

Review of

Richard Polt, *Time and Trauma: Thinking Through Heidegger in the Thirties*, Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019, 283pp., \$135.00 (hbk), 978-1-78661-049-2; \$44.95 (pbk), 978-1-78661-050-8

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In the Anglophone world, few if any know the Heidegger of the 1930s better than Richard Polt. His co-translation of three Heidegger courses from that period, together with his major monograph on Heidegger's 1936-38 *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, have set a high bar for scholarship on the middle Heidegger and have made an indispensable contribution to it.¹

With *Time and Trauma* Polt gathers work he has done over the last ten years and brings it to bear on what he calls “the dark new philosophical landscape” of Heidegger in the 1930s. The result is four strongly argued chapters devoted to three distinct topics: philosophy, politics, and trauma. That is,

- *philosophy*: Heidegger's shift of emphasis and direction in the 1930s (chapter 1);
- *politics*: his disastrous involvement with Nazism, critically evaluated from an Arendtian perspective (chapters 2 and 3);
- *trauma*: outlines of a “traumatic ontology,” a *heideggerisant* reading of existence that takes seriously the experiences of emergency, crisis, and trauma (chapter 4 and Appendix).

As Polt reads him, soon after publishing *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger found himself dissatisfied with how he had treated (or failed to treat) three topics: time, crisis, and sociality. Therefore, in the 1930s he shifted direction and drilled down on

1. “inceptions of time,” i.e., certain intense moments when human temporality itself arises, along with a conception of history focused on such inceptions;
2. these inceptions as “moments of crisis or emergency,” along with the claim that people today *lack* a sense of crisis;
3. the issue of how a community—a “we”—is constituted, and in particular the German nation.

In short, questions of *kairos*, *krisis*, and *polis*:

1. *καῖρος*: intense moments when a new historical ἀρχή of existence becomes possible (cf. *kairologische Momente*, GA 63: 101.12).
2. *κρίσις*: moments of crisis and decision, usually suppressed or ignored (cf. *Sorglosigkeit*: GA 63: 103.12).
3. *πόλις*: the social and political, which were new topics in Heidegger's repertoire.

¹ His previous monograph on the period is *The Emergency of Being: On Heidegger's "Contributions to Philosophy"* (2006). With Gregory Fried he has edited and translated Heidegger's courses *Being and Truth* (from 1933-34), *Nature, History, State* (from 1933-34), and *Introduction to Metaphysics* (from 1935). He is the author of *Heidegger: An Introduction* (1999) and editor, with Gregory Fried, of the series “New Heidegger Research” with Rowman & Littlefield International. (His secret pleasure is collecting typewriters. See his fascinating *The Typewriter Revolution: A Typist's Companion for the 21st Century*, 2015).

A text as rich and well-informed as this one resists easy summaries and, as I fully realize, requires a much more careful and complex discussion than a short review can provide. Polt once defined philosophy as “asking questions beyond the point where questioning usually stops.”² This volume lives up to that ideal and then takes it a step further. Like Heidegger himself, Polt intentionally raises more questions than he answers—which makes the book an invitation to question yet further and to think outside the parameters of received Heideggerian wisdom, including the impressive and laudable wisdom of this volume.

Some readers will feel strongly drawn to the second and third chapters, which provide (1) a devastating critique of Heidegger’s politics under Nazism, including brilliant summaries of six of his courses during the 1930s as well as an astute reading of his “Black Notebooks,” and (2) a constructive Arendtian reading of the political, both in light of and against Heidegger. In what follows, however, I will focus on the more explicitly *philosophical* readings which are most clearly frontloaded in chapter one. *Time and Trauma* is really three books gracefully fused into one: Heidegger’s philosophical shift in the 1930s; his catastrophic political adventures; and the sketch of an existential phenomenology of crisis (“traumatic ontology”). Unfortunately in a brief review like this, I will have to limit myself to a few remarks on only the first of those topics, and that under three headings.

1. *Καῖρός*: The time of *Ereignis*.

Polt takes the proper meaning of “being” (*Sein*) to be “the clearing” (*Lichtung*), the field of finite intelligibility—*λόγος* in its primary sense—that human being is. He sees Heidegger in the 1930s shifting from the *understanding* of the clearing (*Seinsverständnis*) to the *happening* of the clearing (*Seinsgeschehnis*). Polt identifies this happening as “*das Ereignis*,” an event that lies entirely in the future and hence has never yet been realized. And (1) since *Ereignis* is the very happening of the clearing and (2) since the clearing is what defines human being as *Dasein*, it follows that no human being has ever yet been *Dasein*. What’s more, until the ancient Greeks began asking the question of being, no one really existed as human; and nowadays “only those human beings who live in the legacy of that [Greek] inception ‘exist’” in Heidegger’s sense of the term.

