

RICHARD WOLIN

Heidegger in Ruins: Between Philosophy and Ideology

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Richard Wolin's *Heidegger in Ruins: Between Philosophy and Ideology* unveils the intricate ties between Martin Heidegger's philosophical work and his political affiliations. By dismantling the long-held separation between Heidegger's abstract ideas and his entanglement with National Socialism, Wolin reveals unsettling truths that challenge our understanding of the philosopher, offering a fresh and critical perspective on his enduring legacy.

Richard Wolin, a distinguished professor of political science and a leading scholar in political theory and philosophy, has made significant contributions to the analysis of political ideologies, democracy, and totalitarianism. Known for his work on the key figures and foundations of late 20th-century postmodernism, including Nietzsche and Heidegger, as well as his extensive research on the Frankfurt School, Richard Wolin offers an authoritative analysis of Martin Heidegger's legacy.

As the latest installment in Wolin's long-standing effort to confront the troubling legacy of Martin Heidegger, *Heidegger in Ruins* seizes the moment presented by the release of Heidegger's *Schwarze Hefte* (Black Notebooks)¹ to reassess the philosopher's work. Wolin exposes the deep connections between Heidegger's thought and his political sympathies, beginning the book with a note on sources that emphasizes Heidegger's correspondence as a critical resource (2). While he focuses primarily on the published versions of Heidegger's letters, his analysis remains insightful; access to the recently available handwritten originals could have added further depth to his engagement with the material.

¹ For the complete release of Heidegger's *Schwarze Hefte*, see Heidegger *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Peter Trawny, vols. 94–102 (Verlag Vittorio Klostermann, 2014–2021). All footnotes use GA as an abbreviation for this reference.

Wolin asserts that Heidegger's existentialism is no mere abstract endeavor but a deliberate tool deployed in service of National Socialism's pernicious aims (12; 29; 46). *Heidegger in Ruins* is not an idle academic inquiry but a forceful confrontation with the lingering indulgence afforded to Heidegger's political and philosophical errors. While acknowledging the moral corruption in Heidegger's work, Wolin argues that there are valuable philosophical elements worth preserving. By challenging the view that Heidegger's philosophy is irredeemable (12), Wolin suggests that while the larger structure of Heidegger's thought is compromised, the individual "bricks"² may still be useful. This calls for a careful reassessment of Heidegger, advocating for a nuanced separation of philosophical insight from political entanglement – though, in light of Heidegger's more controversial positions, such as his calls for an end to philosophy in favor of a "Metapolitics" (103), it is difficult to determine what criteria could reliably distinguish the philosophical from the ideological.

In the introduction, aptly titled "Heidegger in Black," Wolin guides the reader through some of the most damning passages from the *Black Notebooks*, including a 1934 seminar where Heidegger speaks of the "total extermination" of enemies rooted in the soul of the people (5). Additionally, Wolin analyzes Heidegger's assertion that philosophy should be replaced by "Metapolitics," arguing that this shift only intensifies the ideological darkness surrounding his thought (7–9). Wolin's account is thorough – indeed, exhaustive – tracing Heidegger's philosophical path and his "philosophical Kehre" (turn) with precision (149, 271-275). He argues that this was no innocent intellectual shift but a deliberate realignment with the swelling tide of nationalism, which would soon crest with Nazi ascendancy (149).

Central to Wolin's case is Heidegger's tenure as rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933, during which Heidegger gave a speech and authored a manifesto for a Nazi-inflected academic order (16). Wolin demonstrates how Heidegger's hallmark ideas – *Dasein* and *Being* – were hijacked to serve the volkish, nationalist ends of the Nazi regime. In Heidegger's philosophy, *Dasein* refers to human existence, emphasizing our awareness of and engagement with the world around us – a way of being rooted in one's specific context. However, Wolin critiques how Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* was co-opted to justify Nazi ideology by linking it to nationalist

² Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (1878).

and racist ideas (I). Similarly, Being (*Sein*) in Heidegger's thought refers to the fundamental nature of existence, an ontological inquiry into what it means to be. Wolin argues that Heidegger's exploration of Being became intertwined with dangerous political commitments, using Being to elevate nationalist and exclusionary principles central to Nazi ideology (17-45).

