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Conservatism and Chaos: Martin Heidegger and the Decline of the West

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The German defeat in World War I and the subsequent imposition of the Treaty of Versailles led to a profound sense of national humiliation as well as to a complete economic collapse. Yet accompanying these “external” factors was a deeper crisis of values, in which a number of long-standing traditions and basic cultural assumptions were rejected but never adequately replaced.

Alarmed in the face of rapid change and the loss of fundamental cultural presuppositions, interwar German conservative thinkers began to extol (in theoretical terms) the values of the traditional and familiar, concentrating on themes such as nationalism and “rootedness” in the German land. Some of these thinkers put forth a *Kriegsideologie* (ideology of war) in which military virtues were offered as the antidote to a decadent Europe in the throes of spiritual decline.

This paper will discuss the “conservative revolution” in 20th century German thought, specifically as a reaction to the phenomena of radical change and cultural disintegration. It will also argue that central elements of this movement’s social critique apply quite presciently to our contemporary cultural reality – secular post-modernity. The paper will concentrate on the work of Martin Heidegger, though the writings of Spengler, Junger, and others also will be discussed.

Conservatism and the Problem of Radical Change

When epistemological, political and social change occurs too quickly or too radically, it is a natural impulse to seek refuge in the familiar and traditional. Germany, according to the historian Modris Eksteins, “was a society that went through the transition from a feudal agrarian past to a modern industrial existence in at most three generations, with some parts of the

country experiencing the transformation in even less time” (Eksteins, “History: Of Birds and Cages,” Chamberlain J. and Gilman, S (eds.) *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress* (NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), p. 11). Hence, Wilhelm Michel wrote in 1931:

From an objective point of view, we have been besieged with too much that is new. Our powers of comprehension have been unable to keep pace with it... We stand not in front of machines but rather in front of the machine culture exactly as if before a war; dragged in mid speech into the midst of the turmoil... in the face of the reality rising up all around us.” (Dichtung und Gegenwart, Neue Rundschau, 7, 1931. In *The New Objectivity*, by S. Michalski, p. 202).

Martin Heidegger was one of the most important conservative thinkers of this time, and his thought can be read in part as attempting to return Germany to the groundedness of tradition and the primordially of the Earth. The sudden pace of change in Germany helps us understand Heidegger’s “attempt to hold fast to what was being swept away by urbanization and mechanization: artisanship, cottage-industry forms of production, small-capital farming, stone-built architecture, phenomena that were, even by the early twentieth century, passing hurriedly into history” (Wilding 121).

Heidegger’s thought becomes more intelligible when he is understood as attempting, throughout a number of different contexts, to return a sense of solidity to an unraveling world. Yet many interwar German conservative thinkers paradoxically attempted to remedy the problems of nihilism and cultural disintegration by advocating one of the most nihilistic political programs ever to grace the stage of history (see also Stackelberg).

Peter Marris analyzed “the conservative impulse” not in terms of nostalgia, but rather as a “fundamental...principle of human psychology” to “defend the predictability of life.” Marris writes that there is a “deep-rooted need for continuity” and

stability in our lives because without these things “we cannot interpret what events mean to us, nor explore new kinds of experiences with confidence” (Marris, 2). But “what happens ...when despite all our endeavors, the familiar pattern of life has been broken?” (Marris, 2-3.)

Modernity was fundamentally constituted as the breaking apart of familiar patterns of culture and understanding. Modernity was ushered in by the discoveries of the scientific revolution and the gradual diminishing of religion as an explanatory force. This upheaval continued with the profound loss of a sense of community during the industrial revolution (in which many abandoned the countryside to work in alienating industrial environments), and reached a crescendo with the destruction of Europe’s optimistic, rationalistic enlightenment ideals following the pointless carnage of the World War I.

Yet when ways of life are extinguished and new paradigms have not yet been offered to replace them, the subject is left at a loss to find guiding principles with which to navigate the world. Bereft in the face of this rapid pace of change and the loss of baseline cultural assumptions, a number of interwar German conservative thinkers (e.g., Heidegger, Junger, Spengler, Schmitt), influenced by earlier *Volkish* and Romantic movements, sought refuge in the traditional and familiar, and began to emphasize theoretical conceptions of nationalism and German rootedness.

The Decline of the West

Narratives specifically tracing the phenomenon of decline to the advent of “modernity” were certainly an important part of Weimar intellectual life, e.g., Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West*. The economic crisis and the startling decadence of Weimar Germany were, for Heidegger, merely the “empirical symptoms of decline,” surface phenomena which are to be distinguished from a much more basic and fundamental “source of decline”.

This source was diagnosed by Heidegger as the self-withdrawal of Being from modern existence. Heidegger's work, with its singular focus on the meaning of "Being," constituted an attempt to articulate a sense of rootedness and stability against a backdrop of a disintegrating culture.

