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FROM  
BEING

TO  
Heidegger's *Polemos*

POLITICS

GREGORY FRIED

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## Heidegger's *Polemos*



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# Heidegger's *Polemos*

From Being to Politics

Gregory Fried

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*For my parents  
Charles Fried and Anne Summerscale Fried*



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## Acknowledgments

At the outset of his 1934–35 lecture course on Friedrich Hölderlin’s poem “Germania,” Martin Heidegger said, “Wer vieles beginnt, kommt oft nie zum Anfang” (*GA 39*, 3); loosely translated: “Whoever starts many things often never gets to the beginning.” This dictum might well serve as a warning, if not as an epitaph, for anyone so incautious as to embark upon a study of the work of Martin Heidegger.

And so there are many to whom I owe debts of gratitude for helping me bring this long beginning with Heidegger to a close. This book grew out of a dissertation project at the University of Chicago, and I am grateful to the Committee on Social Thought, which provided the intellectual home within which my work could take place. A National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship in the Core Curriculum at Boston University has given me the opportunity to finish the book. I must thank Leszek Kolakowski, the chair of my dissertation committee, whose questions always went to the heart of the matter and ensured that I kept my sights on what is really important. Robert Pippin and David Tracy, the two other members of my committee, provided essential critique, commentary, and support for my work. Many other

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## Note on Translation

Contributing to the problem of making a start with Heidegger, as many have experienced, is the difficulty and idiosyncrasy of his language. In this study, I have endeavored wherever possible to provide my own translations of his writings. I have often sought assistance from existing translations, but the responsibility for the outcome is my own. This work of translation is necessary both as a matter of scholarship and as a way of providing the reader with terminology as consistent as possible. Furthermore, there is as yet no English translation for many of Heidegger's lecture courses and manuscripts published over the last decade or so. Nevertheless, I am particularly indebted to the Macquarrie and Robinson translation of *Being and Time*, despite the frequently substantial departures of my own. In the case of Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics*, I have employed the translation by Richard Polt and myself, with modifications to suit the purposes of this study. In other specific instances, I shall indicate in a note where I have relied on another translator's rendering. For authors besides Heidegger, I have adopted the translations of others, amending them at times. The reader should assume that all emphasis is original to quotations unless otherwise specified.



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## Abbreviations of Frequently Cited Works

Following is a list of abbreviations for the texts frequently cited, arranged by author. Most of the volumes of the *Gesamtausgabe* of Heidegger's collected works are editions of his lecture courses; the abbreviation "WS" indicates a winter semester course and "SS" indicates a summer semester course. Occasional departures from the regular academic calendar are duly noted. In the case of essays found in well-known collections, I have given the title of the title volume.

### MARTIN HEIDEGGER

BH	"Brief über den Humanismus," in <i>Wegmarken</i>
BP	<i>Beiträge zur Philosophie, Gesamtausgabe</i> , vol. 65
BZ	<i>Der Begriff der Zeit</i>
DB	"Drei Briefe Martin Heideggers an Karl Löwith"
EHD	<i>Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung</i>
EM	<i>Einführung in die Metaphysik</i>
G	<i>Gelassenheit</i>

- GA            *Gesamtausgabe*
- GA 13        vol. 13, *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*
- GA 15        vol. 15, *Seminare*
- GA 24        vol. 24, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (SS 1927)
- GA 26        vol. 26, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik im Ausgang von Leibniz* (SS 1928)
- GA 29/30     vol. 29/30, *Die Begriffe der Metaphysik: Welt—Endlichkeit—Einsamkeit* (WS 1929–30)
- GA 33        vol. 33, *Aristoteles: Metaphysik Theta* (SS 1931)
- GA 34        vol. 34, *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit: Zu Platons Höhlengleichnis und Theätet* (WS 1931–32)
- GA 38        vol. 38, *Logik als die Frage nach dem Wesen der Sprache* (SS 1934)
- GA 39        vol. 39, *Hölderlins Hymnen ‘Germanien’ und ‘Der Rhein’* (WS 1934–35)
- GA 40        vol. 40, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (SS 1935)
- GA 42        vol. 42, *Schelling: Vom Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit (1809)* (SS 1936)
- GA 43        vol. 43, *Nietzsche: Der Wille zur Macht als Kunst* (WS 1936–37)
- GA 44        vol. 44, *Nietzsches metaphysische Grundstellung im abendländischen Denken: Die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen* (SS 1937)
- GA 45        vol. 45, *Grundfragen der Philosophie: Ausgewählte ‘Probleme’ der ‘Logik’* (WS 1937–38)
- GA 47        vol. 47, *Nietzsches Lehre vom Willen zur Macht als Erkenntnis* (SS 1939)
- GA 48        vol. 48, *Nietzsche: Der europäische Nihilismus* (Second Trimester 1940)
- GA 49        vol. 49, *Schelling: Zur erneuten Auslegung seiner Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (First Trimester 1941)
- GA 50        vol. 50, *Nietzsches Metaphysik* (announced for WS 1941–42 but not delivered); *Einleitung in die Philosophie—Denken und Dichten* (WS 1944–45)
- GA 51        vol. 51, *Grundbegriffe* (SS 1941)
- GA 52        vol. 52, *Hölderlins Hymne ‘Andenken’* (WS 1941–42)
- GA 53        vol. 53, *Hölderlins Hymne ‘Der Ister’* (SS 1942)
- GA 54        vol. 54, *Parmenides* (WS 1942–43)
- GA 55        vol. 55, *Heraklit: 1. Der Anfang des abendländischen Denkens (Heraklit)* (SS 1943); *2. Logik: Heraklits Lehre vom Logos* (SS 1944)

