
Book Review

Heidegger: The Roots of War and Fascism Today

by Mark Burdman

Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse

by Richard Wolin

Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press
2001, 276 pages, 29.95

As much of the world has looked on with alarm at the aggressive-war drive conducted by neo-conservative fanatics in the United States, the LaRouche movement has circulated internationally a groundbreaking report, to explain who and what is behind these mad designs and actions. The report, entitled *Children of Satan*, documents that these provocations emanate out of a tightly knit group of disciples of the late fascist philosopher Leo Strauss, who, although a German-Jewish emigré, many of whose family died in the Holocaust, was a promoter of the ideas of such core Nazi ideologues as philosopher Martin Heidegger and jurist Carl Schmitt.

For those wishing to pursue this subject in more depth, Richard Wolin's book can serve as a useful companion volume, albeit Strauss is only mentioned once, in a footnote, where his influence over the American neo-conservative movement is wrongly dismissed as "fleeting." Nonetheless, despite this and other weaknesses in Wolin's account, his book provides some devastating insights into Martin Heidegger, and, to a lesser extent, Carl Schmitt. He raises the troubling paradox, that core features of Heidegger's Nazi ideas were still being promoted, long after his death, by some of his erstwhile Jewish students.

The most egregious of these cases is that of Hannah Arendt, who had been Heidegger's lover, and despite being jilted by him, became one of those most involved in whitewashing his reputation after World War II, in full knowledge that he had been an enthusiastic Nazi. For anybody who has remaining doubts that Heidegger was a pillar of the Nazi regime, Wolin ruthlessly removes these doubts, showing not only that Heidegger—politically, professionally, and academically—was a fanatic Nazi; but that he saw in "Der Führer," the realization of his own, most treasured philosophical concepts,

Although Wolin would almost certainly shy away from the term, what he has brought to the fore, in this book, is certainly one of the most troubling phenomena of the last decades: that of the Jewish Nazi. There are many who cringe in horror at this apparent oxymoron, yelping loudly, "It is impossible for a Jew to be a Nazi!" Some of such yelpers have been somewhat neutralized by the abominable behavior of the Ariel Sharon regime in Israel, and the convincing historical evidence that Sharon's model and forebear, Vladimir Jabotinsky, was a supporter of the Hitler regime—minus its specific anti-Jewish beliefs and excesses.

That returns us to the case of Leo Strauss, Strauss was a German-Jewish emigré to the United States. At the same time, he was sponsored, for his emigré positions—first in Britain, then at his U.S. main base at the University of Chicago—by Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, with whom he exchanged correspondence, and whose views, favoring the bestialist philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, he shared. Strauss was, too, a devoted follower and admirer of Heidegger.

The relevant point was most starkly made by one Emil Fackenheim, a former student of Strauss and author of a major study of Hegel, who has been in Israel for the past years. Fackenheim has devoted decades to evolving a bizarre "post-Holocaust existentialist Jewish philosophy," the which is significantly based on the ideas of Martin Heidegger. At the end of his active teaching career, some years back, Fackenheim asserted that "the day will come when, because it is philosophically correct, and thus just, Martin Heidegger will only be known because he made possible Leo Strauss."

'The Führer Is the Only Reality'

How ghastly such words are, is clear, when one reviews Wolin's evidence that Martin Heidegger played an important role in having "made possible" Adolf Hitler. Wolin shows that Heidegger was a committed Nazi whose commitment was inextricably linked to his philosophy. This is a useful antidote to those revisionist schools, including many individuals in the Leo Strauss nexus, who try to separate the philosopher from the Nazi, and who say, "Sure, Heidegger was a Nazi, but . . ."

Wolin writes that Heidegger, after joining the Nazi Party in 1933, "on the lecture stump, proved an effective propagandist on behalf of the new regime, concluding one speech by declaring, 'Let not ideas and doctrines be your guide. The Führer is the only German reality and its law.'" Wolin notes: "In May 1933, Heidegger sent a telltale telegram to Hitler, expressing solidarity with recent *Gleichschaltung* legislation." *Gleichschaltung* meant putting every feature of life in Germany, public and private, under centralized control. That legislation, Wolin points out, was co-authored by Carl Schmitt. He notes that Heidegger engaged in "instances of political denunciation and personal betrayal. Moreover, Heidegger remained a dues-paying member of the Nazi Party until the regime's bitter end." As late as 1959, he was continu-

ing to wax lyrical about the “inner truth and greatness of the National Socialism.”

