

## **Beiner, Ronald, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right*<sup>1</sup>**

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Ronald Beiner presents a reading of two philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, who are both used and abused by the far-left and the far-right particularly against the backdrop of the global phenomenon of the latter's return. The return of far-right politics is most palpable in events, such as, Brexit, the rise of cultural populists (e.g., Trump and Erdogan), and rightist political parties taking over congresses and parliaments. Events like these have made critical discussions regarding the return of the far-right timely, with memories of the horrors of rightism still lingering in recent memory.

In his attempt to make sense of the political appropriation of Nietzsche and Heidegger, Beiner offers a confrontation of the dynamicity of these philosophers. Beiner seeks to aid thinking political theory in such a contemporary setup. He notes how “The contemporary resurgence of far-right politics forces us to command heightened vigilance with respect to the directly practical implications of what Mark Lilla in 2001 called ‘the reckless mind,’ or what Georg Lukács in 1952 called ‘the destruction of

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<sup>1</sup> Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, EPUB.

reason.”<sup>2</sup> This apathy in reason—arguably a point raised centuries ago in Immanuel Kant’s 1784 response to the question, what is enlightenment?—is the offshoot of the dismantling of social hierarchy, reminiscent of the end of the French *Ancien Régime*, and the widespread democratic ideals.

Beiner reaps the political aspects of Nietzsche and Heidegger’s philosophies through passages from select oeuvres and, with a flowing narrative, by injecting quotations to bring the reader to see immediately their contemporary significance. He engages with writings and speeches from a diverse range of individuals, from politicians and political figureheads to political theorists and philosophers, some of whom are Richard Spencer, George Grant, Aleksandr Dugin, John Gray, Leo Strauss, and Alexis de Tocqueville besides others. I would describe Beiner’s attempt as a recasting of the mold of Nietzsche and Heidegger’s implicit (and at times explicit) political philosophy. This recasting allows a critical reflection “to open our eyes, at once *intellectually, morally, and politically*, to just how dangerous they are.”<sup>3</sup> The danger of these philosophers may be summarized in Nietzsche’s own statement in the *Ecce Homo*: “I am not a human being, I am dynamite.”<sup>4</sup> The dynamicity of the thoughts of Nietzsche and Heidegger are reflected by an ambiguity latent in their writings that allows various interpretations—and therefore one may be perplexed at the multifarious readings of their works. Yet what is central to Nietzsche and even Heidegger is not that they discuss their purview of civilization but their diagnoses of a *sick* civilization, of *modern* civilization.

With Nietzsche, one is familiar with his recurring themes. The Eternal Return or the Death of God are memorable motifs, and a reader of Nietzsche does not make the error of branding him a nihilist but an anti-foundationalist or perspectivist. What Beiner offers to do is to present a counter reading of Nietzsche, while maintaining the life-affirmative status

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<sup>2</sup> “Introduction,” *Ibid.*, §3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. by Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), “Why I Am a Destiny,” § 1, 143-144.

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contra a malevolent horizonless society that modern culture has inflicted. Contrary to the commonly assumed deep-seated perspectivist that spills over to a supporter of the Left, Beiner's Nietzsche is cautious of radical liberty and is geared to the Right. This stresses the implied political thoughts throughout Nietzsche's writings. What Beiner makes clear in the dissection of Nietzsche's political philosophy is the contrast between modernity and nobility; the former producing the democratic, life-negating spirit, while the latter, having confronted the tragic character of life, begets the yes-saying drive. For the *Übermensch(en)* to be possible, there must exist the *Untermensch(en)*. Only with the demise of the banal and the common comes the thrust of the creative excess of and to life. The question remains open as to whether this modern culture has wrought us the negation or affirmation life: "If we fail the test, we are contemptible wimps and degenerates. If we pass the test, we will have proven ourselves to be creatures of a new species higher than a merely human one."<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche's lasting significance is appreciated in how later philosophers such as Sigmund Freud and Max Weber used the same key ideas of Nietzsche found in neofascist ideology and discussed them without the decadent political appropriation.<sup>6</sup>

While Nietzsche had to confront nihilism, Heidegger had to confront the "oblivion" or the "forgetfulness of Being" that in turn plays a fundamental role in political life. What began with the Reformation and the Enlightenment, Heidegger sought to bring to a close. The comfort that bourgeois life offered makes one forget her own most possibility of death. With such a forgetfulness comes a mediocre or superficial care for life. While Heideggerian scholars are inclined to focus on the early works or selections from the post-Nazi accounts, the political implications are just as explosive. Recasting Heidegger's political mold is quite unsettling yet Beiner takes issue with the former's political orientation, specifically his

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<sup>5</sup> Beiner, *Dangerous Minds*, I, "Nietzsche's Preoccupation (Obsession) with Nobility."

