

Postmodernism and Academic Discontents

Paul Gottfried

Editor's Note: The decline of American higher education is generally attributable to the institutionalization of ideologies that drove the countercultural revolution of the 1960s. But the provenance of those ideologies is in question. In a book review in the Winter 1994–95 issue of *Academic Questions*, David H. Hirsch posited the reliance of post-Vietnam radicals on the philosophizing of Martin Heidegger and on French antihumanists whose beliefs “cannot be dissociated from Auschwitz.” This essay disputes that assertion. So to vilify Heidegger, says Paul Gottfried, gives him too much credit. The editors of *AQ* welcome Professor Gottfried’s perspective on the origins of our malaise. We have put his critique before David Hirsch, whose response to Gottfried follows this article.

Over the years *Academic Questions* has combined useful defenses of academic freedom and reasoned discourse with views about postmodernism that merit critical attention. Because of its indisputable value in the war against intolerance, it seems necessary to point out where this publication may have strayed into error. Most troubling for me is the questionable linking of Martin Heidegger to the multiculturalism being celebrated in our universities. The review by David Hirsch (Winter 1994–95) of William Spanos’s *Heidegger and Criticism* illustrates this problem. Hirsch’s comments belong to a bitter brief that can also be found in Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*. According to Bloom (and Hirsch), the student radicalism of the sixties and other more recent expressions of cultural barbarism are products of a “German connection.” Despite intensive efforts to “educate” the Germans in “our principles” of democratic equality and human rights, this nation, happily defeated in two world wars, has taken revenge. It has infected our universities thanks to Nietzsche and Heidegger, Germans of the antidemocratic Right who attacked reason and midwived a new radicalism. The present war on rational standards and coherent discourse, Bloom insists, carries a fascist whiff. Distinctively German enemies of democracy and rationalism unleashed the cultural nihilism now associated with the deconstructionist Left.

Bloom’s brief suffers from excessive apriorism. It assumes rather dogmatically that two of Bloom’s *bêtes noires*, German critics of liberal democracy and academic radicals, can be combined into a single demonology. This argument, never demonstrated, is posited in a manner whereby angry rhetoric is made to take the place of a documented connection. Having been around educational egalitarians, feminist zealots, and multicultural reformers for three decades now, it is hard for me to recall a single conversation with any of them on

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Heidegger or Nietzsche. The authors favorably mentioned by these colleagues have been Karl Marx, John Dewey, Gloria Steinem, and others identified with their own efforts at eradicating social and gender distinctions. It would be useful, from the standpoint of Bloom's and Hirsch's brief, if Donna Shalala had pored over *Sein und Zeit* before imposing minority quotas at the University of Wisconsin. It might also corroborate certain "humanist" charges if deconstructionists drew explicitly on the "German connection" in their complaints about Western white male cultural imperialism. In the real world none of this is happening. Rather we see academic egalitarians turning to egalitarian theorists to justify their actions and attitudes. The European postmodernists who reign in our universities, Hirsch admits, are Frenchmen of the radical Left. Far from being Nazi antisemites, some, like Jacques Derrida, are undeniably Jewish; and all of these postmodernists profess as much belief in democracy as David Hirsch. Neither the misogynist Nietzsche nor the social organicist Heidegger enjoys special favor among American deconstructionists. The names they usually extol belong to the self-proclaimed leftists, Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Lacan, and Roland Barthes. They also speak well of Walt Whitman, one of the poets Hirsch complains that our faculties ignore. Hirsch might do well to look at the proliferating dissertations on Whitman or Justin Kaplan's glowing biography of this "homosexual" pantheist. By contrast, the academic admirers of Heidegger known to me—the late William Barrett, Quentin Lauer, S.J., Michael Gelven, and the historian of German philosophy Gerhard Spiegler—are (or were) American patriots. Hirsch may have his own list of anti-American Heideggerians, but in his review he names no names, except for that of Spanos.

