

Martin Woessner

Heidegger in America.

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The last few years have seen the publication of several excellent books that study well-known philosophers from non-philosophical perspectives. Neil Gross's *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* (University of Chicago Press 2008) uses the sociology of ideas to illuminate Rorty's work. François Cusset's *French Theory* (Éditions La Découverte 2003) does something similar for Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze. To these books we may now add Martin Woessner's *Heidegger in America*. It is a study of Heidegger, but it does not set out to explain his ideas or evaluate his arguments. Rather, it examines Heidegger from the standpoint of intellectual history. It gives a 'reception history' (5) of Heidegger's work, tracing the ways in which his thought was introduced and appropriated in American intellectual life. This history traces Heidegger's reception in many different areas: in the work of philosophers from Marjorie Grene to Richard Rorty, but also in theology, architecture, and popular culture. Woessner has written an excellent book: one that is wide-ranging, well written, and informed by a vast knowledge of American culture. For American Heideggerians, it is essential reading. But even those not interested in Heidegger have much to learn from it, because as Woessner shows, Heidegger has been at the heart of a great many developments in American intellectual life, both inside and outside the academy. For that reason, *Heidegger in America* is an instructive and entertaining romp through twentieth century history of ideas.

The book is divided into nine chapters of greatly varying length. The first four focus on the people who introduced Heidegger's work to an American audience. Chapter 1, 'Freiburg Bound', discusses a handful of Americans who either studied with Heidegger before the Second World War, or encountered his work while travelling in Europe. Some of them, such as Charles Hartshorne and Sidney Hook, were unimpressed by Heidegger, seeing his work as a warmed-over version of American pragmatism. Others saw him as original and important, but were put off by his obscurity and his politics. Marjorie Grene, who attended Heidegger's lectures, speaks succinctly for the latter group, asking: 'Beyond the cheap rhetoric, what is there? The Ghost of the Quest for Being fencing with the ghost of Aristotle. Something, but by no means enough' (36).

Chapter 2, 'Exiles and Emissaries', discusses the role émigré intellectuals from Germany played in disseminating Heidegger's ideas throughout America. Some of these émigrés—Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss, for example—are already well known, so Woessner focuses on lesser-known figures: Renaissance scholar Paul Oskar Kristeller, philosopher Günther Stern, and psychoanalyst Hans Loewald. The discussion of Stern is especially valuable. His 1948 essay 'On the Pseudo-Concreteness of Heidegger's Philosophy' is a fascinating but little-known critique that anticipates many later criticisms of Heidegger, including those made by Theodor Adorno.

Chapter 3, entitled ‘Nihilism, Nothingness, and God’, examines the decisive role American theologians played in popularizing Heidegger. It describes the way Heidegger was appropriated in the 1950s and 1960s by Paul Tillich, Hans Jonas, and William Richardson, among others. Chapter 3 also tells the story of how Edward Robinson and John Macquarrie produced the first English translation of *Being and Time*. It is significant that Robinson was a theologian and that the translation was published by Student Christian Movement Press, a religious imprint of Harper and Row. Woessner makes a compelling case that ‘Heidegger’s relevance for theology was his entry ticket into American intellectual and cultural debate’ (112).

Eventually, Heidegger’s work spread to American philosophy departments. Chapter 4 discusses the man who made the single greatest contribution to this development: J. Glenn Gray. A Hegel scholar by training, Gray was also a former soldier who had participated in the Allies’s denazification program. In the early 1960s, Gray accepted an invitation from Harper and Row to oversee their translations of Heidegger’s work. He became a mentor to young Heideggerians such as David Farrell Krell, and a close friend of Hannah Arendt, another of Heidegger’s popularizers. Initially dismissive of Heidegger, Gray came to respect his work, and drew heavily on him in his own writings on war, the philosophy of education, and the burgeoning student protest movement.

