

Introduction

What Is Heideggerian Marxism?

Richard Wolin

The relatively late and then very rapid reception of Marcuse's work has allowed a historically inaccurate image of him to emerge: the older strata of his development remain unrecognizable. Marcuse's 1932 book, Hegel's Ontology, remains essentially unknown. I suppose that one would find few among Marcuse's contemporary readers who would not be completely surprised by the Introduction's concluding sentence: "Any contribution this work may make to the development and clarification of problems is indebted to the philosophical work of Martin Heidegger." I don't know what Marcuse thinks about this sentence today; we have never spoken about it. But I think that phase of his development was not simply a whim. Indeed, I believe that it is impossible to correctly understand the Marcuse of today without reference to this earlier Marcuse. Whoever fails to detect the persistence of categories from Being and Time in the concepts of Freudian drive theory out of which Marcuse [in Eros and Civilization] develops a Marxian historical construct runs the risk of serious misunderstandings.

Jürgen Habermas (1968)

Since Habermas first wrote these words some thirty-five years ago, more information concerning Marcuse's youthful Heideggerian allegiances has come to light. But confusions and misunderstandings persist. By collecting the philosopher's early, proto-Heideggerian writings in one volume, we hope to shed additional light on what remains a fascinating and underresearched chapter of twentieth-century intellectual life: an encounter between two schools of thought—philosophical Marxism and fundamental ontology—that soon proceeded in opposite directions.

In retrospect it is clear that Marcuse's political worldview was shaped by the key events of his youth: the traumas of world war and, above all, the

failure of the German Revolution of 1918–19. At the age of twenty Marcuse was elected as a Social Democratic deputy to one of the Soldier's and Worker's Councils that mushroomed throughout Germany during the climax of World War I. He resigned, he later claimed, when he noticed that former officers were being elected to the same bodies. He bid an unsentimental farewell to Social Democratic politics following the vicious murders of Spartakus Bund leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht by Freikorps troops acting at the behest of the newly installed Social Democratic government in January 1919.¹

During the early years of the Weimar Republic Marcuse underwent a type of self-imposed "inner emigration." After completing a dissertation in 1922 on the German artist novel, which was heavily influenced by the early aesthetics of Georg Lukács, he returned to his native Berlin to work in an antiquarian bookshop.² During this time, he compiled a detailed Schiller bibliography, steeped himself in the early Marx, and read two classic texts of Hegelian Marxism that would have a profound influence on his future philosophical development: Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* and Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*, both of which had appeared in 1923.

Later in the decade there occurred a publication "event" that lured Marcuse back to the university: the 1927 appearance of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. At the time Germany's philosophy seminars were still dominated by staid and familiar prewar approaches: neo-Kantianism, neo-Hegelianism, and positivism. For the younger generation, however, the horrors of World War I represented a point of no return: the worldviews and perspectives that had predominated prior to 1914 seemed entirely delegitimated. As Marcuse noted time and again, Heidegger's thought seemed to offer something that the conventional academic "school philosophies" lacked: a "philosophy of the *concrete*." Reflecting some fifty years later on the excitement generated by the publication of *Being and Time*, Marcuse observed "To me and my friends, Heidegger's work appeared as a new beginning: we experienced his book [*Being and Time*] (and his lectures, whose transcripts we obtained) as, at long last, a *concrete* philosophy: here there was talk of existence [*Existenz*], of *our* existence, of fear and care and boredom, and so forth. We also experienced an 'academic' emancipation: Heidegger's interpretation of Greek philosophy and German idealism, which offered us new insights into antiquated, fossilized texts."³

Marcuse's testimony concerning Heidegger's pedagogical prowess conforms with that of the philosopher's other prominent students during the 1920s: Hannah Arendt, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hans Jonas, and Karl Löwith.⁴ All five

