

Heidegger, The Spirit And European Culture

Excerpt from interview with Professor Jacques Derrida

Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris

January 8, 1998, Jerusalem

Interviewer: Dr. Michal Ben-Naftali

Translated from French by Dr. Moshe Ron

Q- If you look at the French scene comparing it to the German one after the Holocaust, do you recognize significant differences? How are they to be explained? Why was the response to Heidegger's philosophy preoccupying French thinkers more intensively than Germans? Is it an optical illusion? Were both sides engaged but differently? In what way? Do you recognize a development within your own thought, which is so intimately related to that of Heidegger's, and explicitly so, to concerns in Heidegger's political ontology? Could *De l'esprit* (1) have been written before? Would you write it once again, keeping to your notion that Heidegger's mistake lies in "spiritualizing Nazism"? Does this judgement imply forgiveness?

D- To answer the last question, I wouldn't say that Heidegger's attitude is neither forgivable nor unforgivable. I don't see how I, for one, can formulate the question in these terms. Who would have to forgive Heidegger? Let's begin with the hypothesis that Heidegger's attitude was infinitely guilty. Given this hypothesis, who would have the right to say: "I forgive," or: "I do not forgive"? I don't know. In any case, not I. My relation to this has never been that of a judge, of someone who is in a rush to conclude a book or a speech with: "Heidegger is guilty and I do not forgive him." It is too difficult for me to do that.

To return to the beginning of your question, of course there are considerable differences between the attitude to the Shoah of Frenchmen and especially French philosophers and that of Germans and German philosophers. First, for obvious reasons: the French are French, the Germans are German. German

guilt, when it was felt, after the War, by German citizens or by German philosophers was such - sometimes there was no sense of guilt, but when this sense existed - it was so massive and violent that they began once more to practically prohibit the reading of certain texts by Nietzsche and Heidegger, notably, who were really banned after the War. Indeed Heidegger was brought to justice, Heidegger was - how shall I put it? - dropped from the curriculum, there was a verdict. In this respect, the official attitude of German philosophers, publicly, in any case, was one of a massive and radical exclusion of works such as those of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and this lasted a long time. It is only now that this censorship, or this discredit, or this disqualification is starting to get lifted.

Whereas in France, things have been more complicated and somehow easier. Heidegger's influence had begun timidly before the War; and after the War, philosophers like Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and some others, including Lévinas, who were interested in Heidegger, maintained their interest. There was a political debate very early on about Heidegger's attitude during the war, before the War, under Nazism. Very early on, there was in Temps Modernes a first wave, and then it subsided, and then there was a great deal of work done, philosophical work, about Heidegger during the 50's, '60s, 70's, without the political question harming this development. And then - a question of time, of generation, of time to undo repression, etc. (all this ought to be analyzed closely) - and as you know, in the mid 80's, there was once more a debate about Heidegger.

I took the position you're aware of, with *De l'Esprit*, where I tried not only simply to ascribe all of Heidegger's actions to what you have called "spiritualization," a certain spiritual humanism, the reference to the spirit. No, I believe that the responsibility for Heidegger's decisions, in any particular circumstance, when he did this or that as rector, when he said this, when he signed a particular text, etc., is a responsibility that must be examined in itself. He was judged for that, and as for me, my concern is not to exonerate him of this responsibility. What I tried to do was to account, to a certain extent, for the

philosophical compatibility in his discourse between what he wrote or taught and what he said as rector in his rectorate speech.

The thread I followed was, in fact, that of the reference to the spirit. I cannot reconstitute this work here just like that. But the point for me was not to explain each of Heidegger's gestures by this reference to the spirit, but to try to account for a certain kind of law, I won't say of coherence, but of a law in his philosophical itinerary, that made his Nazi commitment possible or did not make it impossible. And this law I believed I could find in the way he handled, from the very start and for a long time, the reference to the spirit and to the spiritual. I think that if he had been in a position to deconstruct, so to speak, the implications of this spiritualism, this would have meant that he was able to decipher in the Nazi discourse and situation which unfortunately he did not decipher.

This is a move that consisted neither of accusing Heidegger of the unforgivable nor of exonerating him from his offences, but of beginning to try to understand what was going on in the reference to the spirit. Not only in Heidegger, but also in many other philosophers of that period. So that in *L'Autre Cap (2)* or *De l'Esprit* I linked this reference to the spirit to a similar reference, a similar logic to be found in Husserl, in Valéry. So this is not only Heidegger's case. I tried to reconstitute, I won't say a sort of spirit of time, a *Zeitgeist*, but a sort of general constraint that affected all European culture, in order to account not only for Heidegger's offences, but of the general complicity of Europe with the Nazis. Nazism, as I say in *De l'Esprit*, did not just grow like a mushroom. For ten or twelve years European diplomacies, European churches, European universities have, after all, collaborated in their own ways with Nazism. This must be explained. This happened through discourse, through diplomatic arrangements, through silences, looking the other way, bad faith. How could the Church behave in such a manner? How could English and French diplomacy go along, before the War, I mean? Why did they pretend not to understand or see what was happening to the Jews? All this concerns European culture as a whole. And to return briefly to what we

were saying in the beginning, this is why a work of deconstruction is a work on the history of Europe and on European culture, and it couldn't have taken the forms it has taken without the reference to that European moment which was that of this century or of the inter-war period. So my little book on Heidegger, actually all the texts I have devoted to Heidegger, revolve not only around his work which remains, for me, very powerful as well as very provocative, but also around European thought as a whole, in which Heidegger occupies a place which is so visible and, so to speak, so impossible to get around. (3)

Notes:

1) *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby, University of Chicago Press, 1989.

2) *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. P.A. Brault and M.B. Naas, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991.

3) Derrida relates to issues surrounding Heidegger's political ontology in several major texts, such as "Heidegger's Ear: philopolemology (*Geschlecht IV*), trans. J.P. Leavey, Jr; in ed. J. Sallis, *Reading Heidegger: commemorations*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993, pp. 163-218; "Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand", trans. J.P. Leavey, in J. Sallis, ed. *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 161-196.

Source: The Multimedia CD 'Eclipse Of Humanity', Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2000.