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Introduction to Herbert Marcuse and Martin Heidegger: An Exchange of Letters

Richard Wolin

Existentialism collapses in the moment when its political theory is realized. The total-authoritarian state which it yearned for gives the lie to all its truths. Existentialism accompanies its collapse with a self-abasement that is unique in intellectual history; it carries out its own history as a satyr-play to the end. It began philosophically as a great debate with Western rationalism and idealism, in order to redeem the historical concretion of individual existence for this intellectual heritage. And it ends philosophically with the radical denial of its own origins; the struggle against reason drives it blindly into the arms of the reigning powers. In their service and protection it betrays that great philosophy which it once celebrated as the pinnacle of Western thinking.

— Herbert Marcuse,
“The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian State” (1934)

Agriculture is today a motorized food industry, in essence the same as the manufacture of corpses in gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the blockade and starvation of countries, the same as the manufacture of atomic bombs.

— Martin Heidegger,
“Insight into That Which Is” (1949)

The full story of Marcuse’s relation to Heidegger has yet to be written. We know that during the four years Marcuse was in Freiburg studying

* The Introduction and epistolary exchange between Marcuse and Heidegger that follow will soon appear in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (New York: Columbia U P 1991).

with Heidegger, his enthusiasm for Heidegger's philosophy was unreserved. Or as Marcuse himself would observe in retrospect, "I must say frankly that during this time, let's say from 1928 to 1932, there were relatively few reservations and relatively few criticisms on my part."¹ From this period stem Marcuse's first essays — "Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism," "On Concrete Philosophy," "The Foundations of Historical Materialism," "On the Philosophical Foundations of the Concept of Labor in Economics," and "On the Problem of Dialectic" — which attempt to effectuate a synthesis between Marxism and existentialism.² Of course, the synthesis Marcuse was seeking is suggestive of the analogous philosophical enterprise undertaken by the late Sartre in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and other works. Yet, whereas Marcuse was moving from Marxism to existentialism, Sartre's intellectual development followed the obverse trajectory. However, via the integration of Marxism and existentialism, both thinkers were pursuing a common end: they recognized that the crisis of Marxist thought — and practice — was in no small measure precipitated by its incapacity to conceptualize the problem of the "individual." And thus, in the doctrines of orthodox Marxism, the standpoint of the individual threatened to be crushed amid the weight of objective historical determinants and conditions. For Sartre, writing in the wake of Stalinism and the Soviet invasion of Hungary, a "critique of dialectical reason" — in the Kantian sense of establishing transcendental limits or boundaries — had become an urgent historical task. Marcuse's attempts to integrate these two traditions — which he would ultimately judge as failed — seemed to anticipate many of the historical problems of Marxism that would motivate Sartre's later philosophical explorations of these themes.

In Marx's 1946 "Theses on Feuerbach" he remarks that "The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of

1. Herbert Marcuse, in "Heidegger's Politics: An Interview with Herbert Marcuse," in *Marcuse: Critical Theory and the Promise of Utopia*, ed. Robert Pippin et al. (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1988).

2. English translations of these essays are as follows: "Contribution to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism," *Telos* 4 (1969): 3-34 (caveat emptor: this is an extremely poor translation); "The Foundations of Historical Materialism," in Herbert Marcuse, *Studies in Critical Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon, 1973); "On the Philosophical Foundations of the Concept of Labor in Economics," *Telos* 16 (Summer 1973): 9-37; "On the Problem of Dialectic," *Telos* 27 (Spring 1976): 12-39. See also, "Über konkrete Philosophie," *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 62 (1929): 111-28.

the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively.” In contradistinction to materialism, Marx continues, it fell to “idealism” to develop the “*active side*” of dialectics, i.e., that side that points in the direction of *praxis*: “revolutionary, ‘practical-critical,’ activity.”³ It is not hard to see that what Marcuse valorized above all about Heidegger’s early philosophy was its potential contribution to the “*active side*” of dialectics in a way that paralleled the contribution made by German idealism to historical materialism in the previous century. If the “*crisis of historical materialism*” (in “*Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism*,” Marcuse alludes to “the bungled revolutionary situations” of which recent history had provided ample evidence) had been precipitated by the triumph of Marxism’s “objectivistic” self-understanding, would not a new infusion of historically adequate idealist categories aid greatly in the resuscitation of a senescent Marxist theory?

