BEN **FREEDMAN**

Blue Lacunae

Heidegger and "the jews"
by Jean-François Lyotard
Trans. Andreas Michel
and Mark Roberts

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

The two interlocking essays that constitute Lyotard's book – "the jews" and "Heidegger" – each include discussions of themes that have been important for Lyotard: the Kantian sublime, his relation to Freud and Adorno, the concept of the différend. Thus they lay claim to more than a purely momentary interest. But they do appear on the occasion of the recent eruption of the controversy surrounding Heidegger's involvement with Nazism. Although the controversy is not entirely new, it flared up vehemently with the publication in France of Victor Farias's *Heidegger and Nazism*. And while partisans and participants can be found wherever there is a concern for what is called continental philosophy, the intensity of emotion surrounding the "Heidegger affair" has been greatest in France. This is not so much due to the fact that Farias published his book there, but rather because of the impact Heidegger has had upon so much of recent French thought. His profound influence can be seen in such significant thinkers as Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard himself. Lyotard takes the opportunity to engage with a number of writers involved in the affair.

That Heidegger had some involvement with Nazism has always been known. But accepting the Rectorship of Freiburg University, as he did early in the Nazi period, is not, after all, a war crime. Moreover, his long-standing relationship with the German-Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt, and the fact that his mentor Edmund Husserl was a Jew, have tended to mitigate the unsavoury impression. But it has now become clear that his involvement with the party was far more extensive than had long been believed – he continued as a dues-paying member up to the end, and so on. Nevertheless, it is argued that Heidegger was not a Nazi like the others. Lacoue-Labarthe, for example, insists that he was not anti-Semitic and that, therefore as Nazism is a racist ideology, Heidegger could not really have been a Nazi at all. The argument that Lacoue-Labarthe derives from this – that what is truly at issue is not in fact Heidegger's Nazism, but his general silence about the Holocaust – is taken up by Lyotard.

Thus, the combination of the two main themes of *Heidegger and "the jews"* is intended to interrogate both Heidegger and Farias, in effect. Attempting "to think the Heidegger affair," in the essay devoted to him, Lyotard generally dismisses Farias for having missed the point. For "thought exceeds its contexts," he says, by the same token as there are not extenuating circumstances for thought of the stature of Heidegger's. Farias's dossier sticks far too close to the context and to the circumstantial, according to Lyotard. To really think this affair, to interrogate this *unheimlich* business, as he calls it, in which we seem to have known all along what is only now brought home to us by the weight of evidence, we must avoid simplistic dismissals or apologies. For even if we do not simply dismiss this "great" thought (Lyotard finds it a distasteful journalistic affectation to characterize Heidegger as "the greatest" thinker of the century), there is still something terribly amiss, something that calls forth accusation. The plea that Heidegger was not personally anti-Semitic is inadequate. Why did he remain all but silent about the Holocaust? What prevented him from speaking, or caused him to be silent? This lacuna, this gap, is not a peripheral question.

It might be peripheral if it were a matter like his "politics," which Lyotard usually places in quotes. But the lack indicated by this silence takes us beyond the "politics" as such, and beyond the circumstances – extenuating or not – under which he threw in his lot with the NSDAP. These are extraneous things, Lyotard insists. If we are to interrogate the thought that exceeds those circumstances or context, if, in other words, we are to re-examine the thought as it still matters to us, we cannot move directly from his involvement with the Nazi party, as personally damning as that may be, to damn his thinking merely by association. We need to find out more, we need to find out why.

Thus, we cannot find the program of the party in *Being and Time* and Lyotard is impatient with those who would read it there. Nevertheless, he finds "[i]t is difficult to attribute an apolitical quality" to such a work. For if Heidegger "was not a Nazi like Rosenberg, Kriek, or Goebbels," it is precisely because his decisions in 1933 were determined "by his most "profound" thoughts at the time, and by what he wrote in 1927." [*Being and Time* actually goes back a little earlier than this. It was published in the spring of 1927.] Thus, echoing many of his defenders, Lyotard writes that Heidegger "takes, even throws himself, furiously, much further than Nazism, well beyond and outside it." His decision to ally himself with the Nazis, then, derived from his belief that the German *Volk* had made a decision in favour of its authenticity, on behalf of its tradition and its future. The Nazi party was in effect the vehicle through which this decision was to be carried out. As things unfolded, the party proved itself to be, in Heidegger's eyes, inadequate to the greatness of the movement of 1933.

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"Do not mix things," Lyotard warns. Heidegger's "politics" are one thing, his thought another. Anyway, he was critical of the party, and struggled against its educational policies. He engaged in a struggle "against the threats of: everything is political, even knowledge, and: knowledge has nothing to do with the political." The reasonableness of this struggle may or may not be self-evident. It may seem a fairly reasonable position for an intellectual to take. Indeed, Heidegger may have felt that the "great moment" of the 1930s might have succeeded against these threats had the NSDAP not betrayed it. But this is still unsatisfactory. What shape could possibly be taken by a movement that would, however mistakenly, embrace Hitler's party? If it were to leave the Jews and traditional intellectuals alone while massacring communists, socialists, unionists, and gays, one might be forgiven for still finding the thing objectionable.