The suggestion that human beings did not truly “exist” before Greek philosophy—that they were not being-there [*Dasein*] and did not have an understanding of being that transcends beings—is a bizarre surprise for any reader of *Being and Time*. (p. 30; cf. p. 58)

Bizarre indeed. On this reading, Heidegger in the 1930s held that human beings today are living in a twilight zone of no-longer-*Dasein* / not-yet-*Dasein*, floating between a lost Golden Age when the Greeks *began* existing as *Dasein* and a future Golden Age when the *Ereignis*-event might let us once again become *Dasein*. But since *Dasein* is the “understanding of being that transcends beings” (cf. GA 9: 131), then contrary to everything Heidegger asserted before 1930, no one today understands the whatness and howness of things. (This, of course, would include the very Heidegger who makes that claim.)

But maybe things are not that stark. Along with Hölderlin, Heidegger holds that there are “peaks of time” (*Gipfel der Zeit*, GA 39: 52.22) that can be intimated by certain poets and thinkers. These are “inceptions, breakthroughs, or events of appropriation when a world is founded. . . they are so transformative that they inaugurate new domains where entities can be discovered” (p. 30-31)

Such *καῖρός*-like moments allow for a new “inception of time” and hence a new *ἀρχή* (*Anfang*) for existence and being. But they happen only rarely (GA 69: 116.17) and apparently only for an elite few: poets like Hölderlin, thinkers like Heidegger, and political figures like Hitler. For them, the clearing does indeed happen, if only “at times” (GA 70: 15.21). At such intense kairological moments, it seems those elite few do become *Dasein* while the rest of us remain mere humans who are invited to follow their lead.

Temporality, in other words, gets transformed in the 1930s. It is no longer, as in *Being and Time*, “a fixed structure” that any person might realize at occasional moments of authentic resolve. Rather,

² Richard Polt, “The *Ereignis* Interview,” at <http://webcom/paf/RichardPoltInterview.html>.

Heidegger now presents it as gushing forth at great historical moments that establish a way of existing for a people or an age. He has made the transition from the understanding of [the clearing] to the happening of [the clearing] (p. 36).

We may defer for another time the question of whether there are contradictions among the claims (1) that the first inception of *Dasein* took place among the Greeks, (2) that *no* human beings have ever yet achieved the status of *Dasein*, and (3) that there are even now “peaks of time” when *Dasein* and the clearing happen.

2. Κρίσις: the emergency of the lack of emergency.

One of Richard Polt’s major contributions to scholarship on the middle Heidegger is the interpretation of Heidegger’s technical term *Not* as “emergency.”

There is no perfect English equivalent to the German word *Not*, but in many cases it could be translated as “emergency.” For example, a *Notausgang* is an emergency exit, an exit that is to be used in cases of urgent need. In general, then, *Not* is a condition of emergency that arises at a particular juncture and creates a pressing need of distress” (p. 38f.)

Heidegger reads *Not* in three nuanced ways, namely as (1) a condition that is *simply given* with the sheer fact of being human, . . . a condition that (2) we can *personally experience* as a possible moment of decision, . . . but a condition that (3) unfortunately is *mostly not* experienced today or, if experienced, is avoided, ignored, or suppressed. That is, Heidegger’s sense of *Not* contains three distinct senses of the Greek word κρίσις:

1. the *critical fact that defines us as human*, viz., that we are inevitably needed if there is to be a clearing at all;
2. the *moment of possible decision* in which we might choose to personally assume that neededness as our own;
3. the *current crisis* of the widespread avoiding/ignoring/suppressing of both the critical fact and the moment of possible decision.

The first sense of κρίσις: As Polt carefully points out (p. 39f.), this critical fact that inevitably defines us as human—the fact that we are needed (*gebraucht*) for there to be a clearing at all—is our “innermost and most far-reaching neededness” (*innersten und weitesten Not*, GA 39: 113.12) and in fact the “highest gift” (*höchste Schenkung*, GA 45: 152.3-4) given to human being. This is neededness in its most fundamental sense (*die große Not des Daseins*, GA 94: 149.12; cf. 148:24). It is that by which human being is determined as *Dasein*.³ In *Being and Time* this would be called our “existential essence,” our most basic way of existing.

The second sense of κρίσις: To personally experience that neededness is to feel our exposure to “excess,” to our own mortal nothingness that both escapes and makes possible our ability to make sense of things (p. 38). This is a moment of inner terror at experiencing the fact of “the mystery. . . that gives *Dasein* its greatness” (GA 29/30: 244.32-33). In such a moment of crisis we are confronted with a decision (*gestellt. . . in eine Entscheidung*, GA 39: 146.31): either to embrace that fundamental neededness or to flee it.