Heidegger was also a very devoted *implementer* of Nazi policies. In his 1933 Rectoral Address at Freiburg University, he concluded with an inspired paean to the “Glory and Greatness of the [National] Awakening.” Later, he was to declare: “The defining principle of my rectorship has been the fundamental transformation of scholarly education on the basis of the forces and demands of the National Socialist state.” Further, Heidegger was to want to complain that “dissolution” of the old structures did not go far enough, and, Wolin reports, angered his fellow faculty members by attempts to make participation in Nazi “labor camps”—including ideological training—a requirement of university life.

‘Truth Is Not for Every Man’

In 1936, Heidegger confided to Karl Löwith, one of the four Jewish students whom Wolin studies, that his “‘partisanship for National Socialism lay in the essence of his philosophy’; it derived, he claimed, from the concept of ‘historicity’ . . . in *Being and Time*.”

As Wolin shows, the roots go back to the pre-Nazi period. Born into a Catholic family, by 1919, Heidegger was renouncing his religion, in favor of the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche. He took up Nietzsche’s theses: that “God is dead”; that universal concepts must be discarded; and that Platonic “ideas,” and an insistence on “truth,” must be rejected. He became part of what Wolin calls the “anti-civilizational” philosophical movement of the 1920s. In 1923, he was to declare that philosophy has no interest in solving problems of “universal humanity and culture.” On another occasion, he exclaimed: “Thinking begins only when we have come to know that reason, glorified for centuries, is the most stiff-necked adversary of thought.”

Wolin presents an interesting quote on Heidegger from Ernst Cassirer (who had been Leo Strauss’ thesis adviser at Marburg University, and more than well-informed on the species). In 1945, Cassirer declared that Heidegger “does not admit there is something like ‘eternal truth,’ a Platonic ‘realm of ideas’ . . . All this is declared to be elusive. In vain we try to build up a logical philosophy; we can only give an *Existenzphilosophie*. Such an existential philosophy does not claim to give us an objective and universal truth. No thinker can give more truth than his own existence; and this existence has a historical character. . . . In order to express his thought Heidegger had to coin a new term. He spoke of the *Geworfenheit* of man.” Wolin translates this as “being-thrown,” although it can also be rendered as “thrown-ness.” *Geworfenheit*, indeed, is the entry-point for all the worst forms of cruelty and bestiality, as it removes all culturally derived



Nazi Martin Heidegger’s student, lover, and lifelong promoter, Hannah Arendt. What author Wolin “has brought to the fore . . . is certainly one of the most troubling phenomena of the last decades: that of the Jewish Nazi.”

restraints, and reduces man to being a creature of wanton instinct.

“For Heidegger, philosophizing is an intrinsically aristocratic enterprise,” insists Wolin. In his 1935 lecture course, Heidegger stated, “Truth is not for every man, but only for the strong.” It is worth inviting the reader, here, to study researcher Tony Papert’s overview of the methods of Leo Strauss, in the *Children of Satan*. Every feature itemized here, is integral to the core of Strauss’ approach.

“In the last analysis, it seems impossible to separate Heidegger’s philosophical authoritarianism from the question of his political authoritarianism. . . . His philosophical and political predilections were related to one another necessarily rather than contingently,” Wolin further writes. Wolin even goes beyond that, “Heidegger believed that he understood Nazism better than the Nazis themselves,” and, in effect, Hitler owed him an apology, by locating the “National Revolution” on a racial-biological rather than ontological footing. What Heidegger insisted on, above all, was what he referred to as “ontological National Socialism” or “ontological fascism.”

Heidegger, Schmitt, and ‘Having Enemies’

Albeit briefly, Wolin makes the useful point, of bringing Heidegger together with Carl Schmitt. He writes that “Heidegger’s existential realism invites comparison with the political philosopher Carl Schmitt.” He quotes Löwith: “It is not by chance if one finds in Carl Schmitt a political ‘decisionism’—in which the ‘potentiality-for-Being-a-whole’ of individual existence is transposed to the ‘totality’ of the authentic state . . . that corresponds to Heidegger’s

existentialist philosophy.”

Wolin establishes that the two men shared common roots in Nietzsche. Heidegger fully endorsed Schmitt’s statement, in the book *The Concept of the Political*, that “The high points of great politics are the moments in which the enemy comes into view, in concrete clarity, as the enemy.” This idea of Schmitt’s was lifted directly from Nietzsche’s insistence, on the importance of “having enemies.”

Even more interesting today, former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, among others, has asserted that Carl Schmitt’s declaration about the necessity of “the enemy,” is the underlying basis for the Clash of Civilizations policy of leading circles in the United States, and for the impulse toward war coming out of Washington.

