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Martin Heidegger and the Public Sphere

Martin Heidegger y la esfera pública

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Abstract

Martin Heidegger posited a fundamental contrast between genuine thinking and the realm of opinion of the public sphere. This conflict is expressed in *Being and Time*'s critique of the phenomenon of the "they" as an inappropriate setting for true philosophizing, and in the *Letter on Humanism*'s denunciation of Western metaphysics as based on a technification of thought. Exploring possible links between these ideas and Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism can refine the discussion on the relationship between politics and philosophy in Heidegger's thinking. Specifically, it can lead to the identification of an implicit notion of the political in Heidegger's thought.

Keywords: Martin Heidegger; public sphere; humanism; truth; ontology; intellectuals; politics; political theory; genuine thinking; Nazism; *Being and Time*; *Letter on Humanism*.

Resumen

Martin Heidegger planteó un contraste fundamental entre el pensamiento auténtico y el ámbito de la opinión en la esfera pública. Este conflicto se expresa en la crítica de *Ser y tiempo* al fenómeno del "uno" como escenario inapropiado para el verdadero filosofar, y en la denuncia de la metafísica occidental en la *Carta sobre el humanismo* como basada en una tecnificación del pensamiento. Explorar los posibles vínculos entre estas ideas y la participación de Heidegger en el nacionalsocialismo puede refinar la discusión sobre la relación entre política y filosofía en el pensamiento de Heidegger. En concreto, puede conducir a la identificación de una noción implícita de lo político en su pensamiento.

Palabras clave: Martin Heidegger; esfera pública; humanismo; verdad; ontología; intelectuales; política; teoría política; pensamiento auténtico; nacionalsocialismo; *Ser y tiempo*; *Carta sobre el humanismo.*

Introduction

Heidegger's contentious relationship with democratic politics is well-known. Epitomized by his National Socialist allegiance during the 1930s and documented by historians since the 1980s, Heidegger's authoritarian and anti-egalitarian stance received a further confirmation in the 2010s by the publication of the *Black Notebooks*. I want to argue that this controversial relationship has a philosophical foundation that can be traced back to Heidegger's criticism in his 1927 work *Being and Time* of the phenomenon of the "they" (*das Man*) as the realm of inauthenticity, a position he further developed in other crucial texts of his production, such as the 1947 *Letter on Humanism*. From this critique of the "they" results a condemnation of "publicness" (*Öffentlichkeit*) as the space of "impoverished thought." This condemnation implies a dismissal of the legitimacy of collective rational deliberation and, more generally, suggests a conflict between Heidegger's existential thinking and one of the central tenets of democratic politics, the notion of the *public sphere*.

I want to further argue that, in addition to his academic works, the antipolitical stance entailed by Heidegger's rejection of the public realm as a valid category of human existence expressed itself in his public interventions, most notably his adherence to National Socialism, his position as rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933-34, and his postwar silence with respect to his past political allegiances and the crimes of the Nazi regime.

The study of this disagreement between the phenomenon of publicness and the fundamental dimensions of genuine human existence (such as Being, authenticity, and truth) can thus contribute to elucidate the relationship between philosophy and politics in Heidegger's thought. More specifically, it can contribute to articulate the philosophical basis for Heidegger's inclination to non-democratic, anti-egalitarian, and authoritarian forms of social organization. From this point of view, Heidegger's critique of the "they" is not merely a criticism of the inauthenticity of public opinion. More generally, it represents an attitude of nonconformity regarding the principles upon which political democracy rests.

In the first section, I will examine Heidegger's criticism of "publicness," the "they," and public opinion in *Being and Time* and the *Letter on Humanism.* In the second part, I will evaluate the connections

between Heidegger's philosophy and his most emblematic public interventions and, drawing from Heidegger's critique of the public sphere, I will propose a new perspective on his postwar silence regarding his Nazi activism. In the last section, I will argue that from Heidegger's criticism of publicness one can derive an implicit understanding of the political that, given its elitist and anti-pluralist connotations, stands in conflict with a democratic vision.

Heidegger's critique of publicness

Heidegger presents his most significant critiques of the concepts of the public sphere and public opinion in two works: *Being and Time* and the *Letter on Humanism*. Read together, these two works by Heidegger present the general proposition of a radical divergence between, on the one hand, the realm of public discussion—identified with mere *doxa*, or opinion—and, on the other, the space of essential philosophical concepts, which is related to a vision of truth as the "unconcealment" of Being.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger puts into question the very idea of a "common sense" and rejects the existence of supposedly "self-evident" concepts. According to Heidegger, these notions are the result of the reduction of fundamental concepts such as "Being" and "truth" into mere opinions, which people in the modern world regard as obvious. By asserting the essential difference between philosophy and *doxa*, "opinion," Heidegger is reclaiming an originally Socratic attitude. But he is conducting this revision within the context of the twentieth century's society and culture and thus emphasizes that philosophy specifically differs from the modern phenomena of public opinion and the public sphere. Philosophical discourse should therefore not incorporate foreign criteria, such as the standards of "public opinion." For Heidegger, the prime instance of thinking regressing to opinion is the conventional, everyday understanding of the question of Being. Individuals have ceased to concern themselves with defining the meaning of this concept because it is widely considered to be entirely self-evident. This is illusory, as people mistakenly believe that Being, the most ubiquitous of concepts, is also the most unambiguous. Contrarily, it is "rather the most obscure of all" (Heidegger, 2008b, p. 43). The challenge we face leaves us not only without answers to the question of the meaning of Being, but without the question itself. What we conventionally perceive as being has obfuscated the essential distinction between Being and beings, as

the "Being of beings 'is' itself not a being." Consequently, investigating Being necessitates "its own conceptualization" (Heidegger, 2008b, p. 46).

In "On the Essence of Truth," a work published in 1930, Heidegger (2008d, p. 119) presents the conventional interpretation of truth as another example of the transformation of thinking into subjective opinion. This conventional interpretation defines truth as the correspondence between an object and a statement, and is often considered to be immediately obvious to all. Heidegger urges us to distrust the seemingly self-evident notion of truth as correctness. Rather, we should search for a more fundamental sense of truth. Any statement's accuracy is reliant on a prior foundation of elemental truth. This foundation is characterized by an attitude of "freedom," one that allows beings to be and engages with the open region where such beings come to be. Heidegger (2008d, pp. 125-126) labels this process *aletheia* or "unconcealment." This process of "unconcealment" entails engaging with the disclosure of beings, allowing them to reveal themselves in terms of what and how they are.