Michael E. Zimmerman, in "The Ontological Decline of the West," writes that in "describing Europe's descent into nihilism, Heidegger resorts to a striking metaphor: "All things sank to the same level, to a surface resembling a blind mirror that no longer mirrors, that casts nothing back (Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, as discussed in Zimmerman, 3).

According to Zimmerman's reading, "different historical epochs involve determinate ways in which...people understand what things are. The ancient Greeks were "faced with overpowering Being" and thus the Greeks exemplified the astonishment and wonder that lie at the heart of true art, science, and philosophy.

The modern epoch lacks depth because beings have been so emptied out ontologically that they can manifest themselves only one-dimensionally, as raw material for the technological system" (Zimmerman, 3). The primordial sense of awe and wonder characteristic of Greek culture stands in stark contrast with, in Zimmerman's words "the utter meaningless of the modern industrial wasteland" as well as the depressing banality of modern commercial culture, in response to which the modern German moods are "horror and boredom" (6).

Heidegger's work can be interpreted as fitting into the school of "Romanticism," inspired also by such poets as Holderlin and Herder, who sought a return to the sacred, the reclaiming of the mystery in nature, away from the crass consumerism, "productionist metaphysics," and the rampant destruction of the earth brought about by the onslaught of technological modernity.

Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* was the most famous of a number of apocalyptic works produced during the Weimar

period, reflecting a sense of cultural pessimism following German's defeat in World War 1. Spengler's work discussed the "organic rise and fall of world cultures," how these cultures pass through stages of childhood, youth, adulthood and old age, and how in the 19th century, the West had entered into the final stage of old age, and thus had become impotent, corrupt, and sterile.

Heidegger criticized Spengler on a number of grounds, yet both thinkers shared a larger pessimistic outlook that was held by many German conservative academics during this time.

Zimmerman argues that the concept of Being (the primary subject of Heidegger's entire philosophical career) may be interpreted as an example of Spengler's *Ur-symbol*, which "governs the style of the whole expression of life. It lies in the form of state, in religious myths and cults, in the ideals of ethics, the forms of painting, music, and poetry, the basic concepts of every science" (Pauen, *Pessimismus*, as quoted in Zimmerman, 14). Decline sets in as this primal symbol loses its force (Zimmerman, 14).

Heidegger's argument that modernity reflects a "withdrawal of Being" or a "forgetting of Being" may, according to Zimmerman's reading, inform Heidegger's claim that each epoch of Western history is governed by a particular mode of being that organizes all cultural practices (17), for "just as later Christians forgot the radical character of early Christian faith and replaced it with Christendom," so too modern humanity "ignored the extent to which modernity's apparently firm foundation straddles the abyss of finitude" (Zimmerman, 21).

Heidegger was somewhat critical of Spengler and other Weimar historians' "superficial rhetoric of decline and pessimism" (a rhetoric fashionable among right-wing Weimar intellectuals) and thus he later began to move instead in the direction of the more mystical and elusive "language of disclosure and revelation" (Bambach, 258).

However, Heidegger's pessimism might have been the deepest of all. Consider Heidegger's comment in *Introduction to Metaphysics* that "the darkening of the world, the flight of the gods, and the destruction of the earth have reached such proportions that such categories of pessimism and optimism have long become laughable" (*Introduction to Metaphysics*, 29).

Zimmerman remarks that Heidegger "although...seeking to separate himself from the run-of-the-mill pessimist, in effect...implies that such pessimists had no idea how terrible the situation really was. They only saw the symptoms of decline (collapse of values, loss of the sacred and so on) whereas he identified its ontological source" (Zimmerman 22).

Blut und Boden

Heidegger's agrarian conservatism was influenced by the *Volkish* movement that flourished in Germany beginning in the 19th century. A number of writers, artists, and thinkers, horrified by the rapid changes in Germany brought about by modernization, sought solace in Romanticism, with its emphasis on the mystical pull of nature and the German land, Germany's ancient folk traditions, and the greatness of the German people (*volk*). They sought to reclaim these ancient glories through a sense of "rootedness" in the German land and spiritual past, rejecting the rootless, money-driven, immoral lifestyle of the cities.

The nationalism of these German conservative thinkers can be subsumed under Peter Marris' definition of "tribalism," e.g., "a search to express a group identity when people have lost their bearings in a heterogeneous society," a phenomenon in which "the disruption of cultures and communities becomes displaced onto collective expressions of a common dilemma" (Marris, 59).

The *Volkish* writers extolled agrarian virtues, with cities representing the chaos and moral dissolution of modernity.