Being faced by complex realities, he builds his case against a favorite target of Allan Bloom, the rightist inclinations of postmodernists pretending to be on the Left: "Though William Spanos is too old to be one of the 'Young Americanists' involved in the concerted effort to revise the canon, or where they can't revise it to interpret it out of existence, he nevertheless identifies with a generation of American literary theorists who may be described as leaning left under the inspiration of the far Right." The argument that the American academic Left has been colonized by the German Right, through French postmodernists, is provocative but dubious. To me it is likewise counterintuitive, since I have never encountered the battlelines to which Hirsch refers. Spanos asserts, and Hirsch may agree, that America's "oppositional intellectuals" have chosen Heidegger over both Kant and ethical humanism. My question is, Why have I not seen proof of this cosmic struggle waged between rightwing Heideggerians and their outnumbered humanist critics? Certainly Hirsch is not demonizing the Heideggerian Barrett, whom he describes as someone with "a sense of perspective." Like other American Heideggerians of my acquaintance, Barrett appreciated German philosophy and admired both Kant and Heidegger. In this instance *tertium datur*; there is another possibility. One

can respect equally Kant and Heidegger for their intellectual contributions without having to make the ideological choice Hirsch insists upon.

The review of Spanos's book, moreover, does not prove Hirsch's case. From Spanos's failure to deal critically with the antisemitism of Pound and Eliot in his book on modernist aesthetics, Hirsch infers that Spanos must be of the far Right: "[H]e was quite comfortable with the reactionary and, in many instances, fascist politics of the modernist poets and essayists." None of this can be justifiably inferred from Spanos's scholarship of the mid-seventies, at least as presented by Hirsch. There is no reason to think that Spanos acted as a closet fascist by failing to denounce the politics of Eliot or Pound. Nor is it shown that Spanos went on to become a dishonest fascist because he decried American participation in the Vietnam War. Hirsch may be able to demonstrate all of these charges, but not from his highly conjectural associations.

He weakens his case even further by exaggerating the sins of those he links to Spanos. Nowhere in his voluminous scholarship, through which I have arduously waded, does the German "revisionist historian" Ernst Nolte "turn the [Nazi] victimizer into a victim" by seeking to "recontextualize the Nazi genocide." In a review essay in *Society* (July/August 1993), I explain Nolte's real mistake, misinterpreting the *sui generis* character of "German fascism." He carelessly buys the popular front conviction of the 1930s, that all fascisms are related and equally virulent. Nolte also overstates the anticommunist obsessions of those on the nationalist Right between the two wars. He looks for an often nonexistent fixation on Soviet terror among those who supported the Nazis or, like Heidegger, tried to benefit from them. Nonetheless, both interpretive positions were congenial to liberal democratic scholars in the sixties and seventies, when Nolte was viewed as an antifascist with social democratic leanings and became a resident scholar at the Hebrew University. His recontextualization of the Nazi era borrows from his earlier thought, which underlines the unity of fascist movements within a particular time frame. Nolte also incorporates other interpretive theories that have no conceivable fascist lineage, e.g., views on the isomorphic nature of Soviet and Nazi totalitarianisms, which originate with Franz Borkenau, Hannah Arendt, and other members of the anti-Stalinist democratic Left. As for Nolte's comment about "maintaining German guilt," it seems that Hirsch has in mind an op-ed piece that appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 1986, "The Past That Will Not Go Away." Here Nolte does raise the charge that those who dislike the Germans keep them in a permanent state of anxiety by belaboring their past. His complaint is generally correct, but the Nazi period is the least promising point at which to take this revisionist stand. It is indeed that one case of inhumanity which can be used to blacken everything else in German history. But Hirsch is wrong to maintain that "the honor of conducting a totally obsessive, unrelenting campaign of genocide against a peaceful and defenseless 'enemy' belongs only to the Nazis." Though applying such a judgment to the

Vietnam War is every bit as grotesque as Hirsch implies, the Nazis were not the only ones guilty of deliberate genocide. The ancient Assyrians and Hittites boasted of committing the same deed; Robert Conquest has spent much of his life documenting the genocidal acts of Soviet Russia.