Besides the general criticism of the reduction of truth into opinion, another central aspect of *Being and Time* is Heidegger's existential examination of Dasein, the term he employs to describe the nature of human existence (Heidegger, 2008b, p. 53). Access to Dasein is obtained not by relying on abstract theoretical concepts, but by attending to the tangible expressions of everyday human existence: its "average everydayness" (2008b, p. 59). If one examines the mundanity of daily life, it becomes evident that individual human existence, or Dasein, is subjected to the opinions, views, and attitudes of others in their collective generality, resulting in Dasein perceiving its own being as being "taken away by the Others." These "Others" are not distinct individuals, but are instead expressed through the impersonal "they" (*das Man*), a term coined by Heidegger (*BT*, 127).[1] According to Heidegger,

> In utilizing public means of transport and in making use of information services such as the newspaper, every Other is like the next. This Being-with-one-another dissolves one's Dasein completely into the kind of Being of 'the Others,' in such a way, indeed, that the

[1] The number indicates the pagination of the late German editions as shown in the outer margins of Macquarrie and Robinson's translation (Heidegger, 2008a).

> Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the 'they' is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* [*man*] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise, we shrink back from the 'great mass' as *they* shrink back; we find 'shocking' what *they* find shocking (*BT*, 127).

The aggregation of other human existences in their common generality, known as the "they," can manifest in various ways, including everyday conversations between individuals. But Heidegger's analysis of the diverse ways in which the "they" operates provides a portrayal of the logic and mechanisms of public discussion in general, which can be extended to the social dimension of debate in the public sphere. Notably, for example, Heidegger characterizes this "they" as influenced by modern conditions and devices like newspapers. Heidegger thus stresses the specifically modern dimension of the "they" articulated by institutional and technical media in the contemporary public sphere. Heidegger also argues that public opinion can lead to the homogenization of society and the repression of individuality. As a manifestation of the "they," public opinion can be, for Heidegger, more problematic than political despotism: it represents the faceless tyranny of the social.

Heidegger considers the "they" as a "primordial phenomenon" that belongs to the constitution of Dasein and which presents three main characteristics or "ways of Being": *distancing*, *averageness*, and *levelling down*. Distancing, or distantiality, pertains to one's concern regarding how one's own existence differs from others and "whether one's own Dasein has lagged behind the Others and wants to catch up in relationship to them, or whether one's Dasein already has some priority over them and sets out to keep them suppressed" (*BT*, 127). Averageness is the inclination of the collective "they" to uphold what it deems valid and dismiss what it does not. The "they," through averageness, prescribes "what can and may be ventured" and "keep[s] watch over everything exceptional that thrusts itself to the fore" (*BT*, 165). As a result, embracing averageness creates a tendency to "level down" all the possibilities of being. Heidegger accuses public opinion of limiting life's potentialities through the tyranny of the "they," thus eliminating genuine thinking.

The "specific disclosedness of the 'they'" (*BT*, 167) is publicness (*Öffentlichkeit*), which represents, in Stefan Käufer's (2021, p. 615) words, "the specific way in which phenomena are intelligible to the general public." In its plural layers of meaning, the term can refer both to "the people of a broad community" (as in the phrase "the general public") and to the "sphere of discussion or conversation that is accessible to all people and that constitutes the proper venue for expressing matters that should be aired 'in public'" (Käufer, 2021, p. 615). One should emphasize that, in Heidegger's existential analytics, publicness is situated in relation to two existentiales—or essential structures—of Dasein: Being-with (*Mitsein*) and Talk (*Rede*). More specifically, publicness depends on two negatives modes of each of these existentiales: respectively, the "they" and idle talk. That is why publicness, insofar as it pertains to Dasein's Being-with, is a "character of Being," but expressed in a mode of inauthenticity (*BT*, 128). The everyday self is a "they-self" distinct from the authentic self, that is, "the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way" (*BT*, 129). The "they" is a mode of Being-with in which Dasein "stands in subjection to Others" and in which "it itself *is* not" as "its Being has been taken away by the Others", the Others who are the "they" (*BT*, 164).

The concept of the "they" is observable through specific phenomena, such as idle talk, which is Dasein's commonplace method of understanding and interpreting. Idle talk does not involve the appropriation of entities in a primordial way; it communicates only by "*gossiping* and *passing the word along*" (*BT*, 168). When participating in idle talk, "[w]e do not so much understand the entities which are talked about; we already are listening only to what is said-in-the-talk as such. What is said-in the-talk gets understood; but what the talk is about is understood only approximately and superficially" (*BT*, 168). Idle talk thus "releases one from the task of genuinely understanding" (*BT*, 169), while at the same time enforces uniformity of taste and opinion and discourages interest in a genuine investigation. As it lacks a solid foundation, idle talk tends to become public, spreading from verbal rumors to written speculation based on superficial reading. Thus, in his study of the observable phenomena of the "they," Heidegger introduces another explicit connection to the modern public sphere. Regarding idle talk, "[e]veryone is acquainted with what is up for discussion and what occurs, and everyone discusses it; but everyone also knows already how to talk about what has to happen first—about what is not yet up for

discussion but 'really' must be done" (*BT*, 173). Idle talk is connected to two other phenomena: *curiosity* and *ambiguity*. Curiosity seeks novelty and exciting encounters and is concerned with the "constant possibility of distraction" (*BT*, 172). Ambiguity arises as a result of both curiosity and idle talk. When anyone can make claims about anything, it becomes difficult to discern what truly constitutes genuine understanding (*BT*, 217). This "groundlessness" of idle talk is no obstacle to, but rather encourages, "its becoming public" (*BT*, 169).

Since Heidegger devalues publicness as a "manifestation of authenticity" (Wolin, 2022, p. 19) it is not surprising that he assumes an explicit "antipublic rhetoric" (Villa, 1996, p. 213). Heidegger, Richard Polt writes, "sees publicness as a threat to genuine experience and insight: in the public sphere, everything is subject to ambiguity, hearsay, and mere curiosity. With publication comes publicity, and with publicity come superficiality and sensationalism" (2017, p. 74). Heidegger even seems to compare the effects of publicness to those of a closed regime that controls the interpretation of the world and Dasein in every way, and always deems itself correct: "By publicness everything gets obscured, and what has thus been covered up gets passed off as something familiar and accessible to everyone" (*BT*, 127). Heidegger presents a unique paradox regarding the public: contrary to commonly held liberal beliefs, publicness does not serve as a means for society's enlightenment and moral progress. Instead, it acts as a hindrance to the perception of reality, preventing individuals from accessing the truth. Moreover, the "they," as it assumes a spectral non-agency that makes every decision as if it were its own, hinders the realization of the individual by depriving it of its capacity for answerability (*BT*, 127). Dasein will live an inauthentic existence if influenced by the public and tempted by idle talk and ambiguity, as this will lead to the belief that all possibilities are secure, genuine, and complete (*BT*, 222). But this type of tranquillization ultimately isolates Dasein from its true, "ownmost potentiality-for-Being" (*BT*, 178).