Martin Travers discusses Paul Ernst's work: *Der Schmale Weg*

zum Glück, and the character Hans Werther's negative attitudes towards the *Grossstadt*, Berlin. "Werther's first task, after reaching Berlin, is to assert his sense of self in the face on a world that has seriously gone astray." Travers writes of how without fixed moral guidelines or religious principles, these characters attempt to "survive the trials of modernity" (Travers, 25). Modernity, with its "removal of the chains and conventions of society" without offering any "clear goals or values in their place" (Travers, 28), signified for many *Volkish* writers a frightening condition of moral dissolution and epistemological collapse.

Heidegger's descriptions in *Being and Time* of the human condition as "falling" and his specific conceptions of inauthenticity as "groundlessness," also illustrate this theme of modernity as an abyss. While some modernists might have embraced this chaotic uncertainty as "a basis...for a breakthrough," somehow opening up an "abundance of possibilities" (Travers, 28), Heidegger's emphasis on authenticity returns to a realm of Being rooted in the certainties of tradition and in the Earth with its primordial cycles of life and death.

Heidegger's provincialism also raises questions related to cosmopolitanism, a subject of renewed interest today in this age of globalization. According to this view, when one considers the horrific excesses of nationalism in the last century and even today, the very survival of the human race dictates that we consider ourselves "citizens of the world" rather than identifying ourselves through narrower national, ethnic, or religious lines.

To post-modern eyes, this cosmopolitan ideal seems quite sane, for Heidegger's Nazism was a horrifying and unacceptable conclusion of an anti-modernism gone very wrong. Although Heidegger's provincialism has been the subject of much justifiable criticism, it should be remembered that his emphasis on "rootedness" was a conservative reaction to Europe's

spiritual devastation during the interwar period and to some degree reflected nostalgia for the certainties of the past.

In fact, thinkers currently writing on the subject of cosmopolitanism (see Appiah) have themselves recognized the value of rootedness and its connection to authenticity. There is truth to the view that a life lived completely without roots is a life lived “everywhere and nowhere.” Thus Appiah has recently called for a “rooted cosmopolitanism,” attempting a correction of the sorts of mistakes conservatives such as Heidegger have committed, while simultaneously recognizing, in the words of Simone Weil, the fundamental human “need for roots.”

Nostalgia as Futile

This conservative tendency to idealize the past is categorized as “Archaism” by Arnold Toynbee in his writings on the disintegrations of civilizations. Toynbee says:

There is a corresponding psychological schism in the souls of people who happen to be born into a disintegrating society. Discordant psychic tendencies perhaps always latent in human nature now find free play. People try to escape from an intolerable present into an idealized past or into an imaginary future.

(Toynbee, vol. 6, 97)

Toynbee argues that this tendency is self-defeating. While it promises to “grapple with the urgent human problem of combating the malady of social disintegration,” it faces other problems, because if such conservatism tries to “restore the past without taking the present into consideration,” then “the impetus of life – an elemental force which he can never attest – will shatter into fragments the brittle shell that he is bent on retrieving” (Toynbee, 97).

The cliché “you can’t go home again” contains a kernel of truth because the overwhelming force of the present, the passage of time, and the infinity of experiences now constituting the

present, all painfully reinforce how the past can never be recreated. Thus the prospect of a school reunion is often fraught with ambivalence for many, as such events may result in an awkward moment in the present and may even cast a new shadow on the idealized past.

Also, movies made during a particular time (e.g., the 1970s), even if about medieval life, actually more clearly reflect (in terms of dialogue, coloring, costumes, and other subtle features) the time the movie was made than the period during which the action is ostensibly taking place. There is no escaping the “overwhelming force of the present,” no matter how badly we wish to jettison its problems for an idealized past.

Nihilism and the Ideology of War

Reacting to the decadence of Weimar (and the sense of national humiliation caused by the German loss of the First World War and imposition of the subsequent Versailles treaty), a number of conservative German thinkers (including Carl Schmitt, Ernst Junger and others) wrote how “a total transformation of a degenerate *Zivilisation* would occur through sudden and violent change” (Herf, 15). This movement reflects Nietzsche’s call for a fundamental reevaluation of values – for only by a return to the savage contest of life versus death could the soul of Germany be saved from its own degeneracy.

The experiences of harsh military discipline and the violence of war were thereby glorified as having the potential to bring forth a new vision of “total mobilization.” Heidegger’s writings also began to move in this direction, and began to focus less on the individual and more “on the German *Volk*” (Durst, 143).

Heidegger also advocates a form of “resolute decisionism” towards the end of *Being and Time* and in other writings, which according to some interpretations (Durst, 141-143), corresponds to the militaristic “call to action” advocated by other conservative intellectuals of the time (e.g., Carl Schmitt).

Thus the thought of many interwar German conservative

thinkers began to take a more desperate turn, as they began to endorse a solution to the problem of modernity far more nihilistic than modernity itself, resulting in disastrous, world-shattering consequences (Stackelberg).

