

A BEAUTIFUL WALL

By Manu Bazzano

Published in the Hermeneutic Circular, April 2017, pp 29-31¹

Coarse Philistines

I've lived in this Sceptred Isle nearly half of my life, long enough to begin to muddle up its indigenous peculiarities as universalities. This is puzzling as I've always doubted so-called universal values as a liturgy of beliefs forced by the usurpers on the vanquished. But it could well be that the innate parochialism that seems quintessential to British life (despite London and a few other spots) is now Britain's best export, especially since the likes of UKIP scratched their discontent-of-civilization veneer, trading their bigoted souls to customers big and small: Le Pen, Trump, Orban, Beppe Grillo and even far-right Scottish Calvinist Jim Dowson.

Who needs military supremacy when you can exert standoffish cultural hegemony? But what *is* at the heart of parochialism and why is it thriving? One word may help explore it, perhaps even understand it: *endogamy*. Endogamy refers to the practice of marrying within a particular ethnic, class, or social group, discarding others because deemed unsuitable. Nothing wrong with that, you might say: why on earth complain if a group elects to choose a mate within its cousinhood? The problem arises if you copulate with outsiders or flirt with ideas foreign to those of the other parishioners. Then your reward will be, depending on the context, stoning, a cold shoulder or bad reviews. There was and there still is precious little forgiveness for those who sympathize with foreigners and unbelievers and for worshippers of the incorrect god.

Historically, of all the institutions that took up endogamy, monarchy is the most consistent – closely followed by the aristocracy and later emulated by the elites the world over. It makes sense, when you think of it. You may choose not to marry within your tribe but you may justifiably hang out with those who share your worldview, as in the case of Barack Obama, allaying his post-election blues with that celebrated champion of the underdog Sir Richard Branson.

¹ To quote from this article: Bazzano, M. (2017) 'A beautiful wall', *Hermeneutic Circular*, London: Society of Existential Analysis, April, pp 29-31

Say what you will, it is in Britain that the institution of the monarchy enjoys grand popular support. Little England may be shrinking as we speak after June 2016 but her puny message to the world – *hang out with your own* – is now all the rage. Perhaps as a result, everyone is busy building beautiful walls to keep out chaos, contamination and bestial cross-breeding. Foucault would have had a field day with such ingenious developments of the ancient genealogical prejudices he mapped out so well. Yet it is a grave mistake, I believe, to assume that these sentiments are the sole province of *coarse philistines* à la Farage. There is another category of people who eagerly espouse their hatred of the foreign with refinement, panache and even grand theorizing. Nietzsche coined a term for them: *cultured philistines*. Who are they? I have chosen a famous example, one that will, I hope, help illustrate my point.

Cultured Philistines

Heidegger kept a philosophical journal from the 1930s until his death in 1976, a bundle of black notebooks. He outlined the publishing plan for his posthumous works, stating that the *notebooks* should not be released until long after his death. The first six were published in Germany in 2014 as *Schwarze Hefte* (black notebooks) and are being translated in several languages as we speak. I have read them in the Italian version, *Quaderni II-IV*. The English translation, *Ponderings, II-IV*, was published in June last year by Indiana University Press. When they first came out in Germany three years ago, Günter Figal, chair of the Martin Heidegger Society since 2003, promptly resigned, saying:

As chairman of a society, which is named after a person, one is in certain way a representative of that person. After reading the *Schwarze Hefte*, especially the anti-Semitic passages, I do not wish to be such a representative any longer. These statements have not only shocked me, but have turned me around to such an extent that it has become difficult to be a co-representative of this (Critical Theory, 2015, Internet file).