Another crucial aspect to consider when examining the role of publicness in Heidegger's thinking is his negative assessment of the role of language in public discourse. This is expressed in his interpretation of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle's treatise on persuasion and civic communication. For Heidegger, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* explicates a strategy for inducing among the people the set of emotions on which publicness is predicated (*BT*, 139). Heidegger's evaluation of Aristotle's work demonstrates his

critical view of the language of publicness: he considers that public discourse prioritizes manipulation—an incarnation of *doxa*—over genuine truth.

In his 1947 *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger expands on his critique of publicness in the context of his earlier critique of metaphysics by emphasizing the essential role of language in ontology. Metaphysics, stemming from Plato and Aristotle, has historically been a technification of thought, Heidegger writes, because it has forgotten to ask the question of Being. Since its inception, the technical interpretation of thinking has been based on the grammatical differentiation between "subject" and "object," resulting in the metaphysics of subjectivity and the "downfall of language." Metaphysical language denies its own essence as the abode of Being and "surrenders itself to our mere will and trafficking as an instrument of domination over beings" (*LH*, p. 223).

One expression of the metaphysics of subjectivity is humanism, which assumes that "the *humanitas* of *homo humanus* is determined with regard to an already established interpretation of nature, history, world, and the ground of the world, that is, of being as a whole" (*LH*, p. 225). However, humanism, as a type of metaphysical thinking, neglects the crucial question regarding the relation of Being to individual human existence. Humanism regards human existence as a "Subject" among all beings. It is the "tyrant Being" that can introduce the "beingness of beings into 'objectivity.'" Humanism, therefore, cannot comprehend the most profound aspect of humanity: that the individual human existence is the guardian of the truth of Being, or, in Heidegger's phrase, "the shepherd of Being" (*LH,* p. 234).

In the *Letter*, Heidegger situates his critique of humanism within the framework of his earlier critique of publicness as articulated in *Being and Time*. Heidegger argues that humanism is a manifestation of the reification of thought inherent in the notion of the public sphere and states that "'-isms' have for a long time now being suspect. But the market of public opinion continually demands new ones. We are always prepared to supply the demand" (*LH*, p. 219). Heidegger notes a clear link between the technologizing of language and the growing public sphere. In his words, once thought ends, language is seen as a *techne* and philosophy assumes a technical character. Then,

> One no longer thinks; one occupies oneself with 'philosophy.' In competition with one another, such

> occupations publicly offer themselves as '-isms' and try to offer more than the others. The dominance of such terms is not accidental. It rests above all in the modern age upon the peculiar dictatorship of the public realm [*Diktatur der Öffentlichkeit*] (*LH*, p. 221).

Heidegger asserts that forgetfulness of Being has a distinctly modern aspect: the public realm and its manifestation as public opinion, which is another of the facets of the "they" in *Being and Time*. He also hints at a link between the "dictatorship of the public realm" and a kind of commodification of thought, where the public sphere is seen as a marketplace of ideas. He subsequently offers extensive reflection on the notion of the private:

> However, so-called "private existence" is not really essential, that is to say free, human being. It simply insists on negating the public realm [*des Öffentlichen*]. It remains an offshoot that depends upon the public [*dem Öffentlichen*] and nourishes itself by a mere withdrawal from it. Hence it testifies, against its own will, to its subservience to the public realm [*Öffentlichkeit*]. But because it stems from the dominance of subjectivity the public realm itself is the metaphysically conditioned establishment and authorization of the openness [*der Offenheit*] of individual beings in their unconditional objectification. Language thereby falls into the service of expediting communication along routes where objectification—the uniform accessibility of everything to everyone—branches out and disregards all limits. In this way language comes under the dictatorship of the public realm [*die Diktatur der Öffentlichkeit*], which decides in advance what is intelligible and what must be rejected as unintelligible (*LH*, p. 221).

Heidegger's critique of the public realm should not be seen as a defense of the private sphere. Instead, he questions the public/private conceptual pairing and its mutual internal complicities. Heidegger also establishes continuity between the metaphysical dominance of subjectivity, the division between public and private, and the commodification of thought in the public sphere. Based on subjectivity,

the public sphere paradoxically allows for the objectification of everything: language becomes the instrument for this general reification of persons, things, and ideas. Consequently, Heidegger concludes that genuine contemplation is unfeasible in the public realm.

In the *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger confronts what he considers the residuals of subjectivity that remained in *Being and Time*'s argument. By contending that there is a concurrence between metaphysics and subjectivity in the technification of thought, in the *Letter*, Heidegger seems to be suggesting that even *Being and Time*'s Dasein still functioned as some kind of *locus* for subjectivity. The *Letter* sets itself apart from *Being and Time* by adopting a critical stance not only towards the public domain but also towards the private sphere. In this context, to achieve a return to the essence of language, Heidegger emphasizes the need to acknowledge the "seductions of the public realm [*die Öffentlichkeit*] as well as the impotence of the private" (*LH*, p. 223). As will be later discussed in this article, Heidegger's rejection of both the public and private realms indicates the philosophical enunciation of an anti-political stance. Still another difference between Heidegger's two works is the *Letter*'s innovative use of reification language to criticize the dangers that come with the public sphere.

Another feature of the *Letter*'s critique of publicness is its condemnation of some of the vital tools of public deliberation—such as "refutation" and "quarreling"—as essentially alien to genuine thinking. For Heidegger, what emerges from "the words of essential thinkers […] cannot be countered or even cast aside by refutations [*Widerlegungen*]. It can only be taken up in such a way that its truth is more primordially sheltered in Being itself and removed from the domain of mere human opinion. All refutation [*Widerlegen*] in the field of essential thinking is foolish" (*LH*, p. 229). In true thinking, debate and the clash of ideas are not necessary because "essential thinkers always say the Same." Saying the same thing is not a problem. What is a real danger is to "risk discord in order to say the Same" (*LH*, p. 264), for there ambiguity and quarreling threaten. Heidegger thus seems to establish the existence of two poles of language: the pole of essential, authentic thought, represented by the work of poets and thinkers, who are the guardians of the house of Being, and the pole of impoverished thought, represented by the quarrelsome and intellectually unproductive language of the public sphere.

In the *Letter*, Heidegger even anticipates that the negative reactions to his critique of humanism would be the result of the automatism

of "hearsay" (*das Genannte*) and "prevailing opinion"—yet another indicator of the reduction of philosophy to opinion. Lost in the commonplace reasoning of the public sphere, one immediately assumes that whatever speaks against "humanism," "logic," or "values" is necessarily "negative" in the sense of being destructive: "We are so filled with 'logic' that anything that disturbs the habitual somnolence of prevailing opinion [*der gewohnten Schläfrigkeit des Meinens*] is automatically registered as a despicable contradiction" (*LH*, p. 250). But, according to Heidegger, "opposition to 'humanism' in no way implies a defense of the inhuman, but rather opens other vistas" (*LH*, p. 250).