In *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács observes that

[German] classical philosophy is able to think the deepest and most fundamental problems of the development of bourgeois society through to the very end — on the plane of philosophy. It is able — in thought — to complete the evolution of class. And — in thought — it is able to take all the paradoxes of its position to the point where the necessity of going beyond this historical stage in mankind’s development can at least be seen as a problem.⁴

In similar fashion, Marcuse perceives Heideggerian *Existenzphilosophie* to be the most advanced expression of contemporary bourgeois philosophy. However, its value is greater than being simply a “privileged” object of “ideology criticism.” Instead, it has something specific and positive to contribute to materialist dialectics, in a way that parallels Lukács’ own praise of idealism for having provided dialectical thought with the category of “mediation.” And thus, in his “*Contribution to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism*,” Marcuse lauds Heidegger’s *Being and Time* “as a turning point in the history of philosophy — the point where bourgeois philosophy transcends itself from within and opens the way to a new, ‘concrete’ science.”⁵

Just what it was about Heidegger’s existentialism that Marcuse

3. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (New York: International, 1970) 121.

4. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T., 1971) 121.

5. Marcuse, “*Contribution*” 12.

viewed as so promising has been discussed in more detail elsewhere.⁶ In the context at hand, it will hopefully suffice to highlight the two essential “moments” of Marcuse’s appreciation of Heidegger’s thought.

First, Marcuse emphasizes what might be referred to as the “hermeneutical point of departure” (*Ansatz*) of *Being and Time*; i.e., the fact that human Being or *Dasein* occupies center-stage in Heidegger’s “existential analytic” (conversely, Marcuse shows very little interest in the strictly “metaphysical” or “ontological” dimension of *Being and Time*, i.e., Heidegger’s posing of the *Seinsfrage*). He reveres this philosophical approach as an *Aufhebung* of the static, quasi-positivistic aspects of bourgeois philosophy and social science, whereby humanity is viewed predominantly as an object of scientific scrutiny and control, rather than as an active and conscious agent of change and historical becoming. By identifying *Dasein* as “care,” as an “embodied subjectivity” — as “that Being for which its very Being is an issue for it” — Heidegger’s thought displays a potential for the constructive transcendence of the traditional (bourgeois) philosophical antinomy between thought and being, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, and—ultimately—theory and practice. By rejecting the objectivistic framework of previous philosophical thought, Heideggerian “*Dasein* encounters the objective world as a world of meaning oriented toward existence. It does not encounter it as rigid *res extensae*, as independent, abstract physical things. Rather, they are related to an *Existenz* that uses them, orients itself towards them, and deals with them; thus ascribing to them meaning, time, and place.”⁷ By employing a practically situated *Dasein* as his philosophical point of departure, Heidegger’s standpoint in effect emphasizes *the primacy of practical reason*; and in this respect, his discussions of the problems of “Selfhood” and “my ownmost capacity-for-Being” present a micro-philosophical complement to the socio-historical analyses of Marxism.

But of equal importance in Marcuse’s youthful appreciation of Heidegger is the category of historicity: i.e., Heidegger’s contention in Division II of *Being and Time* that not only does all “life” exist *in history* (this is the claim, e.g., of Dilthey’s “historicism”) but that “existence” itself is *historical*: that is, *Dasein* is engaged in a constant and active re-appropriation and shaping of the pre-given semantic potentials of historical

6. Cf. Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984) 38ff; Barry Katz, *Herbert Marcuse and the Art of Liberation* (London: New Left, 1982) 58ff.

7. Marcuse, “Contribution” 13.

life. *Dasein* is thereby always surpassing itself in the direction of the future. Or as Heidegger expresses it, “*The primary meaning of existentiality is in the future.*”⁸ It is clear that in this “active,” “future-oriented” disposition of existential historicity, Marcuse perceives a crucial hermeneutical/methodological tool whereby the problems of historical struggle and contestation might be thematized; problems that Marxism in its current, “objectivistic,” “diamat” guise remained incapable of addressing. Or as Marcuse himself observes, “Past, present, and future are existential characteristics, and thus render possible fundamental phenomena such as understanding, concern and determination. This opens the way for the demonstration of historicity as a fundamental existential determination — which we regard as the decisive point in Heidegger’s phenomenology.”⁹ Moreover, by virtue of the centrality of the category of “historicity” in *Being and Time*, there seemed to exist a necessary and essential basis for the marriage of Marxism and phenomenology that Marcuse was preoccupied with during these years.¹⁰

Marcuse’s efforts to merge Marxism and existentialism would be repeated by many others in the course of the 20th century. Here, in addition to Sartre, the names of Merleau-Ponty, Enzo Paci, Karel Kosik, Pierre Aldo Rovatti, and Tran Duc Thao also come to mind.¹¹ Yet, according to Marcuse’s own retrospective appraisal, such attempts to combine Marxism and existentialism were predestined to failure. This was true insofar as existentialist categories such as “*Dasein*,” “historicity,” and “authenticity” were, in Marcuse’s view, a priori capable of attaining only a “pseudo-concreteness.” Marcuse describes his reasons for breaking with the paradigm of phenomenological Marxism in a 1974 interview in

8. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 374.

