



## Critical geography and the poison of Heidegger's thought\*

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Critical (political) geographers at times select strange bedfellows. Positioning themselves as “left” and “critical” does not prevent these scholars from admiring figures associated with deeply reactionary, dangerous – perhaps even poisonous – forms of political thought. Two such figures are Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger. Both shared more than sympathy with National Socialism – and both never found words of regret for their support and involvement in the Nazi regime. Of course, Schmitt and Heidegger are not the only reactionary figures in the history of spatial political thought. The whole subdiscipline of political geography and geopolitics felt somewhat trapped in an impasse after World War II simply because of the backbreaking burden of the field’s reactionary intellectual heritage. There is a certain irony insofar as critical political geographers have developed a tendency to treat the founding fathers of their discipline, such as Friedrich Ratzel or Halford Mackinder, with much less forbearance for their reactionary and racist positions than they have been willing to swallow in the writings of (or to concede to) their hero Heidegger: Ratzel and Mackinder are liabilities of and to geographical thought; Heidegger provides inspiration to critical theorizing.

Of course, Heidegger’s Nazi past could not be completely ignored. Apologetics of his thought have usually acknowledged his engagement for the Nazi party, but have attempted to contrast his early commitment with later disillusionment – and, more importantly, have warned against jumping to the conclusion that political errors tainted his philosophical work. David Farrell Krell, for example, in his introduction to Martin Heidegger’s *Basic Writings* collection, does not deny Heidegger’s “active collaboration with the Nazi party”, but continuously plays it down, suggesting that it had only “lasted ten months”, after which “passive support and waxing disillusionment” followed. Krell even suggests that Heidegger had been a silent opponent of the regime and informs

us that “various restrictions were placed on his freedom to publish” (Krell, 1977, p. 27). The key point for Krell is that, while we might concede Heidegger’s early engagement in the Nazi cause as a monstrous error, and while we ought to be disturbed by his persistent silence on this after 1945, we should resist the easy temptation to simply condemn his work: perhaps Heidegger was a bad politician, but still a congenial thinker?

The controversies about this question have been at an impasse for several decades.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars forcefully sought to dump Heidegger’s thought, while others labored to sanitize Heidegger’s thought from the poisonous spheres of his political engagement. Unfortunately, the debate needs to be re-opened: beginning in the autumn of 1931, Heidegger recorded his thoughts in diaries, which he called *Schwarze Hefte* – black notebooks. The first three of these *Hefte* have recently been published in the official German language collective works of Martin Heidegger with Klostermann, the official publishing house of his oeuvre. Their black oilcloth covering gave the “*Schwarze Hefte*” their name, but “one could be forgiven for thinking it described their content”, writes Peter E. Gordon in *The New York Review of Books* (Gordon, 2014, p. 26).

Peter Trawny, the editor of the collected works, has written a careful philological evaluation of the *Hefte* (Trawny, 2014). Trawny concludes that Heidegger falls victim to a *seinsgeschichtliche* (ontological-historical) anti-Semitism: the Jews “lacking worldhood” become the ontological anti-type to the “artisanal innocence of being-in-the-world” (Gordon). This throws new light on Heidegger’s politics. We can see this, for example, in the careful chronology of *Heidegger and the political* that Florian Grosser offered only a

<sup>1</sup>On this controversy, see *The Heidegger Controversy*, edited by Richard Wolin (1993).

few years ago (Grosser, 2011): Grosser demonstrates that Heidegger's thinking of the political is dangerous and anti-democratic, celebrating a revolutionary and polemic conception of the political. But he insists Heidegger's thought was not *nazistisch* – Heidegger refused to take on board the anti-Semitic and racist worldview of Nazi ideology (Grosser, 2011, p. 396). At the time Grosser wrote this, the *Hefte* were not yet known. After their publication, we now know better.

Can Heidegger's thought still be "a resource in the rethinking of the political", as Dana Villa suggested some time back (Villa, 1995, p. 212; cited in Grosser, 2011, p. 408)? Can we do with Heidegger what Chantal Mouffe proposed for Carl Schmitt – to "think both *with* and *against* Schmitt" (Mouffe, 1999, p. 6, emphasis in original)? Can we think with Heidegger *against* Heidegger (Sloterdijk, 2001, p. 7)? Heidegger and Schmitt shared not only a political commitment at the inception of the Nazi regime but also their anti-Semitism: for both, "the Jews" became the antithesis to their own reactionary project – and the fundamental root of the problem of the Jewry, both identified through a genuinely geographical argument: the lack of territorial rootedness of a post-exilic people.

For many, even the thought that we ought to think *against* Heidegger, the beloved sage, might come as a challenge, but this is maybe the task we face today. With the *Hefte* revealing to us Heidegger's own "inner" (dark) geopolitics, the attempt to place the master's thought beyond a dubious reactionary and anti-Semitic metaphysics seems difficult to uphold. Heidegger's and Schmitt's geopolitics are *both* dangerous – and it has become untenable to separate his thought from his politics.

I am not a Heidegger expert and am happy to leave it to the latter to come to terms with this conundrum. The answer to the question as to whether or not we still can – and should – engage Heidegger's thought will affect the way we will look at other compromised, reactionary and perhaps even "dangerous" thinkers, such as Carl Schmitt. The *Hefte* leave no doubt: the poetry of Heidegger's thought has a poisonous dimension. Heidegger's work has been a gift to many critical geographers, but, as we now know, it is a problematic gift. In German language, the word *Gift* also means "poison". In that sense, Heidegger's gift – the "greatness" (Krell, 1977, p. 28) of his thought – entailed a *Gift* – a poison: whether we want to swallow this poison now that we know of it is something that needs careful scrutiny. Sometimes, poison kills; sometimes, in the right dose, it cures.

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