- GA 56/57 vol. 56/57, *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie: 1. Die Idee der Philosophie und das Weltanschauungsproblem* (Emergency Wartime Semester 1919); 2. *Phänomenologie und transzendente Wertphilosophie* (SS 1919); 3. *Anhang: Über das Wesen der Universität und des akademischen Studiums* (SS 1919)
- GA 61 vol. 61, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles: Einführung in die phänomenologische Forschung* (WS 1921–22)
- HB Martin Heidegger, Elisabeth Blochmann, *Briefwechsel 1918–1969*
- Hw *Holzwege*
- ID *Identität und Differenz*
- N 1; N 2 *Nietzsche*, vols. 1 and 2
- NH *Nachlese zu Heidegger*
- PIA “Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles”
- RR *Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität; Das Rektorat 1933–34*
- SD *Zur Sache des Denkens*
- SG *Der Satz vom Grund*
- Sp “Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten”
- SZ *Sein und Zeit*
- TK *Die Technik und die Kehre*
- UK “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes,” in *Holzwege*
- VA *Vorträge und Aufsätze*
- VR “Vorwort” to Richardson
- VS *Vier Seminare*
- Wg *Wegmarken*
- WHD *Was heißt Denken?*
- WW “Vom Wesen der Wahrheit,” in *Wegmarken*
- ZS “Zur Seinsfrage,” in *Wegmarken*

**JOHN D. CAPUTO**

- DH *Demythologizing Heidegger*

**JACQUES DERRIDA**

- D “Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*
- Ends “The Ends of Man,” in *Margins of Philosophy*
- FL “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’”



HE	“Heidegger’s Ear: Philopolemology ( <i>Geschlecht 4</i> )”
IJD	“An Interview with Jacques Derrida”
LI	<i>Limited Inc</i>
OG	<i>Of Grammatology</i>
OS	<i>Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question</i>
P	<i>Positions</i>
PH	“Heidegger, the Philosophers’ Hell,” in <i>Points . . .</i>
PMW	“Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man’s War”
RLW	“Racism’s Last Word”
RU	“Reading Us,” in <i>Margins of Philosophy</i>
SM	<i>Specters of Marx</i>
SSP	“Structure, Sign, and Play,” in <i>Writing and Difference</i>
WIP	“The Work of Intellectuals and the Press” in <i>Points . . .</i>

**REINER SCHÜRMAN**

HBA *Heidegger on Being and Acting*

**LESLIE PAUL THIEL**

TM *Timely Meditations*

**GIANNI VATTIMO**

EoM *The End of Modernity*

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## Introduction: How to Read This Book

### CONFRONTING HEIDEGGER

Over a decade has now passed since the eruption of *l'affaire Heidegger* in 1987. The drama of this affair lay in the alleged discovery that Heidegger had been a committed Nazi and in the subsequent explosion of scandal in intellectual circles, and even among the wider public in Europe, especially in France. I say “alleged” because much had already been known to scholars about Heidegger’s involvement with National Socialism; however, this information simply had not been assembled and presented effectively to the general public.<sup>1</sup> But the publication of Victor Farías’s *Heidegger and Nazism* in French in 1987 precipitated the scandal, to be followed by a proliferation of articles and books examining the relation of Heidegger’s thought to his politics. This Heidegger affair risks generating, if it has not already generated, yet another academic cottage industry.