One must wonder what measures Hirsch would take to impose his democratic humanism in teaching the "canon," a term until recently reserved for biblical texts. Since Hirsch does expect interpreters of modernist aesthetics to blast Eliot for reactionary politics and cultural antisemitism, one may ask what should be done in other similar learning situations. For example, would Hirsch require a professor to mention that Thomas Aquinas accused Jews of having usurious dispositions? Is a professor morally obligated to discuss that charge, in Aquinas's letter to the Duchess of Brabant, before being allowed to lecture on the five proofs of God's existence? Is the same humanistic sensitivity, moreover, to be enforced in Hirsch's Judaica department at Brown? Should professors there make public apologies about rabbinic attitudes toward blacks, as expressed in the tractate *Sanhedrin*? There the ancient rabbis spoke about the Hamitic curse attached to the Cushim and elsewhere had unflattering things to say about gentiles in general. Are we to hold these rabbis to the same rules Hirsch would apply to anti-Jewish modernists? Though I personally would forego this dismal exercise, there may be heuristic value in seeing how far one might extend this demand for condemning intolerant views. Are such condemnations to be issued for everyone equally, or only when intolerant views are directed against Hirsch's own group?

In *The Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism after Auschwitz* (Hanover and London: Brown University Press, 1991), Hirsch worries that "the Franco-German hegemony" now "eclipses" the "gentle, constructive humanism of Matthew Arnold." Though he notes in passing its "vulnerabilities" and "shallowness," Hirsch reminds us that "Arnoldian humanism did not lead, as did profound Heideggerian brooding, to the death camps." It may not be enough in this case to concede the unproved premise that Heideggerian brooding somehow produced Auschwitz. Hirsch wants us to go further, as an act of engagement, and accept noble lies as proof of democratic humanistic intention. If Arnold is shallow, why should we lament the fact that people notice? And, in any event, is his humanism, as Hirsch maintains, the sole educational bulwark standing against the "ideology of Auschwitz"? Let us reflect on these assertions further. Must everyone, to please Hirsch, accept the image of Western heritage, as presented by Arnold, as a fusion of Hebraism and Hellenism? Note that Arnold here was talking about human types and not about a theory of civilization.

From this Arnoldian image favored by Hirsch, we must then proceed toward the assumption that the classical-Hebraic fusion was first "ruptured" by Heidegger. Again the problem is one of oversimplification. The rupture Hirsch complains about did not start with Heidegger or with Nietzsche. Favorable appeals to paganism against Christianity can already be found in Machiavelli,

Gibbon, and Voltaire. It is equally present in Jewish democratic humanists Moses Hadas and Peter Gay. Both have made the point that modern democracy and ethical rationalism have a classical, albeit not Christian, point of origin. This argument, though wrongheaded in my opinion, owes nothing to Nietzsche or to Heidegger.

Contrary to one *idée fixe* in Hirsch's book and in his review essay, Heidegger has few defenders in the American academy. Exactly how few became apparent when Victor Farias's *Heidegger and the Nazis* appeared in 1987. Farias's linking of Heideggerian philosophy and Martin Heidegger to Nazi inhumanity received the uncritical endorsement of the *New York Review of Books*, *Commentary*, the *New York Times Book Review*, and *The New Republic*. My own review, in *Telos*, noted two circumstances connected to this publishing success. One, Farias had reprised half- or even nontruths that François Fedier had already analyzed in "Trois attaques contre Heidegger." Fedier's detailed refutation of charges against his subject, going back to the fifties and early sixties, came out in *Critique* in 1966. Two, Farias's attack against Heidegger played extremely well in the American intellectual community, despite its undemonstrated assertions. Given the current intellectual climate, which Hirsch reflects, it is hard to draw critical attention to the weaknesses in Farias's presentation. Academics and journalists have closed debate on the Heidegger question because of their hardened hostility toward nonleftist German ideas.