9. Marcuse, “Contribution” 15.

10. In Marcuse’s failed *Habilitationsschrift*, *Hegel’s Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, the Heideggerian category of historicity also occupies center stage. There is some dispute in the secondary literature as to whether Heidegger ever read (let alone rejected) the work, or whether Marcuse — aware of the difficulties he would face in pursuing a teaching career amid the changing political climate in Germany — ever bothered to submit the work to his mentor. For a discussion of this issue, see Seyla Benhabib, “Translator’s Introduction” to *Hegel’s Ontology and the Theory of Historicity* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T., 1987) xff. For another discussion of the relation of Marcuse to Heidegger as it emerges in this 1932 work, see Robert Pippin, “Marcuse on Hegel and Historicity,” *The Philosophical Forum* XVI.3 (1985): 180-206. Unlike other commentators who argue for a distinct break between the 1932 *Habilitationsschrift* and his next book on Hegel — the 1941 *Reason and Revolution* — Pippin seeks to emphasize the elements of continuity between the two works.

11. For a survey of these tendencies, see Paul Piccone, “Phenomenological Marxism,” *Telos* 9 (Fall 1971): 3-31.

the following terms: "I soon realized that Heidegger's concreteness was to a great extent a phony, a false concreteness, and that in fact his philosophy was just as abstract and just as removed from reality, even avoiding reality, as the philosophies which at that time had dominated German universities, namely a rather dry brand of neo-Kantianism, neo-Hegelianism, neo-Idealism, but also positivism." He continues, "If you look at [Heidegger's] principle concepts . . . *Dasein*, *Das Man*, *Sein*, *Seiendes*, *Existenz*, they are 'bad' abstracts in the sense that they are not conceptual vehicles to comprehend the real concreteness in the apparent one. They lead away."¹²

In his essay, "Existential Ontology and Historical Materialism in the work of Herbert Marcuse," Alfred Schmidt, echoing Marcuse's own sentiments, similarly emphasizes the inner conceptual grounds on which the marriage between Marxism and existentialism foundered. Schmidt seconds the verdict of the philosopher and former Heidegger student Karl Löwith concerning the inadequacies of the category of "historicity": viz., that Heidegger's "reduction of history to historicity is miles away from concrete historical thought"; and in this way, Heidegger in point of fact "falls behind Dilthey's treatment of the problem: for 'insofar as he radicalizes it, [he] thereby eliminates it.'"¹³

The "pseudo-concreteness" of Heidegger's *Existenzphilosophie* — and thus the betrayal of its original phenomenological promise — to which Schmidt and Löwith allude, may be explained in the following terms. *Being and Time* operates with a conceptual distinction between "ontological" ("existential") and "ontic" ("*existentiell*") planes of analysis. The former level refers to fundamental structures of human Being-in-the-world whose specification seems to be the main goal of Heidegger's 1927 work. The latter dimension refers to the concrete, "factual" actualization of the "existential" categories on the plane of everyday life-practice. It is this level that exists beyond the purview of "existential analysis" or "fundamental ontology" properly so-called. Yet, if this is the case, then the dimension of ontic life or everyday concretion would seem to fall beneath the threshold of Heidegger's ontological vision. And consequently, his category of "historicity" would never be capable of accounting for the events of "real history." The dilemma is further compounded by the fact that Heidegger's existential analytic treats "everydayness" as such — and

12. Marcuse, "Heidegger's Politics: An Interview," 96-7.

13. Schmidt, "Existential Ontology and Historical Materialism in the Work of Herbert Marcuse," in *Herbert Marcuse: Critical Theory and the Promise of Utopia*, 49-50.

thus the sphere of "ontic life" in its entirety — as a manifestation of "inauthenticity." For to all intents and purposes, it has been "colonized" by the "They" (*das Man*).