Do we really need another book on this topic, then? Has not everything worth saying already been said? One might argue that the passing of a decade offers enough distance on the matter to permit a more balanced treatment of Heidegger’s own role as well as the ensuing in-

terpretations of his political life and thought. But this study does not pretend to any such comprehensiveness. For one thing, until the Heidegger archives are opened up to free and thorough examination by independent scholars, the complete account of his political involvements, through both his writings and his actions, must be postponed. Furthermore, while the notoriety of the Heidegger affair turns in large part on the revelation of disturbing or even outrageous facts concerning his conduct (the nearly salacious obsession with the story of Heidegger's affair with Hannah Arendt being a case in point), this study will not make biography its principal concern. The subject matter will be Heidegger's thinking, and we shall turn to the man's life only when this can help illuminate his thought.

But if all the evidence is not even available, one might well ask whether the endeavor has any point at all. First of all, in response, a great deal of the Heidegger corpus has in fact been published in the past fifteen years or so. The previously unavailable lecture courses of the 1930s provide an especially important source of insight into Heidegger's political thinking. But more important, this study holds that the question of Heidegger's politics has produced so much discussion quite simply because there remains something still very much at issue for us in the "Heidegger case." At issue, and unresolved—and not just for academic specialists interested in the obscurities of one thread in the tradition of thought known as Continental philosophy, but *for us*, the human beings who reside in the era of late modernity, or, as the fashion would now have it, "post-modernity."

The continuing fascination with the Heidegger case serves as a window onto what may be designated as the problem of identity and difference. Identity and difference—not simply as the subject matter for abstract metaphysical investigations, but also as a designation for perhaps our most pressing political problem: How do "we" understand ourselves? How do we—but also how can we, how will we, and how should we understand ourselves? At issue when we examine Heidegger's politics is the enduring question of political and cultural identity and difference, of the scope of inclusion and the exigencies of exclusion, from the so-called ethnic cleansings of the former Yugoslavia and the genocide of Rwanda to the "identity politics" and the battles over multiculturalism and immigration policy raging in the United States and Europe. The continuing fascination with Heidegger's philosophy and politics points to the unresolved problem of how human beings can or will cope with the tension between an exclusive belonging to a particular group (identity) and a universalizing respect for diversity and otherness (recognition of difference). Heideg-

ger's thought has become a staging ground (one among many) for attempts to work through this question in the epoch of globalization. This goes well beyond the shock at discovering that a supposedly "great" philosopher could have been a Nazi and the subsequent need to explain (or perhaps to explain away) this disturbing fact. What was at issue for Heidegger in politics remains so for us, and, as a problem and a question, it is one of the few things that can be truly said to unite "us": the process of identification and differentiation at work in any assertion of community, of any belonging-to. This is what we face: at issue is the Being of our politics.

In this study I shall attempt to confront, through Heidegger, the Being of our politics with respect to belonging and shall do so through a confrontation with Heidegger's thinking. In this sense, I shall be doing no more than what Heidegger at his best would have asked of us: to address a thinker's work as an occasion, an avenue, to respond to what genuinely calls for thinking. In any serious engagement with the relation between Heidegger's thought and his politics, not only response is called for, but also responsibility. I do not seek to excuse Heidegger, but if I err, it will be on the side of generosity toward his thinking, not as an attempt to save Heidegger's thought from his biography, but rather to preserve his thinking for a productive confrontation.<sup>2</sup> To treat Heidegger neither as hero nor as villain, nor as a mere scholar, but rather as a thinker and a human being whose legacy we may fruitfully explore in asking questions that still demand response, will be my goal.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, I propose to confront my own interpretation of Heidegger's politics with the readings of the broad school of thought known as postmodernism. Postmodernists take much of their inspiration from Heidegger's characterization of modernity as the decisive culmination of the nihilism inherent in Western history. They tend to agree with his characterization of Western thought as subjectivism—obsession with the subjugation of an objective nature. To the extent that in the Western tradition "nature" includes human nature, postmodernists also agree that politics has been as "totalitarian" in its ambition as the sciences in the quest for a complete knowledge of Being, understood as reality, nature, or truth. Against this totalitarianism (in the larger sense) of modernity, postmodernists practice a deconstruction of the hegemonic schemes of identity, and they urge a respect for difference as that which cannot be homogenized; at the same time, horrified by Heidegger's affiliation with National Socialism, they have attempted to reconcile that allegiance, which they find reprehensible, with those aspects of his thought which they have admired. I contend that in the postmodernist readings of Heidegger's

work and politics, the problems raised by Heidegger's thinking remain timely, transcending the traditional boundaries of Left and Right.