Almost all recent broadsides against Heidegger fail to take seriously the counterevidence in Fedier's refutation or what Heidegger had said in his own defense in a long interview with *Der Spiegel* (7 March 1966). This counterevidence does not absolve Heidegger entirely for his gestures toward the Third Reich, but it does raise questions about the sweeping nature of the charges against him. Attempts to read Heidegger's decision to join the Nazi Party into his writings of the 1920s, particularly *Sein und Zeit* (1927) and *Vom Wesen des Grundes* (1929), remain methodologically questionable. The fact that Heidegger made this link in 1933 does not advance Farias's brief. By then Heidegger was trying to sell himself to the Nazis, an undertaking that plainly failed: It was not he but his successor at Freiburg whom the Nazis described in 1934 as the first real Nazi rector there. As for Heidegger's alleged cruelty toward his Jewish mentor Edmund Husserl, whom a Nazified university pushed into early retirement, Heidegger's Jewish student Hannah Arendt addressed that point as early as 1952. Apparently Heidegger treated Husserl with respect and did not forbid him to use the university facilities after Heidegger had joined the Nazi Party. The ban against allowing Jews to do research at Freiburg and other German universities, as Fedier points out, did not take effect until 1935, one year after Heidegger's forced resignation from the rectorship. Despite their deepening philosophic differences since the late twenties, Heidegger dedicated the 1936 edition of *Sein und Zeit*, as well as the first one, to his former patron Husserl.

Another allegation about Heidegger, which still crops up in diatribes, including Hirsch's, concerns his antisemitism in the 1920s. The intended demonstration usually centers on the testimony of Ernst Cassirer's widow, Toni, or more specifically on Frau Cassirer's memoirs *Aus meinem Leben mit Ernst Cassirer* published in 1950. In the matter of a famous debate on the Enlightenment held in the Swiss town of Davos in 1929 between her husband and Heidegger, Toni Cassirer makes the acidic observation: "His [Heidegger's] antisemitic inclinations were already known to us." The transcript of this debate, given in English translation in Nino Langiulli's *The Existentialist Tradition* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), shows not a trace of antisemitism. Quite to the contrary, both speakers behave with exemplary civility, and the high tone of their discussion drew favorable comments from, among others, Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt. What makes this tone even more remarkable, Ernst Nolte explains in his biography of Heidegger in 1993, is that the two men had just competed for the same post at the University of Berlin. Despite their professional rivalry and opposed views about the rationalist tradition, there is no perceptible bitterness in their exchange, unlike the colored postwar reminiscences of Toni Cassirer.

A mark of the low state into which discussions about Heidegger have fallen is how Hirsch treats Richard Rorty's review of *Heidegger and the Nazis*, published in *The New Republic* (11 April 1988). According to Hirsch's reading in *The Deconstruction of Literature*, the leftwing deconstructionist Rorty "presents a spirited but ultimately shocking defense of Nazism." "Rorty seems willing to trash philosophy in order to save Heidegger." In the review by Richard Rorty that I read, none of this was easily deducible. Though Rorty does think that Heidegger was "an original philosopher," he agrees with Farias, as Hirsch lets us know, that "Heidegger was a rather nasty piece of work—a coward and a liar, pretty much from first to last." Hirsch is annoyed that Rorty separates the capacity for philosophical insight from the question of character. Hardly a defense of Nazism, such a perception is one any mature scholar would necessarily make. God or Fate does not choose, in awarding gifts, only those who are saints or accredited democratic humanists.

Hirsch also fails to note the credulity of Rorty in the face of Farias's sinister portrait. Rorty offers the opinion that "Hitler and Heidegger had a lot in common: blood-and-soil rhetoric, anti-Semitism, self-deception." We are also told that Heidegger was a "self-deceived egomaniac" and that his example is important because it typifies the behavior of the "vast majority of German academics," and particularly "the attitude of German intellectuals toward the Holocaust." Rorty has much to say about German and Heideggerian sins, and he states that our moral choice is now one between Heidegger and the "pluralistic tolerance" presented by Rorty's socialist friend, John Rawls. Having read such observations with painful thoroughness, it seems that we are looking at sloppy scholarship expressed in left-liberal clichés. Were the vast majority of

German academics even aware of the Holocaust? Was their failure to oppose the removal of Jewish colleagues an act of approval—or were many simply scared to antagonize the Nazi supervisors of German universities? Having beheld the cowardice of academic colleagues in the face of far less coercion, I am willing to temper my condemnations of those who knuckle under to terrorist regimes. But Rorty never asks such questions before rushing on to generalize. Nor does he give the slightest indication of laboring over Farias's book. His review is certainly shocking but not in any way as a "defense of Nazism."