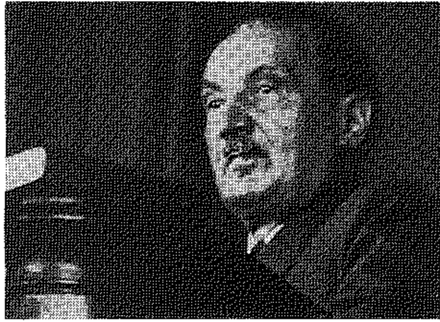
Put this way, we may perhaps remove the quotes from around Heidegger's politics, and consider what the nature of the movement might have been that compelled his most considered involvement. We must resist being overwhelmed by the astounding fact and horrifying specificity of the Holocaust. For the overpowering revulsion it elicits can tend to dim the impression of what else the Nazi regime was about, and everything that led up to it. The enormity of the genocide can obscure the circumstances under which it

was possible. This is why we are likely to mix things, as Lyotard puts it. The danger here is that some ways of trying to understand how this was possible in the West can, by default, normalize the fascist context. By extension, Mussolini's, or Franco's, or Pinochet's fascism may be legitimized – so long as it disavows genocide.

object. In this way, the representation is an attempt, however futile, to displace the apparent origin of the anxiety away from its source within oneself, onto others.

For his part, Lyotard does give a plausible account of the workings of the Nazi psyche. It is, however, presented as the type of the mainstream Western psyche.

what is after all a very Heideggerian way of thinking about the Holocaust. There is a telling lacuna in his own thought. For he entirely disregards the immense struggles out of which alone European fascism could emerge. Nor is this simply a matter of missing details. Rather, it derives from his understanding of the fate of European



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silent about the Holocaust?

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This sort of concern informs Lyotard's first essay. For him, then, "the jews" are all those outsiders, whether by virtue of religion or nationality or quite different factors, who are viewed as fearsome and profoundly strange. Actual Jews are the paradigm for him, however, because of their adherence to memory: any group that concerns itself with memory, and identifies itself through remembering, will be an irritant, Lyotard says, in a society which prefers to mark the past – memorialize it – and proceed to forget.

Thus, Heidegger's thought, with his desire to return to the forgotten question of being, touches that of "the jews" he says. In fact, "the jews" seem in a way to occupy the place of Being in the psyche of the West: they seem to personify it. For the "European Occident," Lyotard says, has always sought to designate some people or other as the demonic source of a ubiquitous but unnameable horror.

Employing an unorthodox version of Freud, Lyotard maintains that we must experience as a terrifying shock the inevitable encounter with "a certain something" that violates our infantile solipsism. This shock so wounds the psyche that on the one hand, it attempts to engorge the foreign agent, covering over the irritant with its own excretion the way an oyster forms a pearl. On the other hand, at its core, the psyche retracts into itself, remaining deeply infantile. This infantile self devotes considerable and continual energy to the forgetting of the limitation of its self. It seems less successful than the oyster, for the shock remains effective to the extent that it seeks to forget it. The anxiety of the "unconscious affect" lives on, its source being attributed to any people we might call the Others.

So Western anti-Semitism is not quite the same as its xenophobia. It seems to be more necessary, for it is an attempt to control the originary terror through an incomplete representation of it. We might think of it as a caricature that represents the thing only well enough to fix it as an

There is an undeniable element of truth to this kind of assertion, as the fascist movements outside of Germany in the 1930s and today partly demonstrate. As Lyotard notes, "Nazism" in various guises is alive today: it is not a uniquely German disease (nor was it uniquely Western in the 1930s, but Lyotard does not mention Japan). The Holocaust appears to be the fullest realization of what these "Nazisms" still represent. While the horror of recognition may have tempered the impetus for its expression for a time, this potential remains endemic to the West. But this way of treating the thing, as force bent on its own realization, is hard to distinguish from the very aspect of Heidegger that Lyotard wants to distance himself from. At this point, I begin to lose sympathy with Lyotard's argument, despite his repeated specification that this is the nature of things in the West, presumably only in the West.

This is not because he is Heideggerian in an entirely orthodox way. If he were, he could not take issue as he does with Heidegger's merely remarking in passing in 1949 that the present danger of technology is revealed alike in agribusiness, the production of nuclear arms, Third World poverty and the production of corpses in the death camps. This does not answer the question Why the Jews? Lyotard argues that Heidegger's own conception is that technology was turned upon them simply because the Jews would remain Jews, irritating the Greco-Roman Western psyche by their difference. Lyotard turns this around: because the West remains infantile it needs its "jews."

Moreover, Lyotard seems to reject Heidegger's whole conception of the *Volk*, however non-racial that might be. Accordingly, he is dubious about the great movement that the Nazi party was not good enough for. But despite hedges and dodges, he cannot dissociate himself from

Jewry to have been written in the primordial history of the occidental mind. The history of the West is thus stripped of countervailing tendencies and traditions. Massive opposition movements, from Wat Taylor's 14th century rebellion, to the Chartists, to the German Communist Party are, by implication, reduced, if I read him correctly, to the status of dissenting minorities. Lyotard smooths over the rough spots, the disjunctions and discontinuities, those irregular and forbidding bits. Of these, the moments at the beginning and end of the Weimar Republic were likely the most full of promise in modern history.

To represent the working of the mechanism without the winding of the spring is to leave the picture incomplete. With the realization of one set of possibilities, murderous infantility seems inevitable: after the fact, we may discover an essentiality beneath the manifestation. But another set of possibilities existed at the end of the Great War, and these were just as genuine. They certainly inspired horror in the likes of Hitler and his supporters. They were shut down by him, a service for which the elites of the West were grateful. After this, the threat from the East could only return in caricatured versions. The Red Army could only install memorials to the promise of earlier times in several European nations and in one German half. On all of this Lyotard remains silent. ◆

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