At the heart of this critique is Heidegger's unsettling proximity to Nazi glorifications of work, most notoriously encapsulated in the phrase "Arbeit macht frei" at Auschwitz. Heidegger's own philosophy asserts that the capacity for work distinguishes human existence, showing parallels to this slogan later used by the Nazi regime (IV).³ Through Wolin's analysis, it becomes clear that Heidegger's rhetoric was not just passively entwined with Nazi ideology – it was weaponized to serve its aims.

In the first chapter, Wolin examines the post-1945 alterations of Heidegger's texts, drawing on Sidonie Kellerer's research to highlight these manipulations.⁴ He reveals that editors of Heidegger *Gesamtausgabe* (Complete Works,) including family members, have frequently sought to obscure certain views. For example, in the 1980s, Heidegger's literary executors pressured editors to quietly remove controversial phrases such as "it would be worthwhile inquiring into world Jewry's (Judentums) predisposition toward planetary criminality," with these omissions only being uncovered years later (36).⁵ Consequently, Wolin contends that Heidegger's "philosophical legacy has been systematically manipulated by a coterie of well-disposed literary executors." (26) The second chapter delves into the destructive elements of Heideggerian thought, connecting

³ Martin Heidegger, "Labor Service and the University" and "The Call to Labor Service," in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Heidegger, "Der deutsche Student als Arbeiter," ["The German Student as Worker,"] in *Reden und andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges*, [Speeches and Other Testimonies of a Life's Path] GA 16 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2000).

⁴ Marion Heinz and Sidonie Kellerer, eds., *Heideggers "Schwarze Hefte": Eine philosophisch-politische Debatte* [Heidegger's "Black Notebooks": A Philosophical-Political Debate,] (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016); Sidonie Kellerer, "Philosophy or Messianism?," in *Confronting Heidegger: A Critical Dialogue on Politics and Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019); Sidonie Kellerer, *Zerrissene Moderne: Descartes bei den Neukantianern, Husserl, und Heidegger* [Fragmented Modernity: Descartes among the Neo-Kantians, Husserl, and Heidegger] (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press, 2013).

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Die Geschichte des Seyns*, [The History of Being,] ed. Peter Trawny (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1998).

his ideas to influential cultural critics like Oswald Spengler. Wolin illustrates how they collectively redefined the concept of *Arbeit* (work), which was once a leftist, internationalist ideal, and recast it as a nationalist imperative, redirecting the working class's loyalties toward the far right. As Wolin reveals, these texts expose Heidegger's endorsement of Nordic racial theory, his justifications for the Nazi euthanasia program, and his embrace of scientific racism (59).⁶

Wolin's strengths lie in his meticulous research and his talent for weaving together historical and philosophical threads into a seamless, persuasive argument. His examination of the *Black Notebooks* is nothing short of revelatory, furnishing the reader with undeniable proof of Heidegger's ideological complicity with National Socialism. Yet, for all its merits, Wolin's work is not without fault. At times, his reading of Heidegger's private correspondences veers into the speculative, leaving some readers perhaps justifiably clamoring for more substantial evidence. Furthermore, while Wolin is masterful in exposing Heidegger's ideological leanings, his critique might benefit from a more nuanced engagement with counter-arguments and a fuller exploration of the complexities that Heidegger's philosophy presents.

The critical discourse surrounding Heidegger is not a recent phenomenon; in fact, the debate began almost immediately after his public association with National Socialism in 1933, when he was appointed rector of the University of Freiburg – a post he attained upon joining the Nazi Party. The controversy over Heidegger's Nazi affiliations intensified after his posthumous *Spiegel* interview titled "Only a God Can Save Us," where he notably failed to express any real remorse for his Nazi sympathies, attributing his actions to misguided intellectual conviction rather than moral failure (30).⁷ This debate over Heidegger's complicity in Nazi ideology raged throughout the 20th century, with a significant portion of scholarship attempting to downplay his political affiliations

⁶ For the relevant background, see Eggert Blum, "Die Marke Heidegger," [The Heidegger Brand,] *Die Zeit* 47 (27 November 2014); Trawny, *Heidegger und der Mythos einer jüdischen Weltverschwörung* [Heidegger and the Myth of a Jewish World Conspiracy] (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2014).