The next five chapters turn away from Heidegger’s arrival in America and toward the effects—often surprising ones—he has exerted on its wider culture. Chapter 5, ‘Dasein and das Man’, examines treatments of Heidegger in popular culture. It takes a brief look at references to Heidegger in American literature and at the many ‘introductions, guides, and summations of Heidegger’ (172) that can be found in nearly any bookstore. Chapter 6, entitled ‘The Continental Divide’, deals with Heidegger’s influence on the ‘continental’ philosophers who inhabit American philosophy departments. It pays special attention to Hubert Dreyfus, whose commentary on *Being and Time* has introduced many American students to that work, and whose work on artificial intelligence applies Heideggerian insights to topics Heidegger himself never imagined. The American philosophical profession is also at the heart of Chapter 7, entitled ‘Richard Rorty and the Riddle of the Book that Never Was’. It is widely known that Rorty spent many years writing a book on Heidegger—a book he never completed. Woessner offers some intriguing suggestions about what the book might have looked like had it been finished. He points out that Rorty’s view of Heidegger shifted over the years, moving from a Dreyfus-inspired appropriation of the early work to a concern with ‘the potential for romantic self-creation in Heidegger’s later works on art and poetry’ (220).

The book’s eighth chapter is called ‘Ethics, Technology, and Memory’, and it explores Heidegger’s influence on architects such as Kenneth Frampton and Daniel Libeskind. Woessner credits them with raising awareness of the ethical significance of Heidegger’s work, particularly his critique of technology and his later reflections on ‘dwelling’. At the same time, Woessner criticizes the architects for downplaying the reactionary political elements in Heidegger’s work. The ninth and final chapter, ‘Culture Wars’, discusses the uses to which Heidegger was put in the battles over postmodernism

that rocked American universities in the 1980s and 1990s. Woessner discusses Heidegger's links to the 'De Man affair'—the revelation that literary theorist Paul De Man had written anti-Semitic articles for collaborationist publications in the early 1940s. Woessner also has interesting things to say about Alan Bloom's 1987 bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bloom's book railed against the relativism and anti-intellectualism its author saw in American youth culture, claiming these trends owed something to Heidegger's 'anti-rational and anti-liberal thought' (277). Woessner gives a nice overview of Bloom's critique, calling it 'intellectual nativism dressed up in blue jeans'—a nativism that was 'all the more farcical because, as everybody knew, its Saville Row suit-wearing proponent spent as much time as he possibly could not in Chicago, but in Paris' (278).

Heidegger in America is a sprawling book, but it is not shallow or dilettantish. Woessner has done his homework, and his reception history is well informed and meticulously researched. What is even more impressive is that the research does not detract from the book's readability. It is a lively work with flashes of humor and some great turns of phrase. (I especially like Woessner's remark that Bloom's diatribe 'sounded at times as though it had been concocted by some counterrevolutionary government official in a Thomas Pynchon novel' [276].) The book is also packed with interesting and sometimes obscure facts. I was intrigued to learn that filmmaker Terrence Malick was once a PhD student of Hubert Dreyfus, and that he translated Heidegger's *Vom Wesen des Grundes* for Northwestern University Press. Simply by assembling facts like this in one place, Woessner shows there is much to be gained by studying Heidegger in a way that is not just philosophical.

But these gains come at a price, and the steepest is the book's reluctance to engage philosophically with Heidegger and his interpreters. Throughout the book, Woessner avoids taking a stand on interpretive questions, saying he is in no position to evaluate the claims Heidegger's readers make. This hesitation is understandable. Woessner is writing intellectual history, not Heidegger scholarship, and he has enough on his plate without defending a particular reading of Heidegger. Nevertheless, this is a book about Heidegger's ideas, and it is impossible to trace the reception of those ideas without referring to the ideas themselves. At a minimum, the vocabulary used to describe a philosopher's ideas is always philosophically loaded. Simply by speaking of Heidegger in certain ways rather than others, Woessner both reflects and helps perpetuate particular judgments about what his ideas mean. And the vocabulary Woessner adopts from the interpreters he discusses is sometimes quite problematic. Following the lead of these interpreters, Woessner variously refers to Heidegger as an irrationalist (31), a critic of reason (84), an existentialist (267-8), and someone who wants to leave the history of philosophy behind (216, 270). All of these labels are controversial; the last two are especially so. And while Woessner does not exactly endorse these labels, neither does he point out how problematic they are. Interpretive questions may not be his main concern, but a book like this cannot bracket them altogether. We cannot write the history of ideas without knowing what those ideas are.

None of this detracts from Woessner's achievement. He has performed a valuable service by reminding us that a grasp of a philosopher's historical context can help us understand his ideas. But he has also shown—perhaps inadvertently—that a grasp of the ideas can enrich our understanding of the historical context.

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