No serious mind could believe that Heidegger was consistently moral or behaved in a principled manner toward the Nazis. He was a deeply flawed person, and his rectorial address at Freiburg on 27 May 1933, *Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universitaet*, was, whatever else it may have been, an act of submission to the Nazis. Heidegger betrayed his bad side again when he tattled to Nazi officials about other professors. As one of his fiercest critics, Hugo Ott, has noted, he accused his devoutly Catholic colleagues as well as his Jewish and socialist ones of being insufficiently loyal to the new order. None of this makes a pretty picture, but not one as lurid as that fashioned by some of Heidegger's militant detractors. Although I am an admirer of his work of the 1920s, I would also concede that there is much in Heidegger's ontology that demands critical comment. Interpreters from Karl Loewith to Stanley Rosen have written provocative critiques of his philosophy, and, unlike recent "revelations" about his concealed Nazism, they are worthwhile contributions to a debate. Rosen's book is particularly instructive as a dispassionate criticism. Notwithstanding his Straussian hermeneutic and Straussian leanings, Rosen goes after Heidegger entirely on textual matters. He avoids the kind of *reductio ad Hitlerum* that mars other discussions of the same subject.

But even if Heidegger were as reprehensible as Victor Farias and David Hirsch believe, it is still not clear that his evil deeds have corroded American universities. An underlying premise of Hirsch and of the Straussian Allan Bloom is that our higher education has suffered by moving away from the Enlightenment. The problem with this charge is one of identity and definition. What exactly do we mean by the legacy of the Enlightenment? Broadly understood, such a heritage embraces the deconstructionists and their neoconservative critics alike. Each side appeals to democratic equality and human rights, which they identify more or less with the Age of Reason. But deconstructionists are also bothered about the halfheartedness of the Western egalitarian mission. From their perspective, we have not gone far enough in leveling hegemonic structures. We have allowed cultural biases and linguistic habits to keep us from practicing a truer democratic inclusiveness. Significantly, the Enlightenment also had a nonleftist side that its present apostles prefer to disregard. It nurtured movements and impulses that Hirsch and the deconstructionists would both gladly disavow, from scientific racialism to the Voltairean neopaganism of Nietzsche. It is doubtful that the entire European Enlightenment can be summed up in "humanistic"

genealogies. Unlike the deconstructionists, many on the other side defend the Age of Reason by oversimplifying its teachings.

Still, there is no need to look for distant causes for what may have arisen within our own culture. The World-War-Two mentality, which has produced excessive stress on the "German connection," may have yielded a second obsession: what the G.I. Bill introduced in 1946 represents the beginning of a continuing national mandate. Older colleagues of mine still fondly recall how they or their parents were given the chance to obtain college degrees because of postwar government subsidies. Eastern European Jews and ethnic Catholics moved up the socioeconomic ladder with the help of this policy. The happy memories of both concerning the Truman administration may be tied to this opportunity for social mobility. Another result of the G.I. Bill was the growth of universities as business. The sudden increase in student enrollments and in teaching and administrative positions transformed the academic scene, a process discussed in a study of deteriorating American higher education published in 1993 by Thomas Sowell. If the G.I. Bill is seen to have enhanced the social status of those now in college jobs, it is hoped that additional subsidies directed toward the same goal can bring further social benefit. Professorial pockets and the public good can both be served, we are told, by educating those who are still disadvantaged.

Unfortunately for this faith, there is no endless supply of worthy students waiting for outreach. With upward of 50 percent of our high school graduates going on to college, as reported in *Statistical Abstract of the U.S.*, we are recruiting for higher education more students than we should. By now, a majority of high school graduates, according to Seymour Itzkoff of Smith College, lack both the reading comprehension and mathematical skills that they should have acquired in junior high. In one widely publicized report about high school graduates in Jersey City, published in 1992, the evidence of ineptitude becomes all too plain. Only 7 percent of the white graduates and 1 percent of the black, when tested, exhibited the reading comprehension and mathematical knowledge of a competent seventh grader. One may presume that about half of these substandard students will go on to college. That particular decision will be theirs—and not that of educators determined to maintain uniform national standards. Those enrolled in college will almost inevitably graduate from whatever institutions they attend. The *U.S. Almanac* for 1994 indicates that 45 percent of high school graduates will receive baccalaureates. In college those "the system has failed" will be encouraged to attend remedial classes and may have a "learning disability" conferred on them before low grades force them out. This last measure may not be necessary, given the grade inflation in our colleges and given the insistence by administrators that faculties should practice "sensitivity." Poor students are imagined to be suffering from "attention deficit syndrome," and a reconsideration of their grades and learning environment is often pushed hard by administrators.