In case the reader requires a justification for why yet another work on Heidegger's politics deserves a hearing on purely scholarly grounds, I can claim to have identified in this study a theme in Heidegger's thought that has gone largely unnoticed but that unites various periods of his work and offers us perhaps the key to understanding his politics. This compelling theme is *polemos*, a Greek word usually translated as "war" but that Heidegger transforms into a profound ontological concept through his interpretation of a single fragment from Heraclitus. *Polemos* for Heidegger, I argue, must be understood as *confrontation*; only in confrontation do we most fully become what we are: beings summoned to an ongoing interpretative struggle with the meaning of the world—and with the meaning of Being itself. In this study, I trace the development of Heidegger's *polemos*, tying it in with the major currents of his thought: his ontology and the attendant analysis of *Dasein*, his account of the history of Being, his vision of nihilism and the crisis of the West, and his hopes for a redemptive revolution.<sup>4</sup>

In this book, then, I attempt three things. First, I want to provide a new reading of the intersection between Heidegger's thinking and his politics, a reading based on Heidegger's own interpretation of *polemos*, that is, "war," *Auseinandersetzung*, or confrontation. Second, I endeavor to show that what remains philosophically interesting in Heidegger's problematic politics cannot be reduced to the specifics of his life or even of his thought. Heidegger's *polemos* addresses to us a question about the meaning of fascism, or, more precisely, about the problem *announced by* fascism, which I take to be the question of the limits of belonging and universalism in the modern age. Finally, I undertake a discussion of some contemporary readings of Heidegger's politics, in particular postmodernist ones, especially that of Jacques Derrida. This confrontation with postmodernism is crucial, not only because it forces a defense of my own interpretation, but also because very much at stake in the postmodernists' readings of Heidegger's politics is its continuing appeal. The historical moment within which fascism arose and the predicament to which it offered one response are not behind us but remain, alas, very much present.

#### ON THE "HEIDEGGER AFFAIR"

"Whoever cannot attack the thinking, attacks the thinker," Heidegger once said.<sup>5</sup> But this self-defense seems somewhat facile;<sup>6</sup> can we not ask, To what ex-

tent does the life of a thinker have bearing on the content of that person's thought? Jürgen Habermas, hardly an apologist for Heidegger, writes that the "rigorous conception of the unity of work and person seems to me inadequate to the autonomy of thought." Habermas does not want to deny that authors have responsibilities or that context may shed light on thought. "But Heidegger's work has long since detached itself from his person." Nevertheless, the case of Heidegger presents special difficulties, even if we tend to the contemporary, professional view of philosophy as separate from personality or, if we insist with Habermas on "the autonomy of thought."<sup>7</sup>

In reviving the question of Being, Heidegger claimed to have broken ground that had lain fallow for millennia, and, in so doing, to have provided decisive insight into our existence. But while Heidegger's early and best-known work, *Being and Time* (1927), discusses at great length the ontological foundations for authentic existence, it provides little indication of what the content of such an existence ought to be.<sup>8</sup> Heidegger, or a Heideggerian, might well argue that authenticity is an *existentiale*, a category of Being, and so can have no determinate content. But *Being and Time* does seem to indicate that insight into our Being demands that we *exist* authentically (*SZ*, §63). It seems reasonable to ask whether Heidegger's own choices in life illuminate the meaning of this authenticity, particularly when Heidegger made use of his philosophical language during the period of his political engagement. In a letter to Karl Löwith, Heidegger writes: "I work concretely and factually out of my 'I am'—out of my intellectual and, in general, my factual origin—milieu—life-context—out of that which is accessible to me from these as the living experience within which I live" (*DB*, 29). Here Heidegger announces an important theme of his thought: philosophy begins with a confrontation with one's own existence. Does his own life, then, illuminate this confrontation?