Roland Stromberg's *Redemption by War* discusses "the almost manic bellicosity of ...Europeans...at the beginning of the terrible war of 1914-1918" (quoted in Griffin, 153). In Berlin, Vienna, Paris, and London, "a storm of war feeling broke out," with many thinkers discussing the need for war not only in political terms but almost in mystical terms, e.g., in terms of "ritual purification" through a "cleansing fire" (see Griffin, 153).

Thus, this war fever on the eve of World War I was, in Roger Griffin's words, "the concrete, palpable implosion of the entire social, political and moral order of the post -Napoleonic political system, the self-destruction of the age of progress." Thus the civilized, educated young men of fin-de-siècle Europe "rushed lemming-like over the cliffs of civilization into mechanized barbarism." (Griffin, 156)

This *kriegsideologie* persisted in Germany throughout the interwar period, an astounding development considering the First World War's disastrous consequences for Germany. However, this was in fact merely another symptom of societal disintegration. Toynbee remarks how the "sinister concentration of the society's dwindling powers" upon the business of warfare, while perhaps offering a temporary illusion of power and control, is sooner or later to be followed by "disillusionment", as it "only serves, in the end, to put a greater driving power into the suicidally demented society's chosen work of self-destruction" (16). Hitler's suicide in his Berlin bunker and the subsequent imposition of the Berlin Wall upon a divided and conquered Germany after World War II, only attest to the truth of Toynbee's words.

Finally, the apocalyptic discussion of "total mobilization" by right-wing Weimar-era German intellectuals underscored the appeal of Hitler's "messianism," a posture that has shown itself

a potent force during acute cultural breakdowns. This explains Heidegger's famous lament regarding the crises of modernity that "only a God can save us." Germany at this time certainly needed to be saved. Unfortunately because it picked Hitler as its messiah, the world ultimately needed to be saved from Germany, and Germany needed to be saved from itself.

Post-Modern Declinism

Elements of the cultural collapse that formed the background of interwar German conservative thought are also present today. Jonathan Lear's book *Radical Hope* suggests about post-modern life that

We live in an age of deep and profound angst that the world itself, as we know it, is vulnerable and could break down. We are confronted with global warming, nuclear conflagration, weapons of mass destruction...and even the demise of civilization itself. Events around the world...terrorist attacks, violent social upheavals...have left us with an uncanny sense of menace. We seem to be aware of a shared vulnerability that we cannot name. (7)

Whether the world situation is objectively more fragile than ever before is difficult to assess, since we have first hand knowledge only of our own time. But tendencies towards decline can be considered operative in contemporary contexts.

Consider the cultural upheavals in the Western world that occurred in the late 1960s (which some writers, e.g., Peter Gay, have likened to Weimar) during which a number of long-standing cultural presuppositions were rejected, but were replaced only with forms of relativism and skepticism. The social revolutions of the 1960s at first promulgated new values, highlighting life-affirming social issues such as equal rights for women and ethnic minorities, preservation of the environment, protests against the Vietnam war, etc.

However, by the mid-1970s much of the revolutionary change gave way to what had merely become hippie fashion. Moreover, this age reached new heights of decadence spawned by the “sexual revolution” and widespread recreational drug use. The epitome of this decadence was the so-called “me generation” of the 1970s and 1980s, in which a backlash against “liberal” 1960s values culminated in an apex of crass consumerism and a culture of selfishness.

On the theoretical level, tendencies towards skepticism and relativism have also been markedly exemplified during this time, especially by the teachings of the “deconstruction” school of post-modernist literary criticism, whereby there exists no “correct” interpretation of any given text or situation. Many post-modern thinkers have given up the search for any objective, eternal truths, and have instead embraced ambiguity and uncertainty as the only possible products of philosophical inquiry.

This contemporary sense of *aporia* is not exactly as defined in the ancient Greek sense of an impasse arising out of the dialectic of conflicting, equally compelling arguments. Yet it nonetheless constitutes a very real state of affairs in which the individual subject, trying to find guiding principles with which to navigate an overwhelming world, faces only silence, thus reflecting a philosophical problem that has no clear or even forthcoming answer.

The implications of this post-modern *aporia* have been staggering. For example, in today’s largely secular Western world, the three great Western monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—currently show significant growth primarily in their far-right, fundamentalist, or absolutist sectors. This is interesting as Spengler predicted the awakening of a “second religiousness” during the latter days of the Decline of the West.

Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* describes in detail how modern man, in marginalizing religion as an explanatory narrative, is now faced with a world stripped of mystery, enchantment, or

transcendence, often now experienced as meaningless or valueless. Yet while religion provides an explanatory narrative for many of mankind's most basic questions and an essential sense of rootedness and community, we also need to be wary of absolutist alternatives to "the malaise of modernity." This paper has already analyzed how sometimes the solutions to such problems turn out to be more dangerous than the problems themselves.

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