

## Richard Wolin: Between Scholarship and Ideology

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Review: *Heidegger in Ruins: Between Philosophy and Ideology*, by Richard Wolin. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022. Pp. 385. Hardcover, \$30.90.

Richard Wolin describes his book, *Heidegger in Ruins: Between Philosophy and Ideology*, as “a modest contribution” to the “more demanding and long-term process” of the rethinking of Martin Heidegger’s place in the history of philosophy, especially in light of the 2014 release of Heidegger’s private journals known as the *Black Notebooks* (12). While Wolin elsewhere traces Heidegger’s philosophical influence,<sup>1</sup> in *Heidegger in Ruins* he remains focused on the task of revealing the correspondence between Heidegger’s philosophy and the “idiom” of the National Socialist Party in the early 1930s. In so doing, Wolin provides an account of the general intellectual atmosphere that dominated among right-leaning academics and intellectuals during the 1920s in an attempt to illustrate the ways in which Heidegger owed some intellectual debt to his age. Though Wolin claims that he does not dismiss Heidegger’s corpus entirely on the account of Heidegger’s antisemitism and illiberalism, he calls into question the viability of “Heidegger studies” as a field given the deep hostility to liberal democracy and western pluralism that is central to Heidegger’s thinking.

### WOLIN’S HEIDEGGER: THE IDEOLOGICAL PHILOSOPHER

Wolin’s thesis rests on the claim that Heidegger both appropriated and was deeply influenced by the “right-radical, conservative revolutionary idiom” of his time (25). This appropriation led him to embrace the “metapolitics” of the historical *volk*, expressed in National Socialism. According to Wolin, Heidegger’s political misstep provoked his ill-conceived attempt to overcome what he diagnosed wrongly as the decline of the West. Heidegger’s attempt to clear the way for another beginning, in Wolin’s view, provided “a

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992) and Wolin, *Heidegger’s Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

meaningful alternative to the impotence and inefficacy of contemporary philosophy—his own existential ontology included” (8).

Wolin first discusses what he calls the “Heidegger Hoax,” that is, the intentional publication of “politically sanitized” versions of Heidegger’s texts, which in his account were altered by both Heidegger himself and others to conceal his deeper commitment to Nazi ideology. For Wolin, Heidegger’s parenthetical addition to the oft-cited passage regarding National Socialism’s “inner truth and greatness,” which Heidegger subsequently qualified as “the confrontation between planetary technology and modern man,” is indicative of a larger trend in Heidegger’s personal writings, as well as in Heidegger scholarship. This instance of tampering with the text, Wolin suggests, set a “significant precedent” of “far-reaching editorial manipulation” (13). Specifically, Heidegger and his subsequent devotees have sought to hide his opposition to democracy, to frame him as a heroic “political dissident” during the Third Reich, and to infuse his philosophy with otherwise non-existent criticisms of Nazi commitment to the science “of the rational human being” (38). Some translators, Wolin adds, especially those with a “vested interest in presenting as favorable image of Heidegger’s thought as is philologically tenable,” have aided this enterprise by deliberately softening the meaning of some texts for the sake of political expediency (46).

Next, Wolin accounts for Heidegger’s philosophical self-understanding in light of the publication of the *Black Notebooks* and his correspondence with his brother, Fritz. The letter exchange details Heidegger’s efforts to remain attuned to the ideas of conservative revolutionaries who wrote during his time, such as the heroic frontline militarism of Hans Zehrer, or Werner Beumelburg’s denunciation of Germany’s “Black Humiliation” in the wake of World War I (64). Heidegger’s engagement with such writings, Wolin argues, is evidence for Heidegger’s own ideological approach to politics and therefore philosophy. In this vein, claims Wolin, Heidegger’s “Turn” reveals the extent to which conservative revolutionary writing had infused his thinking. His prioritization of “German Dasein,” for instance, signaled a hearkening back to Nietzsche’s “active nihilism” and the ostensibly false narrative of European decline (58, 66). Naturally, Wolin’s Heidegger also “pioneered the art of Holocaust denial” by equating modern industry with machination (77). Therefore, Heidegger’s *Technik*-critique can be dismissed as nothing more than a “metaphysical cudgel” with which to “disparage the values of democratic self-determination” (81).