About time, some might say. *Ponderings II-IV* covers the period between 1931 and 1938 and make for a very sobering read. After the elections in July 1931, when the Nazi party became the most prominent in the *Reichstag*, Heidegger was overjoyed like a teenager in love; he jotted down a lyrical ditty: “A marvellously awakening communal will is penetrating the great darkness of the world” (p. 80), adding the more triumphant: “The Führer has awakened a new actuality, giving our thinking the correct course and impetus” (p. 81). Heidegger’s apologists are fond of claiming that his lifelong loyalty to Nazism was an aberrant episode in his life, wholly inconsistent with his profound and meaningful philosophy. Pity that he did not recant his affiliation for his entire life and that he more or less

consistently thought that historical *Dasein* could have been restored and effectively defended by Germany's 'new dawn'. So far, so predictable. Saying that Heidegger was a Nazi is hardly controversial; with the exception of a few existential therapists who have built their professional identity around his writings, no one takes exception to that claim anymore.

True, Heidegger became disillusioned with Nazism in 1938 around the Nazi Party's 'scientific racism'. He did not dislike it because it was racist, but because it was 'scientific'—because in his view it advocated a reductive, ultra-modernist version of science. True, his initial enthusiasm for Nazism waned somewhat; but what the publication of the notebooks makes unambiguously clear is that Heidegger's anti-Semitism was thorough and consistent throughout his life.

On the Banality of Heidegger

One of the major philosophers of our time, Jean-Luc Nancy, recently published a book, *The Banality of Heidegger*, which presents a rigorous examination of anti-Semitism in Heidegger and in western thought. That a thinker of Heidegger's sophistication could be so uncritical and wholeheartedly endorse racial prejudice; that he could write venomous words on the conspiracy of 'world Jewry' dominating the world, is for Nancy part of that same 'banality of evil' so lucidly denounced by Hannah Arendt – albeit a far more refined and intellectualized version than Eichmann's. In tracing Heidegger's dishonourable descent, Nancy asks us to consider the very roots of hatred and self-hatred that plague the history of the West and of Christianity in particular.

Several apologists managed to draw a convenient distinction: they say that Heidegger was a first-rate thinker but his political views were naive and misguided, and the same has been said of Levinas' 'naive Zionism'. Arendt herself drew a grand comparison between Heidegger and Thales, the ancient Greek philosopher who was so enraptured by his deep thoughts and so absent-minded that he fell into a deep well while walking.

The publication of the notebooks (there are more to come) may render in the following years the caginess of Heideggerian apologists untenable; at any rate, it presents us with an exceptional opportunity for an open and critical discussion. I openly invite colleagues and friends for whom Heidegger's texts constituted the staple of their therapeutic training to read the notebooks and ponder over their adherence to Heideggerianism in the light of this thinker's newly-revealed stance. I concede of course that it would be unreasonable to maintain that the intellectual project Heidegger was engaged in – his bold refutation of the

Cartesian subject, his captivating critique of western metaphysics, as well as his keen interest in philosophical generalities such as the ‘question of Being’ – automatically leads to endorsement of Nazism. But there *is* a link between his high-thinking and racial politics, one that is positively disturbing.

Here is a diary entry, circa 1933: “The metaphysics of *Dasein* must deepen itself into its innermost structure and broaden into a meta-politics of the historical people.”

And: “Being has a ground-plan, not an idea but a mission ... that binds *Blood and Soil* to a readiness for action”. In another entry, circa 1939, he accuses pacifism, liberalism, and “the rising power of Jewry”. The influence of the Jews belonged for Heidegger to “the metaphysics of the West” that helped to widen “empty rationality” and “a capacity for calculation.” Another entry of the same year reads: “one of the most hidden forms ... and perhaps the oldest is the tenacious aptitude for calculating and profiteering and intermingling, upon which the world-lessness of Jewry is founded”.