According to Anson Rabinbach (1997, p. 116), the *Letter on Humanism* is not only the first statement of Heidegger's postwar thought, but also a carefully designed combination of personal, philosophical, and strategic elements presented by Heidegger in order to work out his exoneration from the charges of Nazism. The *Letter* aims to tactically absolve its author of all responsibility, because his "error"—his Nazi involvement as rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933-34—is dissolved into the larger "error" of the West—that of metaphysics, humanism, and nihilism, of which Nazism was but another incarnation. As Rabinbach notes, in the intellectual and moral universe of the *Letter*, "National Socialism and the war were not a catastrophe for its victims, but only a catastrophe for the advent of Being" (1997, p. 115). The *Letter* is in itself an "allegory of the author's attempt to remove himself from all ethical considerations or demands of responsibility" (1997, p. 103). It could be argued that the *Letter* represents a sort of performance of "anti-humanism" and the demise of subjectivity to the extent that it sidesteps the question of the author's political and moral responsibility.

Heidegger in public: the rectorship episode and the postwar silence

Two important contexts that must be considered in assessing Heidegger's understanding of publicness are 1) the only experience of participation in the public space that can be found in his life: his rectorship at the University of Freiburg in 1933-34, and 2) Heidegger's entrenched reluctance after 1945 to offer a public apology for his commitment to National Socialism and to condemn the crimes of the Nazi regime. Both experiences are closely intertwined with Heidegger's ideas on the existential value of authenticity and the philosophical bankruptcy

of the public realm. Their analysis presents evidence of the connection between Heidegger's public role and the rift between his ideas and the demands of democratic politics.

The role of Heidegger as rector is significant because it entailed the assumption of a public responsibility during the first year of the National Socialist regime and, consequently, an overt involvement with Nazism. The general understanding of this episode changed in the 1980s after the publication of the works of Hugo Ott (1993) and Víctor Farías (1987). Both books have produced significant new evidence and challenged the conventional, mostly exculpatory interpretation of this period in Heidegger's life. The origin of this exculpatory interpretation is Heidegger's own account of his activities in 1933-34. Heidegger's line of argument for his defense, writes Ott, was created around May 1945 and first expressed in July 1945, when the philosopher was summoned to appear before the denazification commission of the University of Freiburg. The argument took on a written form in November 1945, when Heidegger was asked to give a summary of his position on his participation in National Socialism. This written statement would become the basis for Heidegger's subsequent statements on the matter, such as the 1966 interview with *Der Spiegel*, published in 1976, and *Facts and Thoughts*, Heidegger's memoir of his rectorship (Ott, 1993, pp. 20-21).

Heidegger's self-interpretation of the rectorship episode can be summarized in three points: 1) he accepted the rectorship reluctantly and only as a means of containing the dominance of Nazi doctrine and politics in university life; 2) "he believed that Hitler would grow beyond the party and its doctrine, and that the movement could spiritually be guided onto other tracks, so that everything would come together on the basis of a renewal and concentration for a Western responsibility" (Heidegger, in Safranski, 1998, p. 232), and 3) he broke all ties with the movement and adopted a stance of "spiritual resistance," which he expressed in his university lectures in the 1930s and '40s, once he became aware of the true nature of Nazism.

The investigations of Ott and Farías have shown that Heidegger's self-exculpatory interpretation is untenable, since it overlooks essential facts, such as Heidegger's active search for the rectorship and his deep enthusiasm for Hitler and National Socialism. Ott, for example, concludes that in the light of his findings, "Heidegger's efforts to play down the importance of his rectorship and make it appear as a thing

of utter insignificance in the light of his resistance stance must be regarded as a failure" (1993, p. 9). Víctor Farías, for his part, claims that Heidegger's adherence to Nazism was not the result of opportunism, but was preceded by a "long preparatory way" of involvement in authoritarian, ultranationalist and antisemitic traditions of thought that found a systematic expression in the philosophy of *Being and Time.* Farías (1987, pp. 16-17) also argues that Heidegger's political practice was deeply entangled with National Socialist ideas and objectives. Among other accusations, Farías claims that Heidegger supported the Nazi faction represented by Ernst Röhm and the SA and sought to base this support on a variation of his own philosophy; that Heidegger maintained extensive relations with the Nazi student movement, and that he actively participated in the project of destroying the association of German universities and creating a new militant pro-Nazi organization. Farías (1987, p. 20) also suggests that, even after 1934, Heidegger's philosophical development followed National Socialist lines, since Heidegger allegedly never abandoned certain opinions that were close to Nazi ideology.[2]

Heidegger's lecture course from the summer semester of 1935, published in 1953 as *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (*Introduction to Metaphysics*), presents the foundations of the philosophical account that underpinned both his initial adherence to National Socialism and his subsequent position of claimed "spiritual resistance," which he later described as "an increasingly sharp intellectual debate and criticism of the unspiritual foundations of the 'National Socialist world view'" (Heidegger, 2000, p. 452). In his 1935 course, Heidegger identifies "the Europeans" as a "metaphysical people" caught between the "great pincers" of Russia and America—two versions of the "same hopeless frenzy of unchained technology and of the rootless organization of the average man" (2014, p. 28). In response to their predicament, the Europeans needed to develop "new, historically *spiritual* forces" and make a radical decision about the destiny of "the West" (2014, p. 29). As later confirmed by the publication of the *Black Notebooks*, Heidegger

[2] It must be noted that, according to some observers, Farías' personal interpretation of the facts, and even the presentation of the facts themselves, must be received with a critical attitude. Thomas Sheehan (1988), for example, has criticized the sloppiness of Farías' notes, as well as his confusion of facts and his tendentious translations of Heidegger's statements.

believed that the German people was destined to assume the leading role in this epochal confrontation. In a much-discussed reference, Heidegger even alludes to "the inner truth and greatness" of National Socialism, to which he later added the phrase, "namely, the encounter between global technology and modern humanity" (2014, p. 152, n. 115) in parenthesis when preparing the text for publication.

As noted above, the publication of Martin Heidegger's *Black Notebooks* provided further evidence that his political involvement with the rectorship was not an isolated episode, but the expression of a deeper philosophical-political commitment. Beginning in the early 1930s, Heidegger began to articulate a narrative about the beginning of philosophy and the need to recreate that beginning in light of the volatile situation in Germany and Europe during those years (Trawny, 2015b, p. 10). In this narrative, "the Greeks" represented the beginning of philosophy and "the Germans" embodied the people capable of repeating that beginning. The narrative, Peter Trawny explains, was the basis for Heidegger's embrace of National Socialism, for the philosopher was convinced that both his account of "the history of Being" and the Nazi movement pressed "at the same time, in different ways, for a decision about the essence and definition of the Germans and with that the destiny of the West" (Trawny, 2015b, p. 16). Heidegger thus devised a "spiritual National Socialism" to which he remained loyal despite his distancing himself from the "vulgar National Socialism" after 1934. According to Ronald Beiner (2018, p. 72), Heidegger hoped that German nationalism could overcome the "oblivion of Being" through the destruction of liberal modernity. Heidegger, Beiner writes, "truly believed in the greatness of Hitler and truly believed that the Nazi movement, under the leadership of Hitler, had the cultural power to plumb the depths of the mystery of Being in a way that liberal democracies were utterly incapable of doing" (2018, p. 74).

