Review of “Heidegger and the Ideology of War: Community, Death and the West”

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Domenico Losurdo purports to deal here with what has come to be known since 1987 as “l’affaire Heidegger,” that is, the alleged involvement of Heidegger in Germany’s National-Socialist Party. However, and in spite of its title and Heidegger’s photograph in the cover, this book has little to do with the Master from Freiburg. Heidegger’s philosophy is a passing leitmotiv in Losurdo’s book; one that occurs again and again perhaps, but also one that never receives the serious treatment that it surely deserves.

Just a glance in Losurdo’s bibliography is enough to confirm that this is a book with an interest in history and cultural studies, but not, alas, in philosophy. Disappointingly few works by Heidegger are cited (and only those, in any case, that are thought to have had some historical or political impact); and most serious secondary literature on Heidegger’s thought is simply lacking.

There is, on the other hand, a plethora of historical sources that succeeds in painting Germany’s war years in the most vivid colors. Losurdo examines a diverse group of thinkers that figured pre-eminently in the first half of the century and played a catalytic role in shaping Germany’s intellectual milieu. Max and Marianne Weber, Thomas Mann, Edmund Husserl, Sigmund Freud, Karl Jaspers, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt, and Oswald Spengler are a few of the figures that parade throughout Losurdo’s pages (again, Heidegger, as the reader will come to realize, is just one among them and not necessarily the central one). But here perhaps lies another weakness of this work: the vastness of the material presented badly needs some sort of structure. It is not clear whether the seven chapters of this book were originally conceived as parts of a whole, since much of the material is not thematically discussed under a single chapter but rather scattered in bits and pieces throughout the book.

Losurdo takes the year 1914 as the turning point in last century’s European history. That year, he argues, marked the rise of Kriegsideologie. He pinpoints the development of the ideology of war into a series of terms paired antithetically. He juxtaposes, for example, the concept of Gemeinschaft (community) to that of Gesellschaft (society): the former was invented as a term that would distinguish the essential bond among the people (Volk) over against the bourgeois formation of relationships expressed by society. Since the former is clearly a term that comes out of the ideological arsenal of nationalism, Losurdo has only to show that Heidegger used this (or similar) terminology in order to brand him as such. Another opposition employed by Losurdo is the one between Kultur and Zivilisation, the first stands for the cultural achievements of a romanticized...
Athens, the second for the brutality of military force represented by the Imperium Romanum. Finally, the author singles out a series of themes that, according to him, can help us define the rise of Kriegsideologie. Among them, one can mention the fascination with death and the exaltation of sacrifice (chapter one), the preoccupation with one’s own destiny or the destiny of one’s nation (chapters two and three), the nostalgia for a heroic past, usually exemplified in the history of Greece (chapter six), the idealization of the land, and the decline of the West (chapter five).

From the historian’s perspective, Losurdo succeeds in localizing these themes and motifs in a variety of sources and in bringing them together in order to paint the panorama of a Continent that sinks into ideological, political and military conflict. The author, however, fails to show how we are to read all these themes back into Heidegger’s work. (For a coincidental similarity in terminology does not prove much.) He also fails to establish a clear connection (although implied in many instances) between Heidegger’s thinking and the political agenda of Nazi Germany. For instance, one remains baffled in reading Losurdo’s conclusion that “[Heidegger] continues to remain, to the very end, bound to Nazi Germany, despite his contradictory relationship with it, and despite his unceasing and tormented reinterpretation of that relationship.” (234)

In the end, is Heidegger’s thought ideological? Even if we take, by means of an example, the most notorious text in Heidegger’s corpus, namely the Rektoratrede (“The Self-Assertion of the German University”) of 1933—a text often cited by Losurdo himself—we realize that the issue at hand is not easy to decide, and definitely not by a journalist’s look at the facts surrounding it. At the outset, one finds there almost all the symptoms of an ideological discourse: the exaltation of the will and the obedience to the national destiny, the allusions to the Greek beginning, against which present day Germans are to measure themselves, and finally, the connection between the Germanic Volk and, as Heidegger puts it, its “erd- und bluthafte Kräfte” (a phrase that sounds disturbingly akin to the Nazi Blut und Boden). But what amounts to an acute ideological blunder—and this is a point that escapes Losurdo’s analysis—is Heidegger’s willingness to degenerate the pursuit of knowledge into a form of service. The “Knowledge service” is, as he writes, “of equal rank” with Labor and Armed service—and when and only when these three services “coalesce and become one formative force” then one can say that the destiny of the German University has been fulfilled. Hannah Arendt, in her Origins of Totalitarianism, had aptly observed that it is a characteristic of ideology to suspend any activity but one: labor. Heidegger seems here to commit the same ideological maneuver when he demands the transformation of education into a sort of compulsory Arbeitsdienst. His Rectorial Address had begun with a hermeneutical coup d’état, namely, with the subordination of contemplative life (theoria) to action (energeia, a term that he translates as being-at-work). Since this vocabulary alludes to Aristotle, one could argue against such a formulation by borrowing from the insights of the same thinker with regards to the birth of philosophy in leisure (schole, the very word that gives us the English “school”), and the fact that philosophical discourse is liberal, that is to say, resistant to servile and militant usage toward any kind of “aims” (Meta. I, 981b).

Yet one could not decide the matter at issue (i.e., the ideological implications, if any, of Heidegger’s thought) without first undertaking a systematic examination of Heidegger’s philosophy on its own merit. In other words, before passing judgment on the thinker we have first to address his thought. And this is something that the reader will not find in Lorurdo’s book. For example, it is easy for us to misread a passage from the same Rectorial Address as constituting an exemplary case of the ideology of war, especially when Heidegger insists that “all faculties of will and
thought, all strengths of the heart and all skills of the body, must unfold *through* battle, heightened *in* battle, and preserve *as* battle.” (Heidegger’s emphasis, *Review of Metaphysics*, 38, no 3: 479) What such a misreading would overlook is the fact that “battle” here stands for a key philosophical term in Heidegger’s thought, and in philosophy in general for that matter, since he traces it back to the *polemos* of Heraclitus’ fragment 53 and he renders it in his own language as *Aus-einander-setzung*. (On this and similar matters, I refer the reader to Gregory Fried’s excellent monograph *Heidegger’s Polemos: From Being to Politics* (Yale University Press, 2000) and the recently published *Heidegger’s Roots: Nietzsche, National Socialism and the Greeks* by Charles Bambach (Cornell University Press, 2003). Readers of Losurdo’s work would do well to fill in the many gaps by consulting such rigorously researched works.

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