affirmed that what they found unique in Heidegger's approach was his capacity to revivify antiquated philosophical texts in light of present historical needs and concerns. The leitmotif of Heidegger's courses seemed to be Augustine's *mea res agitur*: "my life is at stake"; in them, doing philosophy ceased to be an exercise in disembodied, scholarly exegesis. At issue was a momentous, hermeneutical encounter between the historical past and the contemporary being-in-the-world. By proceeding thusly, Heidegger was only being self-consistent: he was merely applying the principles of his own philosophy of *Existenz* to the subject matter of his lectures and seminars. Two of the central categories of *Being and Time*'s "existential analytic" were "temporality" and "historicity." Both notions addressed the way that we situate ourselves in time and history. In Heidegger's view, one of the hallmarks of "authentic" being-in-the-world was a capacity to *actualize* the past in light of essential future possibilities. Conversely, inauthentic Dasein (*das Man*) displayed a conformist willingness to adapt passively to circumstances—an existential lassitude that bore marked resemblances to the inert being of "things." Heidegger's ability to fuse the discourse of "everydayness" with the demands of "rigorous science" he had imbibed during his youthful apprenticeship with the founder of the phenomenological movement, Edmund Husserl, distinguished his thinking from the *Lebensphilosophie* or "philosophy of life" that flourished among popular writers (e.g., Oswald Spengler and Ludwig Klages) at the time. Thus, in view of the conservative approaches to scholarship that predominated among the German mandarin professorate during the 1920s, one can readily imagine the genuine excitement Heidegger's philosophical radicalism must have generated, especially among the "lost generation" of the postwar period.⁵

In a colorful 1929 letter, Marcuse described his initial impressions of Heidegger (whom he recalled from his previous stay in Freiburg as a PhD student in the early 1920s) as follows:

Concerning Heidegger: it is hard to imagine a greater difference between the shy and obstinate *Privatdozent* who eight years ago spoke from the window of a small lecture hall and the successor to Husserl who lectures in an overflowing auditorium with at least six hundred listeners (mostly women) in brilliant lectures with unshakeable certainty, talking with that pleasant tremor in his voice which so excites the women, dressed in a sports outfit that almost looks like a chauffeur's uniform, darkly tanned, with the pathos of a teacher who feels himself completely to be an educator, a prophet and pathfinder and whom one indeed believes to be so. The ethical tendencies found in

Being and Time—which aim at philosophy becoming practical—really seem to achieve a breakthrough in Heidegger himself, although, to be sure, in a way that is somewhat alienating. He is all in all too rhetorical, too preachy, too primitive. . . . In the large lecture on German idealism and the philosophical problems of the present he has so far treated the dominant tendencies of contemporary philosophy as anthropological tendencies and metaphysics.⁶

Part of Marcuse's attraction to Heidegger's brand of *Existenzphilosophie* was spurred by the so-called "crisis of Marxism." For Marcuse's generation hopes for a radical regeneration of the existing political order—one which seemed responsible for so much pointless social suffering and injustice—were rudely dashed with the collapse of the short-lived Council Republics (*Räterepublik*) in Bavaria and Hungary following World War I. In his eyes, by brutally crushing the German Revolution, social democracy had merely compounded its sins of August 1914, when, by voting for war credits, it had forsaken the ideals of international socialism in favor of jingoistic militarism. Moreover, it is safe to assume that the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 harbored few attractions for him. Marcuse undoubtedly accepted Rosa Luxemburg's trenchant critique of the authoritarian implications of Lenin's vanguardism.⁷ In fact, most European socialists viewed Lenin's voluntarism as inappropriate for Western and Central Europe, where a more advanced and experienced proletariat existed.

Yet, concomitant with the *political* crisis of Marxism, there existed an *epistemological* crisis; in Marcuse's view, the two were necessarily linked. For under the tutelage of Engels and Karl Kautsky, the Second International had espoused a resolutely antiphilosophical, mechanistic interpretation of Marxism. This approach was predicated on an unreflective scientism (see Engels's *The Dialectics of Nature*) as well as an antiquated theory of capitalism's automatic collapse.⁸ Correspondingly, its leading theoreticians displayed a willful indifference to the "subjective" factor of working-class consciousness. Conversely, it was a willingness to address such questions directly and unapologetically that made Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* seem so refreshing—it stood as a beacon of illumination in the midst of a bleak intellectual and political landscape.