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, II, "Nietzsche's Heirs: Freud and Weber."

membership in the Nationalist Socialist party.<sup>7</sup> He does not find innocence in Heidegger's claims but affirms how the Nazism of Heidegger exceeded the party's own ideals. This, I note, is a decisive step in recasting the mold that Heidegger can and has to be read today. The forgetfulness of Being is but a characterization of a longingness. The problem posed by modernity is precisely this: the longing for a *Heimat*, a home-place, a sense of belonging-ness. This, as Beiner observes, is not what Nietzsche found in modern culture but in the bounded, horized civilization that paved the way for the *Übermensch*. Heidegger likewise pushed for a conscious preponderance of the Being of beings with an actual manifestation: "rootedness in the homeland and healing of the alienation from Being *are one and the same thing*."<sup>8</sup>

What remains clear is that despite the fact that some difficulties in reading and more so applying their philosophies, both Nietzsche and Heidegger rightly point out how "we are bound by an existential obligation to live lives that are untranquilized."<sup>9</sup> It is a life-affirming capacity that must be recognized despite the upshot of nihilism and forgetfulness due to a democratic and watering down of culture. "We are homeless; we await a return to our *Heimat*."<sup>10</sup> It is a homelessness due to liberal modernity, or to work along Beiner's ideas, it is a homelessness in the face of modern society, egalitarianism, and democracy. It is a longing for the excess of life, the reinvigoration of sentiments and passions. The rise of the far-right, as Heidegger noted of Nazism, may be observed as a filling of the void and mediocrity that modernity has made. Because of the possibility to be equal, there has been no single standard to overcome; "Nietzsche's formula of the death of God and Heidegger's formula of the forgetfulness of Being are two ways of articulating a shared intuition—namely, that there is a spiritual void at the heart of modernity."<sup>11</sup> Hence, a totally different cast of political molds

<sup>7</sup> See *Ibid.*, II, "Nietzsche and Heidegger; Freud and Weber."

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, II, "Post-Nazi Heidegger: *Letter on Humanism*."

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, II, "Pre-Nazi Heidegger: The Being-toward-Death Chapter of *Being and Time*."

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, II, "Post-Nazi Heidegger: *Letter on Humanism*."

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, III, "*How to Do Theory in Politically Treacherous Times*."

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of Nietzsche and Heidegger's philosophy. It is a political philosophy that is deeply seated against the modern culture of complacency and decadence.

Overall, this book provides an insight into the current discourse on Nietzsche, Heidegger, and on the far-right not as an apology or defense but as an admonition of the danger of appropriating thinkers to particular ends of the political spectrum. Beiner begins his conclusion by presenting Fukuyama's end of history in the narrative of liberal democracy via the lens of Rawls, Habermas, and Rorty. He warns the readers that antiliberal theorists such as Nietzsche and Habermas must be considered not to find support for a political agenda but to understand "precisely why they turn their backs on bourgeois liberalism."<sup>12</sup> Beiner recasts the political mold of Nietzsche and Heidegger to underscore that it is one thing to understand the issues these thinkers were responding to and another to use their ideas to tackle our current political problems. He juxtaposes the liberal, democratic order and the atrocities permissible under a concretization of their philosophies, with the latter as something far worse.

While the book is a good molding of Nietzschean and Heideggerian political philosophies, it nevertheless fails to provide answers to pressing questions. Beiner ends the book by questioning "Who ever gave us a guarantee that the problem of the human condition admits of a solution?"<sup>13</sup> It seems rather conservative if not naïve to present the danger of appropriating ideas yet not go further to confront political pathologies. The inability for philosophical reflection results indeed in an extremely diminished vision of humanity however this goes alongside a fiasco of political praxis evident all around the world—translating to deaths of actual people in regimes that cling so tight to power. What is it in non-liberal politics that draws so much supporters? Beiner suggests that these campaigns turn out to have a more humanistic appeal than the promises offered by liberalism.<sup>14</sup> However, what does this signify? Considering the answer to this question could have changed the direction of this book and

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

greatly increased its relevance. Actually, this was already something mentioned however in passing in the beginning of his book: post-truth as pre-fascism. Although this book is an attempt at recasting political molds, I again maintain that literature today is saturated with molds for precisely such as what neoliberalism offered and where the politics of Nietzsche and of Heidegger could have taken a different turn is a consideration of the ties of their political ideas vis-à-vis the play of truth and post-truth. The initial hint of post-truth is something not returned to.

Beiner's *Dangerous Minds* is divided into four sections, an introduction and conclusion with two chapters devoted to Nietzsche and Heidegger respectively. It must be stated that this is written in an American way, i.e., bombastic in language and at times informal. It might come to the surprise of readers accustomed to the more formal tone of books written elsewhere. For those interested in the themes mentioned throughout the book, several times Nietzsche's concept of *Große Politik* was brought to the fore yet not dwelled on further. Hugo Drochon's *Nietzsche's Great Politics* develops this much further and features a good discussion of Nietzsche's political philosophy based on the agon.<sup>15</sup> For those interested in a more serious engagement of the political side of Heidegger, Alexander S. Duff's *Heidegger and Politics* is a good start as it surveys different themes in Heidegger's writings and goes at length to translate Heideggerian language to a more capable interaction between readers and Heidegger's text.<sup>16</sup> Lastly, concerning populism, Jan-Werner Müller's *What Is Populism?* provides a more detailed introduction to this political pathology and is more global in approach with examples from around the world than Beiner's majority US-based illustrations.<sup>17</sup> For a more focused narrative on populist within the United States, Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter's

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<sup>15</sup> Hugo Drochon, *Nietzsche's Great Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016)

<sup>16</sup> Alexander S. Duff, *Heidegger and Politics: The Ontology of Radical Discontent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

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*Reactionary Democracy* offers a discussion of far-right politics on a global sphere yet with due consideration to Trumps' election in the United States.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter, *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream* (London: Verso, 2020).

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