

**Mahon O'Brien.** *Heidegger, History and the Holocaust.* Bloomsbury Academic 2015. 192 pp. \$120.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781472510198).

*Update:* 'The Heidegger Case' After Seventy Years. 'The Heidegger Controversy' began with the French Postwar denazification trials of 1945, at which Martin Heidegger was convicted as a 'fellow traveler' in German National Socialist (Nazi) war-crimes, largely on the evidence of his brief tenure as *Rector Magnificus* at Freiburg University from April, 1933 to April, 1934, when he was required to enforce the Nazi *Gleichstaltung* (conformitization) of the German universities, which began on March 23, 1933. 'The Heidegger Case' continued with Jean-Paul Sartre and Co.'s critiques of 'Heidegger's Nazism' in *Les temps modernes* in the 1940s and 1950s, and reached a spectacular anti-climax with Victor Farias' *Heidegger and Nazism* (1989), which exposed certain little-known 'facts' about Heidegger's *Rectorate* and spurred critical responses from the 'French Heideggerians', Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jean-François Lyotard. 'The Heidegger Case' then reached another spectacular anti-climax with the publication of Emmanuel Faye's *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933-1935* (2009), which argued that Heidegger's philosophy was Nazi, anti-Semitic, and racist *tout court*, and that his collected works should be purged from philosophy departments, banned from public libraries, and consigned to the clinical study of Nazism, anti-Semitism, and other dangerous social pathologies. But after seventy years, 'The Heidegger Case' still provokes bitter arguments from both self-appointed prosecutors and *pro bono* defenders of the twentieth century German philosopher, without the judge and jury having arrived at a final judgment in *The Case of Western Philosophy vs. Martin Heidegger*.

In *Heidegger, History, and the Holocaust*, Mahon O'Brien's ambitions are clearly to make a substantial contribution to this scholarly debate, if not to settle, once and for all, 'the question as to how a great philosopher could ... have pledged his allegiance to the Nazi Party' by 'show[ing] exactly how Heidegger's philosophy intersects with his politics' (2). But despite pretenses of judicial impartiality, O'Brien clearly aligns himself with the prosecutorial party in 'The Heidegger Case', since he essentially presupposes 'the facts' of the case, as set forth in such prejudicial collections as Richard Wolin's *The Heidegger Controversy* (MIT Press, 1998). And although O'Brien *does* make some significant contributions to this ongoing controversy, the critical reader familiar with 'The Heidegger Case' may get the uncanny sensation that O'Brien's argument is simply *déjà vu* all over again, since he expends considerable effort simply rehearsing 'The Heidegger Controversy' of the 1980s, specifically the contributions of Pierre Bourdieu (*The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*) (48-50) and Michael E. Zimmerman (*Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity*) (51-3), reprising previous arguments regarding Heidegger's connections with the German conservative revolutionaries, Oswald Spengler (54-64) and Ernst Junger (65-70), and rereading certain passages from Heidegger's texts—specifically, *Being and Time*, section 74 ('the authentic *Dasein* of the [German?] People') (77-85), *Introduction to Metaphysics* ('the inner truth and greatness of the [Nazi] movement') (85-9), *The Bremen and Freiburg Lectures* ('the production of corpses in the gas chambers') (90-4 *et passim*), and the *Rectorate Address* ('The Self-Assertion of the [German] University') (114-17)—which are already well-known to students of 'The Heidegger Case'. And although O'Brien insists that his motivation is not simply to reduce Heidegger's philosophy to his political mistakes, that is what he actually does, especially in the final chapter, 'Heidegger and Anti-Semitism', which relies upon precisely those passages selected by Faye from Heidegger's unpublished lectures of the *Rectorate* period, *Being and Truth* and

*Nature History State* (1933-1934), given immediately after the Nazi *coup d'état* in Weimar Germany and Adolf Hitler's proclamation as Chancellor (January 30, 1933), when the *Rector Magnificus*, under tremendous pressure, made the obligatory Nazi propaganda speeches and gave the requisite 'Heil Hitler!' salutes, before resigning, after only one year, and embarking upon the self-critique of National Socialist metaphysics, and of his own earlier ('Nazi', 'metaphysical') works, recorded in 'Overcoming Metaphysics' (1936-1946).

Initially, O'Brien begins by critiquing what he calls the 'victor's morality' (12) of Heidegger's previous critics, who self-righteously sit in judgment upon 'Heidegger's Nazism', without asking whether they themselves might have behaved equally badly when faced with the sinister menace of the Nazi 'Black Terror' and the S.A. concentration camps. O'Brien cogently argues that Heidegger's philosophy, however compromised, simply can't be reduced, either to the suspect political discourse of the 1930s German conservative revolutionaries (Spengler, Junger, Schmitt), or to Heidegger's own political opinions of the *Rectorate* period, as if these political errors had stigmatized Heidegger's philosophy (and 'Heidegger the Man') for life. But having made that concessionary statement, O'Brien proceeds to follow the selfsame protocol as the prosecutorial critics by castigating 'Heidegger the Nazi' on a relentlessly *ad hominem* basis, imputing to 'Heidegger the Man' the worst possible motives ('self-exculpation', 'opportunism', 'egocentrism', 'careerism', 'megalomania', etc.) (129) in every possible case, thereby becoming a classic example of the triumphalist syndrome he critiques in Farias, Faye, and Wolin.