Heidegger's philosophico-political engagement from the 1930s was, moreover, largely shaped by his antisemitic positions. Although Heidegger's embrace of antisemitic prejudice was already known, the *Black Notebooks* made known the way in which these prejudices are entangled with his narrative of the "history of Being" (Trawny, 2015b, p. 79). Fragments from the *Black Notebooks* show various expressions of antisemitism. "World-Judaism" plays the role of "uprooting of all beings from being" in an "*utterly unrestrained* way" (Heidegger, 2017b, p. 191). Heidegger also ascribes to the Jews an "*emphatically calculative*

giftedness" (2017b, p. 44). In Heidegger's account, Jews appear as "the worldless, calculating subject, dominated by machination" (Trawny, 2015b, p. 22). Heidegger believes that "the battle between the Jews and the National Socialists is a battle for the sake of history, and one that is conducted from racial motives" (Trawny, 2015b, p. 27).

The associations between Heidegger and Nazism have been studied along three main dimensions of analysis: 1) the nature and extent of Heidegger's commitment to Nazism; 2) the question of whether there was an internal relationship between this commitment and the content of Heidegger's thought; and 3) the nature and significance of Heidegger's postwar unwillingness to express regret, admit guilt or offer a public apology for his political and intellectual support of the National Socialist regime. For many observers, this last point—the fact that Heidegger never expressed any kind of self-criticism about his Nazi commitment—has been even more troubling than his original Nazi association. For Richard Rorty, for example, what distinguishes Heidegger from other anti-egalitarian thinkers of the twentieth century is precisely this silence about the crimes of Nazism, especially the massacre of the Jews: Heidegger was the only major twentieth-century writer "to have remained unmoved by the Holocaust" (Rorty, 2000, p. 193)

I would like to argue that the passages of *Being and Time* devoted to the public and the "they" offer elements that suggest the existence of a fourth dimension for the study of the relationship between Heidegger and Nazism, one that is a variation on the previous three. These passages are the ones in which Heidegger relates the "call" of Being in one's inner conscience to *reticence* and *silence*, and the fourth dimension I posit would be the possibility of an internal connection between Heidegger's philosophy and his postwar silence.

Heidegger makes a clear distinction between Dasein's concern with "being with one another in public" and the more crucial moments when one is called to one's own self. In contrast to the noisy chatter of public idle talk, the solitary talk of the call of Being is, "taken strictly, nothing." Apparently, this call asserts nothing because it "gives no information about world events"; it seems as if it has "nothing to say." But one must realize, Heidegger states, that "*conscience discourses solely and constantly in the mode of keeping silent*" (*BT*, 273). Such awareness reveals that our understanding of a call "is not to be tied up with an expectation of anything like a communication" (*BT*, 274). In these sections, Heidegger

explicitly states that the inner conversation of Dasein with itself has nothing to do with exteriorization, but rather demands a radical command to remain silent. By its very nature, Heidegger continues, the call of Being is something that cannot be spoken about in public: "The call discourses in the uncanny mode of *keeping silent*. And it does this only because, in calling the one to whom the appeal is made, it does not call him into the public idle talk of the 'they,' but *calls* him *back* from this *into the reticence of his existent* potentiality-for-Being" (*BT*, 277).

In fact, the mode of discourse that corresponds to "wanting to have a conscience" is a mode of *reticence*. Silence is not the absence of discourse, but "an essential possibility of discourse." Heidegger then adds a line that gives the impression of having been written retrospectively, with his postwar situation in mind: "Anyone who keeps silent when he wants to give us to understand something, must have 'something to say.' […] The fact that 'they,' who hear and understand nothing but loud idle talk, cannot 'report' any call is held against the conscience on the subterfuge that it is 'dumb' and manifestly not present-at-hand" (*BT*, 296).

Reading these excerpts from *Being and Time* might situate the theme of Heidegger's postwar silence in a different perspective. Hypothetically applied to Heidegger's own postwar "reticence" about his political activities during the Nazi era, *Being and Time*'s reflections on silence as a mode of discourse signal a substantial limitation in Heideggerian philosophy, one that reveals itself as an intellectual posture utterly unsuited to the articulation of ethical responsibility or moral self-examination. This limitation may be a symptom of what Hugo Ott alludes to in his concluding remarks on the ethical dimension of Heideggerian thought: "The only ethical category in which Heidegger was able to think or be understood—if, indeed, we can speak of ethics at all in his case—was that of 'obedience to being'" (Ott, 1993, p. 35). For Richard Wolin, the "wordlessness" of the call of conscience confirms Heidegger's *a priori* consignment of the entire world of intersubjective affairs to a sphere of inauthenticity—Heidegger's conviction that the realm of linguistic intercourse has been so dramatically distorted by the "they" that "the only recourse left for authentic Dasein is a smug posture of silent superiority" (Wolin, 1990, p. 45). Pierre Bourdieu offers a different interpretation of Heidegger's silence: in his view, Heidegger remained silent because he was "less the subject than the object of his most fundamental rhetorical strategies" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 105). In the end, Heidegger was nothing more than the "medium" of

the conservative "social unconscious" speaking through him. He had to refuse to disavow his Nazi commitment, because to do otherwise would have been to admit that his thought was not "essential" at all, but deeply marked by the social demands of fascist ideology.

Heidegger and the political

Heidegger's criticism of publicness, as well as the connections between his philosophy and his political positions, raise the question of the German philosopher's overall conception of the political. In this section, I will argue that Heidegger's philosophy contains an implicit understanding of the political that is ultimately incompatible with democratic politics. Modern democratic ideals, since their emergence in the seventeenth century, have emphasized the values of freedom, equality, and rational discussion among equals, as well as the importance of public opinion itself as a central aspect in the exercise of popular sovereignty. From this perspective, then, Heidegger's critical philosophical analysis of the "they" is, therefore, not merely an isolated rejection of public opinion. Rather, it is a fundamental challenge to the principles on which political democracy is based.

As the work of political theorists such as Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Hannah Arendt has shown, the notion of the public is an essential feature of democratic theory and politics. Habermas (1991) defines the term "public sphere" (*Öffentlichkeit*) as the dimension of civil society characterized by public use of reason by the people and the use of the press as an instrument for addressing the reading public. Debate in the public sphere, Habermas writes, is "supposed to transform *voluntas* into a *ratio* that in the public competition of private arguments came into being as the consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all" (1991, p. 83). According to this idea, the free, egalitarian and open discussion in the public sphere gives rise to a public opinion that is regarded as the supreme authority before which all the opinions of particular individuals and groups must appear (Chartier, 1990, p. 50).

