This is the first full-length English translation of Heidegger’s 1933-4 seminar series entitled “Nature History State.” The text is not the original of Heidegger’s words but rather notes taken by one or more attending students submitted for his approval. Since Heidegger, on a couple of occasions, makes interpolations to these notes, it is considered reasonable to suppose both that these are accurate summaries of how the seminars went and are acceptable to the original author as representations of what he intended to say. Critiquing the notes, then, is critiquing the Heideggerian original.
As the title suggests, the thought contained in the seminar is a re-examination of Being and Time (2010), since nature relates to existence, while history and state relate to time and space. The principal observation is that Germany, in Heidegger’s imagination, has entered a stage in which these three elements have coalesced into the figure of the leader (Fuhrer), who will enact a role of destiny for the state-people-being. As Gordon (2015) observes in one of the penetrating essays accompanying the rather slender original text, the work during this period is particularly problematic because of its relationship with National Socialism: “At one pole lie the critics who find the evidence so damning they no longer feel Heidegger’s works merit inclusion in the philosophical canon at all. At the other pole are readers who wish to salvage whatever they can and thus cleave to a prophylactic distinction between Heidegger’s philosophical ideas (in which they see enduring value) and the ideological deployment of those ideas (which they are free to condemn) (pp.85-6).” He then goes on to conclude: “At issue … is question of interpretative schemes: not the fact that Heidegger was a Nazi but the meaning we assign to this fact (p.86).”

There are various grounds for reaching this conclusion, many of which refer to others of Heidegger’s works and are, therefore, beyond the scope of this review. Within the seminar text, the central passage (or, at least, one of the central passages) comes from Session 8, which took place on February 16th, 1934:

“For the Being of the people, as a human way of Being, space is not simply surroundings, or an indifferent container. When we investigate the people’s Being-in-space, we see that every people has a space that belongs to it. Persons who live by the sea, in the mountains, and on the plains are different. History teaches us that nomads have not only been made nomadic by the desolation of wastelands and steppes, but they have often left wastelands
behind them where they have found fruitful and cultivated land – and that human beings who are rooted in the soil have known how to make home for themselves even in the wilderness. Relatedness to space, that is, the mastering of space and becoming marked by space, belong together with the essence and the kind of Being of a people. So it is not right to see the sole ideal for a people in rootedness in the soil (pp.54-5).”

It is worth repeating this passage at length, not just to give a flavour of the text and the way the arguments move from one point to another but, also, to show the deficiencies in thinking and the ways in which these deficiencies foreshadow the horrific consequences to come. Heidegger may have retreated (quietly, as ever) from his support for the central group of National Socialist leaders by 1938 (he seems to have drawn a distinction between that group and the mass of the people) but, at the time of the seminar, he was rector of the University of Freiburg and centrally involved in the reinvention of Germany’s tertiary education institutions as being entirely wedded to the overriding concept of the unity and purpose of the state. As such, he is spreading supposed learning that is not just incorrect – most nomads live in a sophisticated and harmonious balance with their ecologies – but is politically divisive. In what ways would people living by a mountain differ from those who live by the sea? They might have access to different types of food and consumer goods but that is what trading is for and history in reality teaches us how extensively it has been conducted around the world. Constant trading, intermarriage and exchanges of all sorts have enabled different groups come to resemble each other more than they otherwise would and have mitigated against the disastrous warfare that would have most probably have destroyed humanity by now rather than just been an endemic disaster that has blighted uncounted millions of lives. National Socialism, of course, pursued a different ideology in which the German people, once ‘free’ of its
non-German elements, would have not just the freedom but the requirement to find the space that matches its requirements. Heidegger observes elsewhere that it is through ‘interaction’ that the people will manage this spatial transformation and some essayists find some consolation in the thinking that that interaction might suggest some form of peaceful negotiation. Of course, we know that Hitler embarked on the most violent and terrifying form of interaction imaginable. Heidegger contributed to that outcome, to some extent.

The nature of the seminars themselves and the way they are organized are also susceptible to more than one interpretation. On a first reading, it appears that the professor offers the opportunity to the students to participate in an open discussion session. Unfortunately, some of the students – older ones, for the most part – are unable to join the discourse in the desired way and so, in subsequent sessions, the professor feels it is necessary to take a more central role and guide the students towards understanding. This seems a wholly believable scenario and one which I might find myself in the absence of a better thought-out teaching strategy. However, re-evaluation of the scenario suggests a darker reading, in which the professor deliberately sets out to lead students into the error of apparent confusion and lack of direction the better to require them to grasp firmly the coattails of the powerful professor who leads them out of the valleys of ignorance to the commanding heights of enlightenment.

The final word goes to Slavoj Žižek (2015), who unleashes his dialectics on the subject in spectacular fashion. His conclusion is dazzling and to quote it in part runs the risk of quoting out of context what would appear scandalous without the framework of reversals, negations and intuitive leaps on which it is based. Let it be said only that Žižek can envisage a revolutionary, Communist Heidegger given some changes in circumstance and events. It is an
invigorating way to end the book – reading Heidegger, at least in part, was one of my New Year’s resolutions for 2016 and I managed to fit it in right at the last. The reason why I care about this is because Heidegger is so revered in modern intellectual discourse, particularly in continental Europe. My interest is based on his approach to phenomenology. Gordon (2015) quotes Hannah Arendt (1971) on this subject:

“Heidegger never ‘thinks’ about something; he thinks something. In this entirely uncontemplative activity, he penetrates to the depths, but not to discover, let alone bring to light, some ultimate, secure foundations which one could say had been undiscovered earlier in this manner. Rather, he persistently remains there, underground (ibid.).”

The world needs more Hannah Arendts and probably has had enough Mertin Heideggers. However, this seems likely to be a definitive text for this seminar – assuming that the translation is as accurate and workable as it seems to be.

References


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