The third sense of κρίσις: For Heidegger, the most obvious crisis of today is the absence of any awareness of κρίσις-1 (our fundamental neededness) and any experience of κρίσις-2 (moments of possible decision *for* our mortal neededness). This double absence is what Polt calls “the emergency of a lack of emergency.” Whereas one can find similar sentiments in *Being and Time* (cf. its descriptions of fallenness and *das Man*), in the 1930s Heidegger brings it all to bear on social (and ultimately political) questions: how to awaken German society to κρίσις-1, then lead it to κρίσις-2, and thereby possibly help found an authentic “we” of the German *Volk*.

³ “Der Mensch entspringt selbst erst aus dieser Not, die wesentlicher ist als er selbst, der nur und erst von ihr bestimmt wird” (GA 45: 153.19-21).

3. Πόλις: Forming an authentic German people

In *Being and Time* Heidegger is notoriously skimpy on positive discussions of the social dimensions of *Dasein*. He famously begins the body of text with the resounding statement that “*We ourselves* are the entities to be investigated” but then privately scribbled in the margins “In each case [that means] ‘I’” (SZ 41.29; GA 2: 56, note a). In turn, the mere twelve lines that he devoted to a community choosing its future (SZ § 74, 384.29ff) are quite thin and say nothing about how such a community might become authentic.

But in the 1930s that all changed.

After his craven (and failed) attempt to put his philosophy at the service of the Führer both politically as rector of Freiburg University⁴ and academically in his courses of 1933-34, Heidegger foraged around in poetry—notably Hölderlin’s hymns and Sophocles’ *Antigone*—for help on the matter. Polt’s masterful analyses of all these efforts and of the anti-Semitic sentiments Heidegger confined to his private notebooks, is brilliant and trenchant. It would take another review to cover this important part of the book. Those who are already familiar with Polt’s previous publications on the topic will find here both a helpful synthesis and a fitting rounding out of his judicious readings of this dark decade.

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Finally, as I indicated above, this marvelous book intentionally leaves open some important questions about which *doctores scinduntur*. Among them are:

1. Is *Ereignis* an entirely future event and thus not yet operative? Or given that *Ereignis* is the opening up of the clearing for sense (*das Lichten der Lichtung*, GA 12: 127.14-15), mustn’t it be *already* operative (GA 12: 247.2-4) if there are in fact human beings who do make sense of things—and who even argue that *Ereignis* is not yet operative?
2. And should *Ereignis* be called an “event” at all?—given that Heidegger explicitly and repeatedly denied that it was (GA 11: 45.19-20; GA 12: 247.10; GA 14: 25.33-26.2; GA 70: 17.19; GA 98: 161.8 and 341.25).
3. Has no one ever yet been *Dasein*? Or is it rather that we both *are* and are not adequately, *Dasein* (“Wir *sind* ja und sind doch nicht,” GA 73.1: 278.11)?—the way Aristotle might say we are indeed rational but often are “dislocated” (cf. ἄτοπον, 1178a3), i.e., not adequately rational.
4. Did Heidegger surrender the distinction of existentiell and existential in the 1930s (cf. p. 46)? If so, which of the two did he give up?
5. Is *Dasein*’s existential structure a “fixed” essence and a “fixed” structure” (pp. 27, 36)? Or is it the very *becoming* (SZ 199.15) that *Dasein* cannot not be?
6. Would *Anfang* be better read *not* as “inception” (ἄφορμή), a chronological starting point *ante quod non*—e.g., ancient Greece, before which there was not *Dasein*—but instead as a non-chronological ἀρχή, an existential-ontological source (GA 9: 247.11-14) that orders and sustains *Dasein* in its temporal-historical way of being? Thus it would be the case that *Dasein*, like the clearing, “does not begin. . . it originates” (GA 71: 147.14-16).
7. And regarding the social-political: Heidegger countered Marx’s thesis (that philosophers have only interpreted the world whereas the point is to change it) by contesting the meaning of *Welt* (GA 16: 703.15-25). Interesting point. But given that Heidegger based his phenomenology on the particular, factual worlds we live in, when we know all that Heidegger knew about *Welt*, how does that affect the factual economic, social, and political worlds we live in today?

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⁴ . . . including his radio address of November 10, 1933, calling the German people as a whole to choose “their own *Dasein*” in a moment of ersatz authenticity—by voting to leave the League of Nations (GA 16: 188f.)