Thus, Marcuse believed that Heidegger's *Being and Time* represented a potentially valuable ally in the struggle against the reified social continuum of advanced industrial society. He conjectured that Heidegger's philosophy of existence possessed the conceptual means required to counteract an inverted social world in which, according to Marx, "social relations between men assume . . . *the fantastic form of a relation between things.*"⁹ In part, Marcuse

read Heidegger's philosophy as an ontologically veiled *critique of reification*: an indictment of the way in which oppressive social circumstances militate against the possibility human self-realization. It seemed that, like the critical Marxists Lukács and Korsch, Heidegger strove to surmount the fetishization of appearances that characterized the shadow-world of bourgeois immediacy. Like Lukács and Korsch, in *Being and Time* Heidegger strove concertedly to break with the deterministic worldview of bourgeois science, in which human being or Dasein was degraded to the status of a "thing among things." After all, this was the main point behind Heidegger's critique of *Vorhandenheit* or being present-at-hand as a mode of inauthenticity.¹⁰ In Marcuse's view, the critique of "everydayness" in *Being and Time*, division I, in which Heidegger delivers a powerful indictment of inauthentic being-in-the-world via recourse to concepts such as "falling," "idle talk," "publicness," and "the they," represents a welcome ontological complement to the discussions of reification in *Capital* and *History and Class Consciousness*. As Marcuse formulates this insight in "On Concrete Philosophy":

The world in which this Dasein lives is also evolving to an ever greater degree into "business" [*Betrieb*]. The things encountered in it are viewed from the outset as "goods," as things that one must use, but not in the sense of using them to meet the needs of Dasein. Instead, they are used to occupy or to fill an otherwise aimless existence, until they actually do become "necessities." In this way more and more existences are consumed simply in order to keep the "business" operational. The form of existence of all classes had to hollow itself out in such a way that it has become necessary to place existence itself on a new foundation.¹¹

By proceeding positivistically, contemporary social science fetishized the standpoint of the "object" or "things." Methodologically speaking, it treated "persons" like "things"—as objects of administrative manipulation and control. The breakthrough achieved by Heidegger's philosophy of existence was that, proceeding from the standpoint of Dasein, it placed human reality rather than "objectivity" or "thinghood" at the center of its phenomenological perspective. It was this practice that provided it with the conceptual leverage to overcome the reifying orientation of traditional science.¹² As Marcuse explains:

The ontological historicity of Dasein must . . . assume decisive significance for the methodology of the "social sciences." Social arrangements, economic orders, and political formations together constitute the happening of Dasein and must be viewed from the perspective of this existence [*Existenz*]. If they

are investigated from the outset as “things,” with an eye toward their structure, their relationships, and the laws of their development, the observations (most likely undertaken with the model of the natural sciences as their mistaken ideal) that result will be such that the meaning of these constructs cannot even appear. (“On Concrete Philosophy,” 39)

In the “Theses on Feuerbach” (1845) Marx had praised Hegel for having developed the “active side” of the dialectic, a dimension unknown both to the materialism of the high Enlightenment as well as nineteenth-century positivism. “The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of *contemplation*, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence it happened that the active side, in contradistinction to materialism, was developed by idealism (but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such).”¹³ That Heidegger, whose existential ontology seemed to be motivated by an analogous antiscientific animus, could be enlisted as fellow traveler in the Hegelian Marxist cause was the wager that Marcuse laid in 1928 when, as a twenty-nine-year-old, he followed Heidegger to Freiburg. At the time, Marcuse optimistically described the potential of Heidegger’s 1927 masterwork as follows: “*Being and Time* . . . seems to represent a *turning point in the history of philosophy*: the point at which bourgeois philosophy unmakes itself from the inside and clears the way for a new and ‘concrete’ science.”¹⁴

Marcuse was also favorably impressed by the Freiburg sage’s efforts to break with the paradigm of German idealism. The “transcendence of German idealism”: here was a project that seemed to unite Heidegger’s existentialism and Marxism in a common cause. In keeping with the spirit of the age, thinkers in the second half of the nineteenth century transformed neo-Kantianism into an epistemological vindication of philosophy of science or positivism.¹⁵ The noumenal dimension of Kant’s ethics—for example, the regulative idea of humanity as a “kingdom of ends”—had been banished as an atavistic, metaphysical excrescence. From the standpoint of a young philosopher in the 1920s, it seemed impossible to redeem Kant as a genuine critic of the historical present. A similar fate of terminal irrelevance had apparently befallen Hegel’s system. For it seemed that, with the exception of Dilthey’s work, Hegel scholarship had degenerated into a type of neoscholasticism—an incessant, abstract clarification of the Master’s impressive conceptual edifice as propounded in the *Science*

of *Logic* and other works.¹⁶ Since a critical thematization of “lived experience” played such a prominent role in Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, at the time Marcuse surmised that it might provide the philosophical stimulus necessary to revivify an orthodox Marxist discourse that had lapsed into advanced senescence.