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Thus, Heidegger and his later interpreters, per Wolin, not only purged his writings of political remarks, but also of racist commentary. In fact, *the* misunderstanding plaguing Heidegger scholarship is the view that Heidegger's thinking regarding questions of race was, on epistemological grounds, opposed to Nazi biological racism. But Wolin tells us that "Nazi race thinking was an inherently ideological construct that emerged in polemical opposition to nineteenth-century positivism" (15). It was, as a result, an amalgam of pseudo-science and mystical elements. In other words, biological racism was not biological at all. According to Wolin, Heidegger falls perfectly in line with this mystical view, writing in the *Black Notebooks*, "race [is] a necessary and mediate condition of historical Dasein" (15).<sup>2</sup> Thus Wolin concludes that "Heidegger remained no less committed to the fundamental tenets of race thinking than did the movement's other devotees" (103). He was "a political Plato," advancing a "racial-authoritarian paideia" based on a peculiarly spiritual species of racism (113). For Wolin, Heidegger's spiritual racism is supported by his prioritization of existential rootedness, *ursprünglichen Bodenständigkeit*, the hallmark of authenticity. In this vein, Wolin brings to the fore ample evidence to suggest that, for Heidegger, to lack roots is to be inauthentic, to be of a lesser order ontologically. He concludes, therefore, that this form of racism—if a preference for one's own is in fact racism—is far more objectionable than mere biological racism; for men without roots lie outside of authentic history, *Geschichtlichkeit*. Wolin concludes that Heidegger scholars who emphasize the politically "quietist" elements of Heidegger's thought vastly overstate the viability of their position: Wolin's Heidegger is a deeply reactionary thinker who unapologetically stood for rootedness, *Bodenständigkeit*, by which he merely meant racism. Thus Wolin, joining the likes of Emmanuel Faye, declares the study of Heidegger's thought to be a deeply questionable endeavor.<sup>3</sup>

### HEIDEGGER'S METAPOLITICS

Wolin reveals in his book some undeniable connections between Heidegger's thinking and the political context within which he lived. In this respect, Wolin lives up to his "modest" promise to restore Heidegger to his own time and place. And yet, because of his own

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco, CA: HarperSan Francisco, 1977), 228, subsequently writes of "the error of biologism": "The human body is something essentially other than an animal organism."

<sup>3</sup> See Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933-1935*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

interpretive method, Wolin hardly engages with Heidegger's own writing, instead choosing to assign moral intent to a philosopher who asserted repeatedly that one's understanding of Being is determinative of, and primary to, all morality and politics. Instead of an engagement with Heidegger's published writings in an attempt to elucidate Heidegger's political commitments, Wolin excuses himself from such a task by suggesting that every damning line has been sanitized, and that the texts available to us cannot be trusted. In other words, Wolin treats Heidegger not as a philosopher committed to questioning deeply, but as a peddler of ideological propaganda who hides his political radicalism behind thinly veiled opposition to rational philosophical creeds. Heidegger must have been truly desperate considering the great volumes that he filled. Thus, Wolin finds Heidegger, as the subtitle of his book declares, "between philosophy and ideology," except without the philosophy.

Despite these presumptions, Wolin's research is invaluable. He is doubtless correct when he suggests that Heidegger's thinking, after the turn and seeing the direction of Germany, took on a "metapolitical focus." The guiding question of thought in his *Contributions to Philosophy*, for example, is transformed from *Being and Time's* general question of Being to "Who are we?"<sup>4</sup> The question changed along with the status of the German people. Put differently, truth of things may be closer to their surface than it seems. Therefore, Heidegger's philosophy is not the thinking of a free-floating intellect. Rootedness is, after all, necessary for an authentic life according to Heidegger. The implications of this are clear enough: a people tied to a place is superior to a nomadic people. Wolin does not, however, draw out the alleged connection between authentic rootedness and Nazi imperialism, Nazi militarism, or the concept of the nation state as the vehicle for a people—all tenants of the National Socialist movement that Heidegger demonstrably remained critical of. Yet despite these objections, Wolin declares Heidegger guilty by way of a highly speculative association.

Yet if Heidegger's political vision remains somewhat vague, this is because he remained uncommitted to any particular political arrangement, like the nation-state; the form of a regime is of much less importance than the way a people conceives of the question of being. The form, in fact, grows out of this conception. We can see this when Heidegger asserts in

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<sup>4</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1989), 39.

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his *Contributions to Philosophy* that the question of being reinvigorates the sciences, wherein it becomes clear that he is *not* outright opposed to science, or to adopting a technological view of things. He writes, "Since every living thing is organismic ... it is *possible* to take this bodily thing as a body-object and then consider it mechanistically. There are even certain tasks which require such a view."<sup>5</sup> But the sciences, he argues, cannot ground themselves; for this, philosophy is necessary. Presumably, this applies to political science as well; viewing things from the perspective of political theory is certainly possible and even desirable for the achievement of certain tasks. Yet for Heidegger it is decidedly *not* the grounding of philosophy except in its meta-political form.