In this study, I seek to navigate a course between the extremes of dismissing Heidegger's thought on the basis of his deeds and of claiming that his life has no bearing on his philosophy. My compass will be the assumption that in coming to terms with Heidegger's thought, even if it turns down terrible paths, we can confront issues that remain vital in philosophy today. To engage with them does not require that we embrace the answers of the thinker, but only that we enter into a problematic that remains unresolved. After all, Heidegger's *questions* stand within a tradition that includes Kierkegaard, Husserl, Jaspers, Sartre, and Levinas, thinkers whom it would be indiscriminate, not to say absurd, to cast out summarily for somehow contributing to the development of fascism. I do not address the same question here as does Robert Bernasconi,

who asks whether the Western ideal of the philosophical way of life, as directly corresponding to the ethical life, can be maintained after a thinker who erred so monstrously. I agree with Bernasconi that the task of thinking through the failure of philosophy as *the* good life has barely begun; my point here, however, is simply that a thinker's life and thought cannot be neatly segregated and that we must also exercise caution in ascribing an influence of one upon the other.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, we cannot ignore biographical facts that shed direct light on the political meaning of Heidegger's thought.<sup>10</sup> This does not mean that in Heidegger's case, history and biography supply an accurate lens for understanding his thinking, only that they provide a resource to which we can, and at times should, turn. Habermas's insistence on the autonomy of thought is correct to the extent that Heidegger's life per se does not explain his thinking. But I cannot go so far as Richard Rorty, who rejects the perception of any strong connection between Heidegger's life and thought as "essentialism." Rorty writes, "For those of us who wish to continue to pick over the tools in Heidegger's [tool]box, the fact that the man who designed these remarkable tools was first a Nazi and later a cowardly hypocrite is just one of history's many ironies."<sup>11</sup> This is simply too glib; Rorty refuses even to take the question of Heidegger's politics seriously, and he ignores that scavenging "tools" without examining the possible breadth of their application (beyond our own naïvely decent purposes) can be very dangerous. We must consider the philosophical dimension of his politics, as laid out in his writings, before we begin to think about whether we can, or should, make use of this thinking. Indeed, perhaps it is not so much a matter of *making use* of Heidegger as we would of a toolbox full of ideas, but rather the possibility of raising decisive questions about philosophy and politics for ourselves through a thoughtful confrontation with Heidegger's work. For this encounter with Heidegger's thought to succeed, we must treat it as a whole, at least preliminarily.

Of pertinence to my project are not the details of Heidegger's behavior or the history of the interpretation of that conduct over the years. The historical research of Hugo Ott, Bernd Martin, and Rüdiger Safransky provides us with a context in which to come to terms with his writings. It is a confrontation with the texts that I seek, but at certain moments an understanding of the historical context becomes indispensable to this endeavor (for example, in reading Heidegger's 1933 rectoral address, or his speeches of the same year in favor of Hitler's referendum on leaving the League of Nations). The "official story" that once reigned—that Heidegger made a naïve and stupid mistake that he soon retracted and deeply regretted—prevents a genuine encounter with his

thought, because this interpretation is simply false. To consider the full interpretative possibilities of a text, one must at times turn to the actions of the author. But the historical minutiae surrounding the uproar over Heidegger's life offer so little help with the philosophical issues that we would do best to avoid entering the lists of biographical combat and limit ourselves to data that are now firmly established.

The question at hand is the meaning of *polemos*, the interpretation of *Auseinandersetzung* that Heidegger lends to it, and the relevance of this interpretation for his understanding of politics. Beyond Heidegger's own thinking, what announces itself in fascism is the enduring problem of identity and difference, of belonging and exclusion, of universalism and particularity. As far as possible, the present inquiry will follow the path of *confrontation* that Heidegger himself sets out for us. Since the task is to explicate what Heidegger means by confrontation, as *polemos* and *Auseinandersetzung*, it might seem we are moving in a vicious circle. We want a confrontation with Heidegger, but confrontation is precisely what we seek to understand. But as Heidegger says of the hermeneutic circle, the problem is not so much getting around it, but entering into it in the right way (*SZ*, 153).

#### OTHER READINGS

With a general sketch of what I hope to accomplish with this project in place, it may be helpful to say something about the position it occupies within the range of scholarship concerning Heidegger's politics. A caveat: the categories outlined here are not meant to be taken as definitive; many of the authors cited work on several levels at once, and I mention them and these divisions here only to offer some preliminary clarification concerning the place of my contribution in the debate.

1. *Biography*. As explained, this study will not offer new biographical insights into Heidegger's life and work. Nor will I attempt to interpret the life of Martin Heidegger the man. This research has already been done well by Ott and, more recently, by Safransky; further advances in this area must await the release of archival materials. But let me be absolutely clear: I by no means discount such historical and biographical research as irrelevant, and I shall make use of it whenever it helps to understand a text in question.

2. *Scope*. In this study I shall not attempt a comprehensive account of the development of Heidegger's thought in terms of *polemos*. For the development of Heidegger's thinking, the reader can turn to the excellent work of Theodore



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