A Heideggerian apologist could easily write off the above as cultural product of the common bigotry of the times, yet the notion of *world-lessness* calls to mind the intricate discussion of the ‘de-worlding of the world’ found in *Being and Time*. In other words, Heidegger’s anti-Semitism is *one* with his critique of western metaphysics. The abandonment of Being, a leitmotiv in his writings, seems to be dangerously close to the existence of the Jews. In a diary entry of 1941 he writes: “the question concerning the role of world Jewry is not a racial but a metaphysical question”. Because they lacked ‘worldhood’, the editor of the *Notebooks* Peter Trawny writes, the Jews became a philosophical category: the very opposite of the pastoral purity of being-in-the-world. When the German army assaulted the Soviet Union in 1941, Heidegger wrote:

World Jewry, spurred on by the emigrants who have been let out of Germany, is ungraspable everywhere and doesn’t need to get involved in military action while continuing to unfurl its influence, whereas we are left to sacrifice the best blood of the best of our people.

The ‘Heidegger controversy’ is nothing new. It resurfaces regularly every few decades. But I believe the notebooks will change the way his philosophy is read and understood: as the thought of a man who refused to abandon his political delusions and whose racial prejudices were more virulent and consistent than it was ever thought.

An American Heidegger?

In a review of the black notebooks published last autumn in the *London Review of Books*, the philosopher Malcolm Bull asked whether Heidegger would have supported Donald Trump. He goes on to make interesting parallels between the two; Trump is of course no philosopher, but he speaks of a *plight* of the American people which can be redeemed by the pursuit of *greatness*. There is a similarity here with Heidegger, who wanted to make Germany great again, restore it from the abandonment of 'Being' and reinstate its people's historical greatness. How? Through work, the creation of a new community, and 'the constant decision of the will to greatness and the acceptance of decline'. Heideggerian rhetoric would not be out of place within Trump's 'programme'. This is not merely because both are examples, as Bull writes, 'of the way in which vacuities converge under the pressure of megalomania', but because the historical configurations that cluster around Trump and phenomena such as Brexit and the rise of the far-right in Europe all uncannily evoke the long shadow of Heidegger. A case in point is Russian writer Alexander Dugin, close adviser of Putin and allegedly instrumental in creating stronger ties between Russia and the Trump administration. Steve Bannon, Trump's chief strategist (a man whose political objective is to undermine liberal democracy in Western Europe and restore America to the greatness it endured before the anarchic and immoral 1960s), is a great admirer of Dugin. The latter has himself allegedly been active in creating links among far-right bloggers and creators of fake news all over Europe. Dugin writes about political philosophy and geopolitics, and his main inspiration is one Martin Heidegger.

In Heidegger, Dugin sees a solid basis for the creation of what he calls a 'Fourth Political Theory'. The first three (liberalism, Marxism, and fascism) all failed, according to him, and it is now time for a new theory that is able to react to 'planetarism' and the evils of cosmopolitanism. How? By re-establishing the lost greatness of the Russian people at the vanguard of a new Euro-Asian movement: the familiar binomial plight/greatness rears its ugly head again: it legitimises the basest parochial fancies and channels them to the aggrandizing project of regeneration of humanity itself with Russia (instead of Germany or America) at its centre. Heidegger's 'new beginning' was to take place via a return to the innocence of the pre-Socratics before the fall from 'Being' (and with a little help from the Gestapo). In Dugin's case, there is a significant shift from race or even class to *citizenship*. Privilege and income is increasingly measured in relation to where one was born and where one lives. The Brexiters were at the vanguard, with their call for more control on 'our borders' echoed by Trump's wall over the Mexican border. Both have tremendous appeal;

this is the appeal of *nativism*, of that very same ‘soil and blood’ Heidegger so excitedly writes about in his notebooks.

The parochial notion of *attachment to place* divides people into natives and strangers: the former possess ontological security, belonging, and the prospect of a little place in the sun in the global economic order. The latter are demonized, neglected and chastised for belonging to nowhere, a quintessentially parochial idea exemplified in Theresa May’s words during her speech at her party’s conference in Birmingham in October 2016: “If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere”.

Manu’s forthcoming book is *Zen and Therapy: Heretical Perspectives* (Routledge)

manubazzano@onetel.com