In this sense, Habermas' public sphere is a development of Immanuel Kant's ideas on collective rationality, as expressed in his 1784 essay "What is Enlightenment?," where Kant (1996, p. 58) characterizes it as the process of liberation from self-inflicted immaturity through the use of one's own reason. To achieve Enlightenment, Kant writes, nothing more is required than the "freedom to make a *public use* of one's reason" in all matters. Kant defines this public use as "that which anyone makes

of it *as a scholar* before the entire public of the *reading world*" (1996, p. 58). For Kant, then, the public expression of one's criticism through the media is a necessary element in the collective progress of humanity toward an enlightened state.

Charles Taylor, for his part, includes the public sphere, along with the market and the self-governing people, among the "social imaginaries" that characterize Western modernity (2004, p. 2). Significantly, the emergence of these imaginaries is inseparable from the establishment of what Taylor calls the "modern moral order" (2004, p. 21) the vision of egalitarian individualism that underlies modern notions of rights, legitimate rule and mutual benefit. The public sphere is an instance of these forms of mutual benefit because it provides a common space where potentially all the members of a given community can engage in critical debate in order to "come to a common mind about important matters" (2004, pp. 87-88).

The notion of publicness is also present in Hannah Arendt's idea of the public realm as that "common world" or "scene for action and speech" where the plurality of human beings meets and becomes aware of its freedom. Inspired by the model of the Greek polis, Arendt (1969, p. 153) presents the public as the space where free human beings appear and where freedom can become a tangible reality through words, actions, and events that can be heard, seen, and remembered. It is in this space of publicness that politics, understood as the capacity for concerted action, is possible. For Arendt, there is no freedom without public space, nor public space without freedom: "Without a politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance" (1969, p. 147).

While Heidegger's "existential analytics" cannot be fully reduced to a straightforward ideological position, the importance of the public sphere as a fundamental component of any democratic vision places Heidegger's ideas about authentic human existence in tension with democratic politics. Since, according to Heidegger, the concept of publicness acts as a catalyst for the reception of *doxa* as a deceptive truth, the dilemma between democratic politics and authentic thought becomes insoluble. Given that the public sphere—as the realm of human freedom, equality, and plurality—is the foundation of any republican, liberal, or democratic view, Heidegger's critique of the public sphere is one of the central components of his more general anti-egalitarian and anti-democratic stance.

What would be the defining features of Heidegger's implicit understanding of the political? For Hannah Arendt, the most defining aspect of Heidegger's philosophy with respect to politics is its relentless oblivion of political action (Villa, 1996, p. 230). Heidegger's philosophy, Arendt finds, is not hostile to politics, but essentially alien to it. It is not *anti-political*, but *unpolitical* (Villa, 1996, p. 211). This lack of space for the political in Heidegger's thought, Arendt argues, follows from its unworldly character, its conception of thinking as a withdrawal that disdains the particularities of reality, and above all from its "reification of thought as the only genuine action" (Villa, 1996, p. 230). According to Arendt, Heidegger's unpolitical stance became radicalized after 1945 as a reflection of the "zero point" marked by Germany's defeat. This radicalization took the form of the new mood of serenity (*Gelassenheit*) and the affirmation of a "will-not-to-will" (Arendt, 1971, p. 188). By this time it had become quite clear to Heidegger that "action, in which a We is always engaged in changing our common world, stands in the sharpest possible opposition to the solitary business of thought, which operates in a dialogue between me and myself" (Arendt, 1971, p. 200).

In contrast to Arendt, other scholars have pointed out the actively anti-political dimension implicit in Heidegger's ideas and argued for the existence of an internal connection between Heideggerian philosophy and nationalist and authoritarian forms of politics. Ronald Beiner (2018, p. 104), for example, has identified in the content of Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism* a kind of "spiritualization" of German nationalist attitudes. Inspired by Hölderlin's poetry, Heidegger advocates a form of nationalism that is "near to Being" because of its "rootedness" in the soil. For this reason, the German *Volk* is ordained to play a decisive role in the destiny of Being in response to the progressive dissolution of the "mystery of existence" in a "homeless" modernity. Richard Wolin (1990, p. 8), for his part, has argued that for Heidegger there may be forms of political life that are conducive to the "coming to presence" of Being in history. These political forms would constitute the rudiments of a Heideggerian political theory in which the flourishing of Being would be distinct from the ventures of the everyday, coinciding instead with the exceptional moments of existential commitment. Heidegger himself sought to ground his participation in the Nazi movement in this philosophy of Being. Heidegger's philosophy, Wolin argues, is an internalization of the conservative revolutionary critique of modernity that presents the "question of Being" as a way out of the "decline of the

West." Heidegger's critique of publicness is a meaningful articulation of this stance, as the term stands as "a kind of deprecatory shorthand for the totality of modern political terms" (Wolin, 1990, p. 36).[3]

The fragments from the *Black Notebooks*, in which Heidegger himself presents the grounding principles for his adherence to National Socialism, provide support for these interpretations. In these fragments, Heidegger (2016, p. 142) praises the "possible greatness" of Nazism, which lies in its "essential character" as a "*barbaric principle*." And while he rejects the possibility of a National Socialist philosophy—because the "thinking of the truth of *beyng*" is always *ahead* of "all instituting, preserving, and restoring of *beings*" (2016, pp. 253-254)—he expresses his belief in the possibility of a collaboration between Nazism and philosophy that would "coeffectuate a new basic posture towards beyng" (2016, p. 139). Despite the expression of some reservations, his desire "to provide the movement" with "possibilities of world-configuration and of development" (2016, pp. 98-99) prevails. Heidegger articulates this desire in terms of his own philosophy: "The *metaphysics of Dasein* must become deeper in accord with the innermost structure of that metaphysics and must expand into the *metapolitics 'of' the historical people*" (2016, p. 91). Only the collaboration between "the movement" and his own philosophy would guarantee that "everything now transpiring" would be "more than a political reorganization" and become a preparation for what is truly primordial: "the transformation of the essence of truth" (2016, p. 319).

[3] French philosopher Emmanuel Faye (2009) has offered one of the most radical versions of the "internal relationship" thesis concerning Heideggerian philosophy and Nazi ideology. Faye argues that the significance of Heidegger's thought was, in short, the instrumentalization of philosophy in the service of National Socialism. The continuing influence of Heidegger in contemporary philosophy represents, for Faye, the continuation of the Second World War in the intellectual realm—a veritable propagation of Nazism in the sphere of ideas. Perhaps Faye's most extreme assertion is that Heidegger's political commitment was "the foundation of his entire work" (2009, p. 6). This would be demonstrated by Heidegger's constant use of terminology of allegedly Nazi origin-terms, such as "combat," "sacrifice," "fate," and "community of people," supposedly associated with the central Heideggerian notions of "historical existence," "essence," "truth," and "being." Since Nazism would have inspired Heidegger's work "in its entirety," Faye concludes that the reading and promotion of Heidegger's books entails "dangers to humanity and to thought" (2009, p. 316).