Marxism tried to diagnose the “objective,” economic preconditions of capitalism’s collapse, but it seemed to neglect the “subjective” side of the equation, working-class consciousness. Conversely, whereas Heidegger’s philosophy excelled at describing the phenomenological structure of being-in-the-world, its weakness lay in its incapacity to address those aspects of the contemporary crisis that were *social* and *historical* as opposed to *timeless* and *ontological*. A careful perusal of Marcuse’s writings from 1928–32 shows that his major reservation about Heidegger’s thought concerned its capacity to descend from the rarefied heights of fundamental ontology in order to address matters of contemporary social and historical relevance. In other words: did the *Existenzialien* or basic concepts of *Being and Time* facilitate the tasks of concrete social analysis or were they, conversely, an ontological subterfuge?

In the “Theses on Feuerbach” Marx famously observed: “The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question” (144). In a parallel vein, *Being and Time*’s existential analytic commenced with Dasein immersed in a series of practical involvements: everydayness, tools, concern, moods, being-with-others and, lastly, historicity. At the time Marcuse imagined, far from implausibly, that the two methodological approaches, both of which sought to transcend the ethereal claims of German idealism in a worldly and practical direction, could be viewed as mutual complements. In his 1929 essay, “On Concrete Philosophy,” Marcuse makes it quite clear why he believed *Existenzphilosophie* was uniquely relevant to the practical crises confronting humanity:

If the meaning of philosophizing is the making visible of truth, and if this truth has a fundamentally existential character, then not only is philosophizing a mode of human existing, but philosophy itself is, according to its very meaning, existential. . . . Authentic philosophizing refuses to remain at the stage of knowledge; rather, in driving this knowledge on to truth it strives for the concrete appropriation of that truth through human Dasein. Care [*Sorge*]

for human existence and its truth makes philosophy a “practical science” in the deepest sense, and it also leads philosophy—and this is the crucial point—into the concrete distress [*Bedrängnis*] of human existence. (36)

In Marcuse’s eyes, Heidegger’s orientational breakthrough derived from the fact that in his thought, “philosophy is once again seen from the standpoint of concrete human existence and is interrogated with concrete human existence as its end” (37).

Part of Marcuse’s attraction to Heidegger stemmed from his frustrations with the limitations of bourgeois “inwardness” (*Innerlichkeit*)—so pronounced in the tradition of German idealism—and his corresponding sympathies for the concepts of “action” and “life” that were so current during the 1920s. He therefore harbored a certain admiration for the “activist” components of existential ontology, in which “decisiveness” or “resolve” (*Entschlossenheit*) was one of the hallmarks of authenticity.

Similarly, in the 1930 habilitation study (or second dissertation) that Marcuse wrote under Heidegger’s supervision, published two years later as *Hegel’s Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, the concept of “life” plays a key role. “Life” refers to the dimension of practical-experiential immediacy that, as a rule, is shunned by the contemplative and intellectualized orientation of bourgeois thought.¹⁷ As Marcuse observes: “The ‘we-like’ process of Life, the confrontation through which reciprocal ‘recognition’ is actualized, is thus characterized by an ‘act’ [*Tun*]. Life fulfills its ontological meaning as well as its universal substantiality, that is, the bringing-to-truth and letting-be of all beings, only through the accomplishment of an *act*, through the concrete actual confrontation with itself and the world.”¹⁸ Undoubtedly, Marcuse felt that an infusion of “actionist” sentiment might awaken the proletariat from its narcoleptic torpor. Hence, in the passages from these early texts in which Marxian and existentialist notions are most intimately fused, Marcuse treats the proletariat both as the answer to the inequities of capitalism as well as the solution to the (Heideggerian) problem of “authenticity”:

Knowledge of one’s own historicity and consciously historical existence becomes possible at the moment when existence breaks through reification. . . . Reified objectivities are things that historically come to be in that they have been objects of provisioning by a Dasein living among them. . . . Bourgeois philosophy must, according to its rootedness in being in bourgeois society, insist on the Dasein—-independent objectivity of the environment—or alternatively, in those cases where it did maintain that the world is constituted

in Dasein, it needed to contain this constitution within the immanence of consciousness. . . . [But] there is a Dasein whose thrownness consists precisely in the overcoming of its thrownness. *The historical act is only possible today as the act of the proletariat because it is the only Dasein within whose existence the act is necessarily given.*¹⁹ (“Contributions,” 32; emphasis added)