⁷ Martin Heidegger, "Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten," [Only a God Can Save Us Now,] interview by *Der Spiegel*, 1966, published posthumously 1976, *Der Spiegel*, no. 23 (1976).

as a pragmatic move aimed at preserving philosophical integrity rather than a true ideological alignment with fascism. For years, defenders of Heidegger posited that his Nazi membership was merely a means to protect academic autonomy at Freiburg, not a wholehearted endorsement of Nazi principles. Wolin's work, however, decisively refutes this interpretation, revealing a deeply embedded nationalist worldview in Heidegger's philosophy.

In Chapter Three of *Heidegger in Ruins*, Wolin examines Heidegger's critique of "biologism" and its relationship to National Socialist racism, suggesting that Heidegger sought to frame race as an existential concept tied to *Stimmung* (pre-reflective emotional state, mood or attunement). However, Wolin questions whether this truly signifies a major ideological shift, pointing out Heidegger's earlier references to the "German race" and the indirect manner in which he addressed racial issues prior to 1933. Moving to Chapters Four and Five, Wolin addresses the intertwined ideas of work, land, and soil within both Heideggerian philosophy and National Socialist ideology. These chapters lay bare the profound political significance of Heidegger's embrace of concepts like *Bodenständigkeit* ("rootedness-in-soil") and his rejection of Western rationality. Wolin dissects how these ideas were weaponized to legitimize Nazi policies of racial purity and authoritarian rule. Heidegger's notion of the "Metapolitics of the historical Volk" provided the intellectual scaffolding for the Nazi project to reshape German society, purging it of so-called "rootless" elements (90). The relevance of Wolin's exploration extends beyond Heidegger's time, as his ideas continue to exert influence on contemporary far-right movements both in Germany and globally.

In the book's final chapter, Wolin examines how Heidegger's philosophy has been adopted by New Right movements across France, the United States, Germany, and Russia (VI). For example, the far-right leader of Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), Björn Höcke, on May 28, 2020, proudly posted a photograph of himself reading *Die Kehre*⁸ – a publication inspired by Heidegger's philosophy and edited by a member

⁸ Julian Jasper Göppfarth, *Querdenker: Local Intellectuals, Far-Right Populism and the Politics of Aesthetics of Kulturturnation in Germany* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2020), 180.

of the Identitarian Movement (342-347). The magazine purports to reclaim environmentalism for nationalist and traditionalist causes, framing ecological concerns within a nationalist agenda. This is no mere coincidence. Heidegger's emphasis on national *Dasein* – the collective being rooted in shared tradition, spirit, and locality – has been co-opted by modern populists, providing a philosophical underpinning for their rhetoric of national identity, tradition, and resistance to perceived external threats.

The fusion of intellectualism and populism within Germany's far-right is clearly embodied by the German New Right (GNR), a movement that exemplifies how these two traditionally distinct elements can intertwine. Wolin holds that Heidegger's philosophy provides a rich intellectual bedrock for these far-right movements, offering both academic respectability and populist allure (VI). His concepts of Volk and nation serve as a platform to reimagine German nationhood, forming the ideological glue that binds the GNR's civil society networks, which unite populist and intellectual actors in a common cause.⁹ Heidegger's idea of a national *Dasein* – a mutual national existence – gives GNR intellectuals a means of legitimizing an exclusionary nationalism, cleverly navigating the legal and social constraints imposed in post-war Germany. By shifting away from the crude racial discourse of earlier decades to emphasize cultural and historical heritage, these movements propagate an ideological narrative centered on the protection of "ordinary white people" (307) and the preservation of the national homeland against what they portray as global technocratic elites and a racialized "Other."¹⁰ This focus on cultural and historical identity resonates deeply with far-right intellectuals and activists, who cast themselves as defenders of a beleaguered national identity. Furthermore, Heidegger's thought is strategically employed by the GNR to link environmentalism with nationalism, creating a counter-narrative to mainstream ecological movements, which they deride as disconnected from national identity. By reframing environmentalism as

⁹ See Martin Sellner and Walter Spatz, *Gelassen in den Widerstand: Ein Gespräch über Heidegger* [Calm in the Resistance: A Dialogue about Heidegger] (Kaplaken 47, Verlag Antaios, 2015).