For those who enjoy the irony, of Carl Schmitt having been the sponsor of the German-Jewish emigré Leo Strauss, Wolin provides the following quote, delivered by Schmitt at a meeting of German jurists, in the mid-1930s: “We need to liberate the German spirit from all Jewish falsifications, falsifications of the concept of spirit which have made it possible for Jewish emigrants to label the great struggle of Gauleiter Julius Streicher as something unspiritual.” Julius Streicher was the editor of *Der Stürmer*, the Nazi publication with the most virulent anti-Jewish filth.

Hannah Arendt: Lover, Defender, Disciple

Clearly establishing Heidegger’s nasty philosophical pedigree, Wolin has set as his main task, tracing what this reviewer would call the “Heideggerian genes” in the thought of four of his Jewish students from the pre-Nazi era. On this task as such, Wolin only partly succeeds. Readers of his book should beware, that he himself is so steeped in the philosophical idioms of the truly bizarre and disastrous 20th Century, that his language and argumentation is often abstruse. With all the evidence he presents to show Heidegger’s monstrous qualities, he begins the book by glibly calling him “Germany’s greatest philosopher.” A few sentences later, he characterizes the miserable Hannah Arendt as “probably the 20th Century’s greatest political thinker.” Given that he otherwise shows her to be, in essence, a Heideggerian fascist, albeit of a “leftist” kind, that characterization is quite a mouthful.

In the profiles of Löwith, Jonas, and Marcuse, Wolin largely lets them off the hook. Of course, all three take their distance from Heidegger as a Nazi, but the traces of Heideggerian thought are quite evident, and Wolin could have been more forceful in demonstrating this. In Jonas, this takes the form of what can only be called “ecological fascism,” a “green-existentialist” extremism. In Marcuse, it took the form of embracing a counterculture movement founded on the “erotic,” and on “the primitive.”

Of his four subjects, Wolin’s most interesting and nastiest profile is of Hannah Arendt. He repeats the known fact, that she was Heidegger’s lover, whom, in 1928, Heidegger brutally jilted. That, plus his enthusiastic embrace of Nazism,

should have torn Arendt angrily away from him. But quite the contrary happened. Scandalously, Arendt became one of his chief exonerators in the post-war period, when he had already been subjected to denazification procedures. Wolin reports that the two “reconciled” in 1950, when she returned to Germany, at a time when Heidegger was still banned from German university life, and his reputation ruined, because he was a Nazi collaborator. “The reunion transformed her from one of his harshest critics into one of his most staunch defenders. . . . Arendt was ecstatic about their reunion.” She wrote that the evening and following morning “are a confirmation of an entire life.”

Wolin writes: “Arendt became Heidegger’s de facto American literary agent, diligently overseeing contracts and translations of his books. In a moment of desperation, Heidegger, elderly and cash-poor, contemplated auctioning off the original manuscript of *Being and Time*. Unworldly in matters of *Geld*, where was he to turn for advice? To a Jew, of course. Arendt dutifully complied. . . .”

After their reconciliation, Arendt “systematically downplayed the gravity and extent of Heidegger’s Nazi past. In her contribution to a *Festschrift* commemorating Heidegger’s 80th birthday, Arendt went out of her way to dispute the relationship between Heidegger’s philosophy and his enlistment for Hitler. . . . She characterized Heidegger’s 1933 Rectorial Address as a text that, ‘though in spots unpleasantly nationalistic,’ was ‘by no means an expression of Nazism.’ ”

Most importantly, she propagated Heidegger’s ideas: “Hannah Arendt became the ultimate political existentialist. Her political thinking followed what one might describe as a ‘left Heideggerian’ course: She transposed the revolutionary anti-rational energies that Heidegger praised in right-wing revolutionary movements to the ends of the political left.” As Wolin shows, with such of her ideas as “aesthetized politics” and “action for action’s sake,” and with her open contempt for modern democracy and preference for her own variant of “aristocracy,” she echoed some of the pet ideas of the 1920s political right, the which led into fascism and Nazism.

Where Wolin really falls down, is in his repeated conclusion, that the problem with Heidegger, Schmitt, and such disciples as Arendt, is that they were expressing some kind of “Germanism,” and/or were the end-product of some kind of specifically “German way.” Particularly as his arguments involve the complexities of German Jews, this is way off the mark, as further evidenced by his complete lack of understanding of the importance of the German Jew Moses Mendelssohn, in defining a universal identity for Jews, far beyond a German context.

But in the end, Wolin has provided a useful overview of the “left” counterparts to the “right” neo-cons of the Leo Strauss school today; and so, for those wanting to further their understanding of this phenomenon, and willing to trudge through often difficult argumentation, the book is recommended.