A further disconcerting fact is that many of our high school graduates lack the general intelligence for serious college work. "Serious" is the operative term here, intended to exclude those gut majors that attract the marginal students. The general intelligence level required for college work, according to Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, is about 110; in the 1950s, however, it was set as high as 120. Average I.Q. for American whites now stands at around 100, for American blacks at about 85, and for Hispanics and native Americans somewhere in between. Much of our college population falls into a middling cognitive range and should find it hard to master calculus, foreign languages, or organic chemistry. Some students may overcome these intellectual limits by working harder, but, in today's educational buyer's market, such exertions may no longer be necessary. "Higher education" has become an entitlement, a civil right, and an exceedingly fat business. Besides, full colleges are seen to be socially useful. They keep riotous adolescents off the streets or out of their parents' homes, while the job market can function without too many young applicants. Because of these circumstances, we Americans warehouse more than half of our high school graduates for at least four years.

This picture of American higher education seems to me all too accurate. I would supplement it with the finding of academic conservatives and others who have criticized affirmative action. There is in fact a noticeable correlation, observed by Lino Graglia of the University of Texas School of Law, between government pressure to favor minorities and multicultural gibberish in the academy. The latter becomes frenetic at any university which is forced to undergo the former. Administrations and, finally, faculty will try to justify the imposed social policy by stressing new sensitivities and new modes of learning. But, as socialist commentator Russell Jacoby notes with cogency in *Dogmatic Wisdom* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), private schools have also degraded themselves through cynical pursuit of the profit motive. Multicultural and therapeutic substitutes for education provide a painless "college experience"; and, in a tough recruiting market, college administrators and professors are anxious about their harvest of students and tuitions. Like the therapeutic rationalization of incompetence, talk about diversity can help explain away the lack of learning skills or the inability of students to engage in rational discourse.

But none of this has much to do with Heidegger's critique of rationalism and abstract universals or with Nietzsche's will to power. What is being described are hand-to-mouth justifications for the marketing of a devalued college experience. In this devaluation I doubt that any significant blame can be attached to even those leftwing deconstructionists whom Hirsch likes to depict as Heideggerians. For one thing, Barthes and Derrida shed no light on the behavior of my own past and present colleagues. Their professional questions are blatantly nonphilosophic. Unlike Hirsch and Derrida, these professors agonize over student recruitment and student retention. They are the living proof of Bertolt Brecht's caustic observation: "Erst kommt das Essen und dann

das Philosophieren!" They would inject lithium into their students for the sake of better evaluations.

Focusing on postmodernists also diverts attention from the peculiarly American pipe dream of "higher education" for everyone. This vision has mesmerized American educators to a degree that would appall any Old World socialist. Only in the New World do we continue to dream the dream of Mortimer Adler, that everyone can be given some proportionate sliver of humanistic *paedeia*. Needless to say, institutional and personal greed has fueled egalitarian passion—whence has proceeded the inescapable debasement of liberal arts courses. But understanding these problems does not require us to go searching for foreign evils. The burden of German history is heavy enough without this undeserved guilt. Native stupidities, and not the "German connection," have brought about the present "closing of the American mind."

From "Reforming Developmental Writing: Writing and Agency at the Academic Edge" in the *Spring/Summer Feminist Teacher*, page 23:

As writing teachers, we have coupled [our] feminist perspective with a cultural studies perspective based on the work of theorists in composition studies. Following James Berlin, we understand cultural studies as an area of research and teaching concerned specifically with studying how language is used in the formation of power relationships that not only lead to marginalization and oppression but also open up spaces for transformation.