What we can say with some certainty, but perhaps little more clarity, is that for Heidegger, politics is a "sheltering," a "playing out between world and earth."<sup>6</sup> For "time-space itself is a conflictual domain of strife," wherein the *polemos* of Heraclitus reveals the gods and the men.<sup>7</sup> If this sounds like it contains a critique of democracy, so be it. But are all nondemocratic political views by extension necessarily for National Socialism? Philosophy, for Heidegger, is a form of *homesickness*, a longing to return to the polis of the Greeks, a time of authentic history, where the strong stood out amidst the flux. Heidegger's political preference is whatever allows for this authentic history to unfold. In this way, Heidegger's phenomenological method takes on a fundamentally political aspect; it is concerned deeply with the *home*, where Wolin would have him concern himself with the foreign.

It is in this light that one begins to see just how much Wolin despises the thinker about whom he has spilt so much ink. For Heidegger, political life is in sheltering, that is, *building*. For man "is capable of such building only if he already builds in the sense of the poetic taking of measure." Authentic building, therefore, requires *myth*; it "occurs so far as there are poets, such poets as take the measure for architecture, the structure of dwelling." Poetry and philosophy constitute the arts of horizon-creation, the arts of metapolitics. For myth both instructs the understanding and engages the passions, and in each city or nation it is fundamentally *different*, setting people apart from each other. Wolin, by contrast, desires to emphasize *sameness* among men and nations. And while, to Wolin's dismay, myth tells us little of historical fact, it may indeed reveal more about a people than any sociological or

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<sup>5</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 217.

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 216.

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 205.

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psychological study. It tells us of the gods of the regime, being an expression not of reflection but of supernatural instinct. In forming the language-horizon of the regime, the poet sets the terms through which the arts and sciences will be developed; he fixes the name of things and the ways of thinking; he breaks through the ordinary modes of grammatical construction to create a new language for the ages that follow. Importantly, however, this is not *prescriptive* for Heidegger; a myth cannot simply be willed into existence.

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In his account of the hysteria following the publication of the *Black Notebooks*, Giorgio Agamben suggested that “if every assertion that is critical or negatively disposed toward Judaism—even that which is contained in private diary entries—is condemned as anti-Semitic, the net effect is to place Judaism outside of language” (9). After presenting Agamben’s claims, Wolin dismisses Agamben’s argument, calling it a “subterfuge,” asserting implicitly that he himself is free of any such prejudices. Yet one might say that Wolin wishes to perform the very linguistic dodge described by Agamben when he removes the myth of a purely rational politics—limited entirely to deliberation about the distribution of economic goods—from questioning altogether. Much greater thinkers than Wolin—even those who do not celebrate Heidegger—have acknowledged the power of his *destruktion*.<sup>8</sup> By virtue of this maneuver, Heidegger’s criticisms of such a regime and its philosophical basis are simply declared guilty by association without further treatment.

Wolin states his refusal to engage with Heidegger clearly. In his own words, he “consciously shunned” the “reverential, text-immanent approach to understanding Heidegger’s work” that in his view has prevailed among Heidegger’s disciples; he refused in principle to engage with Heidegger’s writings at any length (23). Though the purported aim of the book is to signal the impossibility of Heidegger studies because Heidegger’s philosophy was esoteric Nazi ideology, it strikes the reader as a problem that the eminent Heidegger scholar hardly cites Heidegger’s published writings. Wolin justifies this on the grounds that he simply sought to “honor the hermeneutical directives that Heidegger himself provided” by refusing to expunge questions of the larger historical context (24). In other

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<sup>8</sup> See Richard Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy: On Original Forgetting* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 112.

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words, Heidegger is treated as simply a product of the ideology of his time. While perhaps a useful approach, it is also limited and can degenerate into caricature. Because of his emphasis on cultural context, private letters, linguistic hunches, and persistent recourse to the same stock lines from Heidegger's writings,<sup>9</sup> it becomes clear that Wolin's method causes him to overshoot to the point of presenting a cartoonishly devious Heidegger. For this reason, he seems to give little credence to the possibility that Heidegger, while clearly engaging with many of the terms and ideas of the time, may not have adopted all of them himself, or may have tried to put the idiom of his day to different purposes. If Wolin was to truly adopt Heidegger's method in an analysis of Heidegger himself, such a task would demand that it be done without first imposing one's own absolutist theoretical construct.

