specifically historical Da-sein. This leap can be carried out only as the liberation of what is given as endowment into what is given as task.”15

As Dugin has pointed out, if early Heidegger assumed that Dasein is something given, then later Heidegger concluded that Dasein is something that must be discovered, substantiated, and constituted. To this end, it is necessary first and foremost to accomplish a serious intellectual process (see Heidegger’s What is Called Thinking).

It is crucial to understand that although Heidegger’s ideas are considered to be a kind of culmination of European philosophy (which began with the Ancient Greeks, a point which is symbolic in itself since Heidegger built his hypotheses on an analysis of Ancient Greek philosophers), Heidegger is also often classified as a thinker who transcended Eurocentrism. For this reason, still during his lifetime, many of Heidegger’s concepts were welcomed in regions that had developed critiques of philosophy with regards to the European heritage as a whole. For example, enormous interest in Heidegger’s works could be found in 20th century Latin America. In Brazil, Heidegger’s works were addressed by Vicente Ferreira da Silva, in Argentina by Carlos Astrada, Vicente Fantone, Enrique Dussel, and Francisco Romero, in Venezuela by Juan David Garcia Bacca, and in Colombia by Ruben Sierra Mejia. Additional confirmation of this can be found in the words of the Iranian philosopher Ahmad Fardid to the effect that Heidegger can be seen as a figure of global significance, not merely as a representative of European thought. Given that Fardid, who is known for his concept of Gharbzadegi, or “Westoxification”, was a consistent critic of Western thought, which he believed contributed to the emergence of nihilism, such recognition of Heidegger is rather telling.

Indeed, Heidegger has had followers not only in Iran, but in many Asian countries as well. In Japan in the 1930’s, Heidegger’s student Kitaro Nishida founded the Kyoto School of Philosophy. Although in Japan Heidegger was largely considered a bearer of the European spirit (following the Meiji reforms, Japan was swept with excessive enthusiasm for everything European, especially German culture and philosophy), it is interesting to note that Heidegger’s notion of “existence” was redrafted in a Buddhist spirit as “true being” (genjitsu sonzai) and “Nothing” (“Oblivion”) was interpreted as “emptiness” (shunya). In other words, the Japanese interpreted Martin Heidegger’s basic concepts in accordance with their own concepts and often blended his terms with the concepts of such European existentialists as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Gabriel Marcel. Another Japanese philosopher, Keiji Nishitani, has adapted Heidegger’s ideas to traditional Eastern models, as is so often done in the East. Parallels between traditional Eastern philosophy and Heideggerian analysis have also been drawn in Korea by Hwa Yol Jung.

In this regard, Russia and the study of Martin Heidegger’s legacy form a kind of bridge between Europe and the East, between the rigid rationalism that has subsumed European consciousness since the Middle Ages, and the abstract contemplative thinking characteristic of Asian peoples. Let us say even more directly that Eurasianism and Heideggerianism are in some sense interconnected and spiritually close tendencies among contemporary ideological currents in Russia.

Although these two schools can also be examined as independent philosophical doctrines, as is often done by secular scholars and opportunistic political scientists, any deep understanding of one can be had only upon grasping the other.

Footnotes:

1 For example, the insistence that all states and peoples should adopt the Westminster English parliamentary system as a universal model regardless of ancient traditions, social structures and hierarchies.

2 « Les droits de l´homme et le nouvel occidentalisme » in L’Homme et la société (numéro spécial [1987], p.9

3 Jean Baudrillard, Power Inferno, Paris: Galilée, 2002. Also see for example Jean Baudrillard, “The Violence of the Global” (< <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=385>>).

4 In English: War of all against all.

5 Hence the criticism of National Socialism and Fascism by Right-Traditionalists such as Julius Evola. See K R Bolton, Thinkers of the Right (Luton, 2003), p. 173..

6 Francis Fukuyama The End of History and the Last Man , Penguin Books, 1992.

7 G Pascal Zachary, The Global Me, NSW, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2000.

8 Clive Hamilton, Affluenza: When Too Much is Never Enough, NSW, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2005.

9 This is the meaning of Spengler’s statement that, “Herein lies the secret of why all radical (i.e. poor) parties necessarily become the tools of the money-powers, the Equites, the Bourse. Theoretically their enemy is capital, but practically they attack, not the Bourse, but Tradition on behalf of the Bourse. This is as true today as it was for the Gracchuan age, and in all countries…” Oswald Spengler, The Decline of the West, (London : George Allen & Unwin , 1971), Vol. 2, p. 464.

10 See Martin Heidegger on these terms.

11 Martin Heidegger, Ponderings II-VI: Black Notebooks 1931-1938 (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2016), 28.

12 Ibid, 91.

13 Ibid, 83.

14 Ibid, 89.

15 Ibid, 173.