The first antidemocratic consequence of Heidegger's implicit concept of the political is an elitist and anti-egalitarian position. Heidegger, Beiner writes, regards the "tranquillized everydayness" of inauthentic Dasein as "the norm in a democratic culture": a social existence that is "prosaic and banal" (2018, p. 75). The unspoken normative dimension in Heidegger's analysis of the condition of Dasein is elitist, since it implies that only a few individuals will be able to attain an authentic existence. Most people will lack the "ontological courage" to "live alongside the imminence of nonbeing" and so will therefore take refuge in the "tranquilization" of the "they" (Beiner, 2018, pp. 82-83). Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu (1991, p. 79) identifies the conceptual opposition between authenticity and inauthenticity in *Being and Time* as an example of Heidegger's philosophical version of conservative revolutionary ideology. For the French sociologist, this opposition is nothing more than a restatement of the traditional opposition between the "elite" and the "masses." The phenomenon of the masses finds its Heideggerian articulation in the concept of the "they," which expresses itself through social mechanisms of opinion and is characterized as tyrannical, inquisitorial, and always inclined to reduce everything to the lowest level, inviting individuals to shirk their responsibilities. Bourdieu (1991, pp. 3-4) thus proposes to undertake a dual reading of Heidegger's texts structured by simultaneous references to the two mental spaces of the political and the philosophical.

Like Bourdieu, Habermas notes that, despite its posture of abstract philosophizing, *Being and Time* is a work imbued with the "spirit of the times," especially the critique of mass civilization and the elitist denunciation of the "dictatorship of public opinion" (1989, p. 438). According to Habermas, one of the main limitations of the argument of *Being and Time* is Heidegger's attribution of a "derivative" status to Being-with-others —a move that results in the complete obliteration of "the social" as a valid philosophical dimension.[4] Even if Heidegger initially concedes that human existence is embedded in structures of

[4] It must be noted that, contrary to Habermas' claim of a derived status for the social in Heideggerian philosophy, in his course for the Winter semester of 1928-29 at the University of Freiburg (published as *Introduction to Philosophy*), Heidegger presents Being-with as an essential structure: "In the essence of a being-there [*Da-sein*] lies being-with [*Mit-sein*], even if another being factically does not exist at all. Dasein already brings with it the sphere of possible

linguistic subjectivity, Habermas argues, he does not respond to this fact in terms of a theory of communication. On the contrary, he degrades any structure that goes beyond isolated Dasein as an expression of inauthenticity (Habermas, 1987, p. 149).

Heidegger's critique of the experience of modernity became more explicit in his writings of the 1930s, such as *Introduction to Metaphysics*, where he argues that the main problem of the modern world is the progressive disappearance of "rank" as a form of crucial qualitative distinction, replaced by the equality of mere number. Significant signs of the decadence of Western civilization, in this sense, are "the reduction of human beings to a mass" and "the preeminence of the mediocre" (2014, p. 49). The modern world, says Heidegger, thus lacks the depth "from which the essential always comes and returns to human beings, thereby forcing them to superiority and allowing them to act on the basis of rank" (2014, p. 50). "America" and "Russia" pose a threat to the European West because they have embraced a "quantitative temper" which "is no longer something inconsequential and merely barren, but is the onslaught of that which aggressively destroys all rank and all that is world-spiritual, and portrays these as a lie" (2014, p. 51).

The second antidemocratic consequence of Heidegger's implicit concept of the political is a condemnation of pluralistic society. Rüdiger Safranski (1998) has argued that Heidegger's censure of the diversity of positions inherent to the public sphere is inevitably a denunciation of the pluralism of views and perspectives proper to democracy. The Heideggerian affirmation of an ethics of authenticity represents a radical break with the notion of an ethics of public life. What Heidegger so harshly criticizes—the insidious penetration of the "they"—is precisely the phenomenon that constitutes the parameter of public responsibility, namely, "the coincidence of the morally good and the socially valid" (Safranski, 1998, p. 146). While Heidegger denied that his critique of the "they" alluded to the Weimar scene because he did not want to be seen as a critic of a historical epoch—something that would remain in the dimension of the ontic—but as a thinker devoted to Being and its existentiales, that is, to the dimension of the ontological, for Safranski (1998, p. 162), Heidegger's analysis of inauthenticity offers a clear reference to his own democratic epoch.

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neighborhood; it is intrinsically already neighbor to…, whereas two stones, for example, cannot be neighboring" (Heidegger, 2024, p. 98).

Significantly, in the passages of the *Black Notebook*s where Heidegger refers to the contrast between "philosophy" and "the public," he interprets the plurality of debate in the public sphere as "noise." The fate of philosophy, for example, depends on "those few" who are no longer "slaves to public opinion" (Heidegger, 2017a, p. 58). Since the primordial, that is, the "dialogue of thinkers" and the "history of Beyng," is not "historiologically verifiable," it "remains concealed to public opinion" (2017a, p. 170). Heidegger emphasizes the impossibility of a "respectable press"—a category in which he includes radio as the "press of the ear"—given that publicness is based on "unrespectability" (2017a, p. 124). The public sphere, in sum, is not only a form of "emptiness" (Heidegger, 2017b, p. 42), a "ravenous void […] that indiscriminately mixes everything into a quickly consumed verbal hodgepodge" (2017b, p. 135). It also represents an "obstruction of the clearing" in which the "basic form" of self-consciousness is noise: "All speaking and writing are noise […]. All proclamation and praise are noise. Noise carries out the essential step of what is loud into the distorted essence. Noise consummates the instituting of the distorted essence in complete releasement" (2017b, p. 80).

In the words of Peter Trawny (2015a, p. 48), Heidegger was "the final and probably most vehement obstructer of modernity." In the *Black Notebooks* in particular, Heidegger sought to combat one of the aspects of modernity that he disliked the most: what the sociologist Max Weber called the "disenchantment of the world." In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger revealingly decries one of the main consequences of this "disenchantment," which is the process of separating social life into a plurality of autonomous spheres of value or, in Heidegger's words, the "instrumental misinterpretation of the spirit" that has "divided up into regions […] the powers of spiritual happening—poetry and fine arts, state-creation and religion" (2014, p. 52). Heidegger seems to resort to a Weberian language to condemn this modern fragmentation of unitary meaning into a multiplicity of points of reference:

> These regions become fields of a free endeavor that sets its own standards for itself, according to the meaning of 'standards' that it can still attain. These standards of validity for production and use are called values. Cultural values secure meaning for themselves in the whole of a culture only by restricting themselves to

> their self-validity: poetry for poetry's sake, art for art's sake, science for science's sake (2014, p. 52).