In the first place, O'Brien reads Heidegger's 'The Question Concerning Technology' (1955), a distinctly 'post-Nazi' text, in the harshly lurid backlight of Heidegger's notorious 'agriculture remark' ('Agriculture is now a mechanized food industry, in essence the same as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the blockading and starvation of countries, the same as the production of hydrogen bombs') (24), and sets that scandalous remark against the protocols from the Wannsee Conference (January 20, 1942), at which 'The Final Solution to the Jewish Question' was dictated (32-3). O'Brien's intent is to prove that Heidegger's analysis of the Holocaust or Shoah as a technologically administered atrocity, if 'scandalously inadequate' in a stringently moralizing sense, was also 'absolutely [technically] correct' (Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, Basil Blackwell, 34) in the strictly technocratic sense, since, as O'Brien argues, 'the Holocaust was in fact the purest... expression of the extreme danger of [what Heidegger calls] *Gestell*': that is, of the Western metaphysical technology of 'enframing' (*gestellen*) which reduces human beings to "problems" that admitt of "solution" through extermination (41). But O'Brien neglects to mention that Heidegger's remark is also 'absolutely correct' in the world-historical sense, since, as Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands* (Basic Books, 2010) extensively documents, the 1930s Stalinist Soviet collectivization of agriculture killed as many (or more?) people by starvation (3.5 million Ukrainians in 1933 alone!) as the Nazi concentration camps. Secondly, O'Brien reads the 1930s *Rectorate* texts against the pro-Nazi texts of the German conservative revolutionaries (54-71), without demonstrating how Heidegger critically distances himself from that suspect political discourse, while also incorporating it into his critique of National Socialist metaphysics. In the *Being and Truth* lectures, for example, Heidegger's citation of Schmitt's 'friend/enemy' distinction from *The Concept of the Political* ('the enemy is... every person who poses an [existential] threat to the *Dasein* of the people'; 152-3 n.11) makes clear that what Schmitt celebrates as a brutally physical attempt by the Nazi Party and the S.A. to destroy German ('Spartacist') communism (to 'crush Marxism its enemy'; Schmitt, *State, Movement, People*, Plutarch Press, 2001, 35) is instead thought by Heidegger as a *Weltanschauungskrieg* (a

‘battle of world views’) between the German *Volk* and Stalinist Bolshevism, in which ‘the least of [the battle] consists in coming to blows with one another’ (cf. Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, Indiana University Press, 2010, 73). Thirdly, O’Brien proceeds, in a gesture reminiscent of Faye’s Heidegger, to collapse Heidegger’s ‘post-Nazi’ philosophy into his political discourse of the 1930s *Rectorate* period, especially the *Nature History State* lectures, which certainly do not represent Heidegger’s best thought about Nazism and anti-Semitism, as presented, for example, in *The Bremen and Freiburg Lectures* (1949-1950).

And finally, O’Brien concludes with a stunning peroration which rivals those of Farias, Faye, and Wolin in prosecutorial vitriol, and resembles the protocol of the French Postwar denazification trials, when Vichy collaborators sat in judgment upon Nazi ‘fellow travelers’, and simple accusation was tantamount to proof of complicity in Nazi war crimes. ‘Where do we ourselves, the accusers, the prosecutors, judges and jurors, in short—the victors—’, O’Brien asks, ‘where do we draw the line when it comes to stretching necks? How many people who were never brought to trial at Nuremburg shared the same prejudices as those who suffered the long drop from a short rope?’ (132). Although O’Brien’s intent is to criticize the ‘victor’s justice’ by which certain high-profile Nazis (Speer, Bormann, etc.) were condemned to imprisonment or death by the Nuremburg tribunals, while others, equally guilty, escaped punishment, this passage comes dangerously close to a call for vigilante justice against those who, like Heidegger, never committed an overt act of cruelty, murder, or torture, and whose crimes and misdeeds are, at most, clandestine thought-crimes, which cannot rightly be prosecuted, whether by the French tribunals, or by Western philosophy at large. But this passage is, unfortunately, typical of O’Brien’s critical work, which, in its politically correct desire to dissociate itself from the ‘victor’s moralizing’ of Farias, Faye, and Wolin, still succumbs to their prosecutorial excesses, and finally leaves the abyss between ‘Heidegger’s philosophy’ and ‘Heidegger’s Nazism’ more perilously impassable, and more problematic, than before this latest episode of ‘The Heidegger Controversy’.

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