But whatever the inner, conceptual grounds may have been for the breakdown of Marcuse's project of an "existential Marxism," the immediate cause for its dissolution seemed to owe more to the force of objective historical circumstances: Hitler's accession to power on January 30, 1933, followed by Heidegger's enthusiastic proclamation of support for the regime four months later.¹⁴ In retrospect, Marcuse insists that during his stay in Freiburg, he never remotely suspected Heidegger of even covertly harboring pro-Nazi sentiments. Thus, the philosopher's "conversion" to the National Socialist cause in the spring of 1933 took him — as well as many others — by complete surprise. Nevertheless, Marcuse goes on to insist that had he at the time been slightly more attentive to the latent political semantics of *Being and Time* and other works, he might have been spared this later shock. As he explains:

Now, from personal experience I can tell you that neither in his lectures, nor in his seminars, nor personally, was there ever any hint of [Heidegger's] sympathies for Nazism. . . . So his openly declared Nazism came as a complete surprise to us. From that point on, of course, we asked ourselves the question: did we overlook indications and anticipations in *Being and Time* and the related writings? And we made one interesting observation, *ex-post* (and I want to stress that, *ex-post*, it is easy to make this observation). If you look at his view of human existence, of Being-in-the-world, you will find a highly repressive, highly oppressive interpretation. I have just today gone again through the table of contents of *Being and Time* and had a look at the main categories in which he sees the essential characteristics of existence or *Dasein*. I can just read them to you and you will see what I mean: 'Idle talk, curiosity, ambiguity, falling and Being-thrown, concern, Being-toward-death, anxiety, dread, boredom,' and so on. Now this gives a picture which plays well on the fears and frustrations of men and women in a repressive society — a joyless existence: overshadowed by death and anxiety; human material for the authoritarian personality.¹⁵

14. See Heidegger's Rectorial Address of May 27, 1933, *Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität/Das Rektorat 1933-34: Tatsachen und Gedanken* (Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1983). See also Heidegger, "Political Texts: 1933-34," *New German Critique* 45 (Fall 1988): 96-114.

15. Marcuse, "Heidegger's Politics: An Interview," 99.

Yet, in the opening citation from the 1934 essay, “The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian State,” Marcuse expresses a slightly different sentiment: viz., that in its partisanship for Nazism, *Existenzphilosophie* does not so much realize its “inner truth”; rather, it engages in a “radical denial of its own origins”: i.e., its claim to being the legitimate heir of the Western philosophical tradition.

The 1947-48 exchange of letters between Marcuse and Heidegger shows Marcuse grappling with a seemingly inexplicable dilemma: how could Heidegger, who claimed to be the philosophical inheritor of the legacy of Western philosophy, place his thinking in the service of a political movement that embodied the *absolute negation* of everything that legacy stood for. Moreover, as becomes clear from the letters themselves, Marcuse’s ties to Heidegger were not only intellectual, but also personal: he revered Heidegger not only as a thinker, but also as the teacher who had the most significant impact on Marcuse’s own intellectual development. His attachments remained strong enough to motivate the visit to Heidegger’s Todtnauberg ski hut earlier in 1947 — like the poet Paul Celan (see his poem, “Todtnauberg”), Marcuse, too, journeyed to Heidegger’s Black Forest retreat in search of a “single word” of repentance which the philosopher refused to grant. But even after the disappointing discussion with Heidegger in Todtnauberg, we see that Marcuse, against the advice of his fellow German-Jewish emigrés (presumably, the other members of the Institute for Social Research), went on to send a “care-package” to Heidegger at a time when the conditions of life in Germany remained tenuous; for this much he still owed “the man from whom I learned philosophy from 1928-1932.”

As Marcuse explains in the 1974 “Interview,” after this exchange of letters, all communication between the two men was broken off. And yet, if one turns to *One-Dimensional Man*, one finds Marcuse citing Heidegger’s arguments from “The Question Concerning Technology” in support of Marcuse’s own critique of instrumental reason (“Modern man takes the entirety of Being as raw material for production and subjects the entirety of the object-world to the sweep and order of production [*Herstellen*]”).¹⁶

Turning now to Heidegger’s letter of January 20, 1948: one finds there the familiar series of rationalizations, half-truths, and untruths that have recently been exposed in the books by Victor Farias and

16. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1964) 153-4.

Hugo Ott.¹⁷ But one also finds recourse to a strategy of denial and relativization that would become a commonplace in the Federal Republic during the "latency period" of the Adenauer years: the claim that the world operates with a double-standard in its condemnation of German war-crimes, since those of the allies were equally horrific (Dresden, the expulsion of the Germans residing in the "Eastern territories," etc.). To his credit, here Marcuse refuses to allow the "philosopher of Being" to have the last word.

17. Victor Farias, *Heidegger et le nazisme* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1987) (English translation forthcoming from Temple UP); Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: Unterwegs zu seiner Biographie* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1988).

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