Despite the evidence for the entanglement of anti-democratic political elements in Heidegger's philosophy, one should avoid the temptation of totalizing readings that would reduce the entireness of Heideggerian concepts, arguments, and insights to a univocal, conservative ideological position. Habermas himself, one of the first thinkers to criticize the authoritarian political tendency in Heidegger's philosophy, has argued for a more subtle analytical distinction when considering the question of the continuity between Heidegger's writings and his participation in the Nazi regime. For Habermas, Heidegger's political behavior did not necessarily follow automatically from the philosophy of *Being and Time*. But, at the same time, his behavior was not incompatible with that philosophy. What really changed the status of the relationship between philosophy and ideology in Heidegger's writings was the transformation in what Otto Pöggeler (1993) has called Heidegger's "political self-understanding."

According to this interpretation, in the late 1920s Heidegger's reading of his own philosophy was invaded by distinctly right-wing ideological motifs, a move fueled by the escalating economic crisis and the ever-increasing political unrest. As a result, Heidegger gave new content to the concepts of his basic ontology while retaining the same words and categories.[5] This transformation intensified in the early 1930s and especially after 1933. The individualistic demand for the authenticity of *Being and Time*, for example, was liquidated and replaced by the notion of the collective destiny of a people, understood as a historical challenge (Habermas, 1989, p. 443). Dasein's capacity for wholeness was now to be found in "the historical existence of a nation yoked together by the Führer into a collective will" (Habermas, 1987, p. 157). The consequence

[5] Rüdiger Safranski offers several examples of the adaptation of Heidegger's philosophy to Nazism. In the memorial address for Leo Schlageter, a *Freikorps* member executed by the French for his sabotage activities in the Ruhr, Heidegger presented Schlageter's death as the realization of the existential ideal of *Being and Time* (Safranski, 1998, p. 242). Heidegger's political application of his philosophy of authenticity found its most extreme manifestation in the opposition between the inauthentic "we" represented by the "they" and the authentic "we" of the nation, which asserts itself as if it were an individual (Safranski, 1998, p. 266).

of this change was the establishment of a connection between Heidegger's philosophy and contemporary events. Only after realizing that Nazism was not a reaction against technological nihilism, but one of its manifestations, would Heidegger express his disappointment. For Habermas, the introduction of ideological motifs into Heidegger's thought was not so much a built-in feature of existential philosophy as an external invasion that can be given a precise context: the economic crisis and political decline in the Weimar Republic.

Other authors have also argued for a more nuanced reading of Heidegger's relationship to politics. Dana Villa (1996, p. 215) argues that while a denigration of communicative action is evident in Heidegger's descriptions of the public and the "they," Heidegger's fundamental ontology does not entail an automatic rejection of the public sphere. In particular, Heidegger's critical account of the power of "mere talk" should not be understood as a condemnation of the public sphere, but as a description of the reduction of public life to the level of spectacle. Moreover, according to Villa, *Being and Time* presents a clear role for politics and political speech—a role in which the notion of an authentic public space is implied. In *Being and Time*, politics has the dual task of 1) reminding the community of its radical historicality and finitude, preparing it for a commitment to its "most distinctive possibility," and 2) providing the authority necessary to give *direction* and *content* to existential freedom (Villa, 1996, p. 216). In a different spirit, Richard Wolin (2022, p. 12) has warned against abandoning Heideggerian thought as "irreparably contaminated and, hence, *irredeemable*," and has argued instead for a systematic reevaluation of his philosophy in light of the revelations of the *Black Notebooks*. Peter Gordon (2017, p. 145) has similarly called for "a thoughtful appropriation" of Heidegger's philosophy, no longer as "an integral whole in the manner of the grand philosophical systems of the past," but "only where it can be redeemed, as Adorno might have said, in its fragments."

Heidegger's critique of public opinion

What is the connection between Heidegger's philosophy and modern European history? At first glance, it seems that Heidegger's concern with "authenticity" is a re-edition of the "know thyself" motto of ancient thought—a merely a-historical preoccupation with the seemingly universal questions of philosophy. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that Heidegger is in fact responding to some

of the pressing realities of modernity, such as the distinction between the public and the private, the role of public opinion, and the experience of mass culture.

In this respect, it is difficult not to notice an affinity between Heidegger's critique of the public and Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of public opinion in *Democracy in America*. Like Heidegger, Tocqueville identifies the tendency to suppress or repress individuality as one of the manifestations of social equality: "the weak want to bring the strong down to their level, which reduces men to a preference for equality in servitude rather than inequality in freedom" (2004, p. 60). Tocqueville also denounces modern society's dependence on the impersonal power of public opinion—a phantom reality that the masses have made their primary source of belief. This influence of public opinion on the mind of each citizen destroys the conditions for independent thought. According to Tocqueville, "as long as the majority remains in doubt, people talk, but as soon as it makes up its mind once and for all, everyone falls silent […]. I know of no country where there is in general less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America" (2004, p. 293). This omnipotence of the majority endangers freedom: it creates the conditions for a democratic despotism that imposes itself through a violence that is "entirely intellectual." Both Heidegger and Tocqueville distrust the effects of public opinion on individual thought. But while Tocqueville belongs to a tradition that sees the distrust of the effects of public opinion as an inherent part of democracy itself, Heidegger inscribes himself in a very different political genealogy. What primarily distinguishes Heidegger from other critics of democracy is his unambiguous interpretation of the consequences of equality as exclusively impoverishing and destructive. By contrast, critics like Tocqueville do not stop at pointing out the negative aspects of democracy, but rather indicate its internal ambiguities and socially productive contradictions.

Perhaps the limitations of Heidegger's assessment of the public sphere derive less from the positive content of his philosophy than from the conceptual gaps in his thinking. In particular, Heidegger's categories lack a phenomenology of the interactions of human consciousness with other human consciousness—that is, a phenomenology of conversation

and debate.[6] This philosophy also lacks a phenomenology of power, domination, resistance, and liberation. Heidegger's is a philosophy of solitude, of Dasein's determination to be authentic in the face of the masses, and of *ek-sistence*'s quiet contemplation of the mystery of being. Even where it rejects subjectivity, Heidegger's is a radically individualistic philosophy: it leaves no room for thinking about politics—that social space between the individual and the masses, Dasein and the "they."

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[6] In his *Introduction to Philosophy*, however, Heidegger presents a more positive understanding of Being-with (*Mitsein*): "Now, beings that have our manner of being, yet that we ourselves are not, but that are in each case the other, another Dasein, the Dasein of others, are not simply present at hand next to us with perhaps other things between. Rather, the other Dasein is there with us, Dasein-with; we ourselves are determined by a being-with with the other. Dasein and Dasein are a with-one-another" (Heidegger, 2024, p. 60).

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