¹⁰ See Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Nation, Ethnicity*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

a matter of *Heimat* – homeland – protection, the far right presents itself as the authentic guardian of local and cultural landscapes.¹¹

Heidegger's critique of modernity and emphasis on authenticity have indeed transcended Germany's borders, appropriated by far-right leaders and intellectuals around the world (324). His rejection of universalism offers these figures a potent rhetorical weapon to champion national sovereignty and traditional values. Concepts like *Volk* and *Dasein* are repurposed to bolster populist arguments against globalization, multiculturalism, and the perceived erosion of liberal democracy. Wolin contends that Heidegger's *völkisch* ideals have been revived by populist leaders such as Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Viktor Orbán, Andrzej Duda, and major aspirants to authoritarian right-wing rule in France and Austria (325): these leaders push for a "pure" national identity, rail against the forces of globalism, and seek to reclaim sovereignty from supranational entities (327).

The resurgence of Heideggerian thought among far-right advocates highlights the philosopher's continuing influence on populist and nationalist ideologies. For many, his philosophy has become a blueprint for existential nationalist ideologies that now fuel populist movements on a global scale.

Overall, Richard Wolin's *Heidegger in Ruins: Between Philosophy and Ideology* offers a fresh perspective on Heidegger's ties to Nazism, building on earlier studies like Hans Sluga's *Heidegger's Crisis* and Pierre Bourdieu's *The Political Ontology of Heidegger*, which thoroughly examined Heidegger's Nazi affiliations and their philosophical implications. Wolin extends this discussion by exploring Heidegger's influence on modern far-right movements and providing his own philosophical insights. In comparison to Günther Anders' more critical *The Pseudo-Concreteness of Heidegger*, Wolin updates the analysis by placing Heidegger's legacy in contemporary contexts.¹²

¹¹ Arguably, this rapport of the Volk to its *Heimat* is "politics in the highest and most authentic sense." Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymnen "Germanien" und "Der Rhein,"* [Hölderlin's Hymns "Germania" and "The Rhine,"] GA 39, 214, quoted in Adam Epstein, "Blood and Soil: The Meaning of the Nazi Slogan Chanted by White Nationalists in Charlottesville," *Quartz*, August 13, 2017.

¹² Hans Sluga, *Heidegger's Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Pierre Bourdieu, *L'Ontologie politique de Martin Heidegger* (Paris: Editions de Minuit,

Although Wolin does not deeply engage with primary sources, he makes complex issues accessible to a broader audience, emphasizing the lasting impact of Heidegger's philosophy on today's political ideologies.

Wolin presents a researched critique of Martin Heidegger's ideological affiliations, confronting the uncomfortable truths about his support for National Socialism and his enduring influence on far-right ideologies, dismantling the myth of Heidegger as an apolitical philosopher, emphasizing the ethical responsibility intellectuals bear in shaping political discourse. The book stands as both a scholarly achievement and a stark warning against the uncritical embrace of intellectual figures. Highly recommended for academics in political philosophy, history, ethics, and German studies, as well as for students and practitioners keen on exploring the ethical responsibilities of intellectuals within political landscapes, Wolin's work offers invaluable lessons for contemporary discussions on the role of philosophy in societal and political contexts. Anyone intrigued by Heidegger's profound philosophical ideas – or drawn to the works of his most prominent followers – should make it a priority to read Wolin's book.

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1988); Günther Anders, "On the Pseudo-Concreteness of Heidegger's Philosophy," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 8 (1948).

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