

Bernhard Radloff (2007): Heidegger and the Question of National Socialism: Disclosure and Gestalt. (New Studies in Phenomenology and Hermeneutics). Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press. ISBN: 9780802093158; pp. 528, USD 75.

The Gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnheim once wrote to the American art historian Dore Ashton, that Heidegger “makes my adrenaline flow” (Kleinman & Duzer, 1997, p. 129). Like many of his generation, Arnheim had felt the influence of Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* upon its appearance in 1929. Arnheim seems to have been impressed particularly by Heidegger’s *Holzwege*, which were published in 1950, and influenced the former’s memorable essay on “The Robin and the Saint” (Arnheim, 1966). Common phenomenological commitments between Gestalt theory and existentialism would seem to suggest there is some connection but it is precisely the existential element of Heidegger’s ‘improvements’ on Husserl – the emphasis on historicity and radical embodiment of consciousness – that has made them often part ways. What, if anything, does the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger have to do with Gestalt psychology?

Because ‘gestalt’ was a word in common parlance during Heidegger’s maturity and especially those crucial months at the beginning of the National Socialist period when he briefly accepted Nazism (as seen in his infamous Rector’s address of 1933), Heidegger is not only of interest to the gestalt community but to anyone trying to understand the valence of the philosopher’s use of words like *Gestalt* and *Ganzes*. Many have been happy to dismiss Heidegger as a obfuscating pedant and at worst a fascist, but this does nothing to capture the complexity of his thought and its echoes among German audiences in the nineteen thirties.

Bernhard Radloff takes his departure from cultural studies like those of Mitchell Ash (1995) and Anne Harrington (1996) and their analyses of ‘gestalt’ and ‘holism’ to make his case that such terms did not have mono-vocal conservative associations. Radloff in fact argues that, quite to the contrary of those who would see an abstract retreat to the German *Volk* in Nazism, Heidegger briefly, and as he admitted mistakenly, saw the only chance for real political engagement. In fact, Gestalt figures so prominently because in Heidegger’s understanding it is a model of real, historical, embodied organization. It is the opposite of an abstract, unattainable idea. Because Nazism was a real engaged political process he hoped that Germans could move beyond utopias. He realized later that another utopia was promised.

Radloff’s *Martin Heidegger and the Problem of National Socialism* is nothing less than a dense, well-argued, and complete explanation of Heidegger’s philosophical views and how they informed his political ideas. It is both philosophical exegesis and cultural history, which explains its rare completeness. Indeed, it is a long, tightly-argued book. I am convinced by Radloff’s analysis that Heidegger and

his Rector's addresses should be understood in a broader conservative light and that references to 'Volk' and the like are not direct Nazi signifiers. If Heidegger cannot be dismissed from his Rector's address alone, let it be clear that the existentialist philosopher was anti-cosmopolitan. His behavior qualified him more for alignment to the conservative right than a specifically 'Nazi' identity. He was not, however, racist or nationalist.

Without dwelling further on the direct question of whether Heidegger's politics must presume antidemocratic thought, I want in this review to concentrate on issues of interest to a readership knowledgeable of Gestalt theory and the proper historicization of its ideas. First, it is extremely interesting to read that in 1930 Heidegger recommended Adhemar Gelb or Kurt Lewin to the chair in philosophy at the Friedrich-Wilhelms Universität at Breslau in Schlesia. Heidegger collaborated with Gelb in the preparation of the posthumous edition of Max Scheler's philosophy in the Winter of 1928/9 and wrote of a later meeting in May 1932: "I value him greatly and believe he will one day write the new psychology, which is growing out of the totally changed problematic of the new biology" (p. 23).

Heidegger had a good familiarity with Gestalt psychology but perhaps more importantly saw his enterprise as not that different from Husserl's in the *Logische Untersuchungen*, where he outlined the important ontology of part and whole, which was presumed by, and amplified in, Gestalt thinking. If the ontology of *Dasein*, being-in-the-world, is a problem of the relation of part to whole, it is ontological. Heidegger famously 'overcame' the metaphysics of presence, but he did this through a rich ontology. The person – environment interaction is inherently communal, including both the idea and its reception. It is inherently temporal, an event (not an origin) and a relational whole (not a substance).

This dynamization of lived experience is precisely the element of radical historicity Heidegger added to philosophy. His return to Greek philosophy to plumb the depths of the ontology he was after led him to see *Gestalt* precisely as a kind of delimitation. Concrete objects or events that are delimited both unconceal – revealing a truth – but also cause withdrawal or obfuscation. This is the nature of limits in general, both revelatory but in revealing also supplanting what was originally sought. If *Gestalt* is inherently concrete and delimited, there are vast consequences for politics. Rockmore states that Heidegger supported Nazism because his concept of being demanded "some type of antidemocratic, totalitarian politics" (p. 115). What we have seen, however, is that politics for Heidegger is inherently communal, a concrete meeting of active events in a new reality.

At the end of Radloff's book, one appreciates what Heidegger had to say and how it might be comparable to other dynamized approaches to the person-environment

relation – especially in the thought of Kurt Lewin who was Heidegger’s almost exact contemporary. But we ultimately run up against a difference in intellectual culture. Unlike Heidegger, the Gestaltists were committed to the scientific worldview. Although they respected the phenomenological and ultimately historicized nature of lived experience, their thinking turned to experimentation and not Greek philology and etymology. Nevertheless, Heidegger and thinkers like Lewin lived in a shared intellectual climate and had many ideas in common, least of all regarding the ontology of the *Gestalt*.

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