But undoubtedly the Heideggerian concept that most appealed to Marcuse during the late 1920s was “historicity.” As Marcuse observes in “Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism”: “It is precisely knowledge of historicity that leads to the most momentous decision: the decision either to struggle for the recognized necessity, even against Dasein’s own inherited existence” (23). In division 2 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger abruptly shifted from adopting the standpoint of a highly individualized, Kierkegaardian Dasein, reminiscent of *Fear and Trembling’s* Knight of Faith, to adopting the perspective of a *historical collectivity*. Under Dilthey’s influence, the categorical framework of division 1 was drastically altered through the employment of concepts such as “destiny,” “community,” “generation,” and “the historical life of a people” (*Volk*).²⁰ In Marcuse’s view it seemed clear that “historicity” represented the essential link between existentialism and historical materialism.

In *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, Dilthey had stressed the importance of *Erlebnis*—“lived experience”—as a response to the “crisis of historicism”: the nineteenth-century understanding of history qua positive science. For if in the guise of historicism history writing strove to capture the past “the way it really was” (Ranke), it remained incapable of providing orientation or directives for the historical present. According to Dilthey, “historicity” meant not only that all life was historically determined, but that it was in essence “meaningfully” structured in a way that facilitated hermeneutic understanding across generations. Thus, history qua “historicity” represented a reservoir of interpretive meaning that transcended the soulless, positivist accumulation of data by traditional history writing (*Historie*).

But it was left to Heidegger in *Being and Time* to take the final step in the development of the concept. Whereas Dilthey stressed the fact that life, qua historicity, was *in* history, Heidegger emphasized that *existence was itself historical*: the past yielded traditions on which peoples and individuals could *act* in view of future possibilities. As such “futurity” (*Zukunftigkeit*) became historicity’s distinguishing feature. In this way, Heidegger imparted an *activist* component to historicity—historicity as a mode of authentic collective becoming—that

remained occluded in Dilthey's formulations. As Heidegger remarks, "history as *Geschichte* signifies a happening [*Geschehen*] that we ourselves are, where we are there present. . . . We are history, that is, our own past. Our future lives out of its past."²¹ Thus, in Heidegger's optic, historicity ceased to be a category of contemplative, scholarly understanding. Instead, it became a virtual call to arms, a summons to authentic ontological engagement.

At the same time it is clear that Marcuse never identified with *Existenzphilosophie* uncritically or naively. In the essays that follow, time and again, he openly ponders whether Heidegger's ontological standpoint can be reconciled with the genuinely historical concerns of critical Marxism. As he demonstratively opines in "Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism": "We therefore demand . . . that the phenomenology of human Dasein initiated by Heidegger forge onward, coming to completion in a phenomenology of concrete Dasein and the concrete historical action demanded by history in each historical situation" (20). In the back of his mind there seemed constantly to lurk a troubling question: were Heidegger's efforts to produce a "philosophy of the concrete" genuine or did they merely culminate in an alluring yet deceptive "pseudo-concreteness"? For if the state of "alienation" (or "inauthentic Dasein") described by existential ontology were perceived as a timeless and unalterable *condition humaine*, there would be no real incentive to practically redress it. Instead, it would represent an inevitable destiny we would be powerless to emend. As Marcuse observes:

Now in order to even be able to approach Dasein, in order to be able to take hold of it in its existence, concrete philosophy must *become historical*, it must insert itself into the concrete historical situation. The becoming historical of philosophy means, firstly, that concrete philosophy has to investigate contemporaneous Dasein in its historical situation, with an eye toward which possibilities for the appropriation of truths are available. . . .

Concrete philosophy can thus only approach existence if it seeks out Dasein in the sphere in which its existence is based: as it *acts* in its world in accordance with its historical situation. ("On Concrete Philosophy," 44, 47)

Marcuse's early essays make it unmistakably clear that *capitalism*—imperialism, finance capital, monopolies, cartels, and so forth—was the social formation that determined the nature of contemporary politics and society. In his view, in order to become "concrete," philosophy at some point would need to address these problems and themes. After a prolonged philosophical appren-