By way of example, Wolin presents Nietzsche and Heidegger as simply two sides of the same coin throughout the book. Time and again, he comes back to Heidegger's allegedly full-throated promotion of Nietzsche's "active nihilism." While there is no space here to give an account of Nietzsche, it is sufficient to say that Heidegger spilt much ink—as Wolin knows—differentiating his own position from Nietzsche's *on this very question*. Heidegger, for example, writes in "The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead" that Nietzschean metaphysics accounts for the transformation of the "suprasensory," understood as the creation of the biblical god, to the reign of "human creativity" as "business enterprise."<sup>10</sup> In his *Contributions to Philosophy* he condemns Nietzsche's thinking for accepting "the traditional interpretation of beings as constancy and presence and explains truth purely as a means of securing the continuance of life."<sup>11</sup> Given Heidegger's extensive engagement with and critique of Nietzsche in his Nietzsche lectures, as well as the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, the onus is on Wolin to prove his assertion that Heidegger adopted Nietzsche's "active nihilism." Yet such evidence is nowhere to be found. Where Heidegger's early works may lead toward Wolin's thesis to some extent—resoluteness in *Being and Time*, for example, is presented as the *will* to question—Heidegger also writes of the "powerlessness of thinking," which is to will itself not to will, that is, not to engage in "machination" or pursue "lived experience."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Wolin has been citing the same passages for at least two decades, including Heidegger's line about the "inner truth and greatness" of National Socialism, in *The Heidegger Controversy*, 2, and numerous places in *Heidegger in Ruins*.

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1977), 64.

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 250.

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, 38.

Resoluteness, therefore, has some limits. By extension, freedom in Heidegger's view is freedom from the allegedly Nietzschean spirit of revenge that Wolin readily ascribes to Heidegger.

Further complicating the matter, Wolin appears to have made up his mind about the need to excoriate "Heidegger studies" long ago. From the publication of his 1993 book, *The Heidegger Controversy*, wherein he wrote that "Heidegger's alliance with Nazism ... was grandiose and profound" (2), to his 2016 claim that "Heidegger's thought was 'always already' ideological," Wolin appears to have been engaged in a considerable amount of repackaging of an "always already" stated theory.<sup>13</sup> Further, in his eagerness to condemn Heidegger for his lack of trans-national vision, Wolin seems to ignore the political education that he has adopted from his own regime—the very vision that he smuggles in and asserts over and against Heidegger's. In a recent interview, for instance, Wolin engaged in his own form of race-politics, arguing that the antiracists of our time have a holy mission to be the change they want to see in the world:

Today, in many Western societies antiracism has emerged to combat racial injustice. But like all social movements, unless it can influence legislators and politicians who pass laws, it too will remain marginalized. My main concern about Afro-Pessimism is that, as the name implies, it is too resigned about the very real, if tenuous, gains that the civil rights movement has made in the past, such as, desegregation. To be sure, as the Black Lives Matter movement has shown, there remains a long way to go.<sup>14</sup>

Thus Wolin's own words illustrate one of Heidegger's most pertinent arguments: the alleged separation of church and state at the heart of the rational politics of the nation state conceals the "political myth" that lies at the center of our own order.

So what of Heidegger and Nazism? Provisionally, one could hardly do better than turning to Richard Velkley's *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy* for a balanced view of Heidegger. In his book, and despite his preference for one of Heidegger's successors, Leo Strauss, Velkley does not attempt to stoke hysteria, nor does he engage in pious sermonizing. Rather, he confronts Heidegger's thinking in a direct manner, while avoiding the naive attitude of which Wolin perhaps rightly accuses other readers of Heidegger. Mark Blitz, in

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<sup>13</sup> Wolin, "Heidegger and the Political: Finitude, Thownness, and the Destiny of Being," *iPhilo*, September 11, 2012; *The Politics of Being: The Political Thought of Martin Heidegger* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), xi-vii.

<sup>14</sup> "Examining Heidegger's Legacy: A Conversation with Richard Wolin," *Yalebooks*, January 10, 2023.



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his book *Being and Time and the Possibility of Political Philosophy*, also offers a nuanced view, admitting that “Heidegger’s thought and political action were connected,” but noting further that his support for the Nazis, while unsurprising, was “not in every situation required by his thought.”<sup>15</sup>

And so, while Wolin claims to have made a modest contribution, one gets the sense that his aims were not so modest; where he sought to declare Heidegger to be in ruins, we find that Heidegger is ruined only in his imagination and the imaginations of a small cadre of intellectuals. The study of Heidegger will continue on, just as if Wolin had never proclaimed the death of such an endeavor.

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Blitz, *Heidegger’s Being and Time and the Possibility of Political Philosophy* (Philadelphia, PA: Paul Dry Books, 2017), 261.