

“Right Step (Albeit in the Wrong Direction)”: Žižek on Heidegger’s Nazism and the Domestication of Nietzsche

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ABSTRACT

At a certain point in his in *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008), Slavoj Žižek suggests that, particularly with respect to Martin Heidegger's relationship with Nazism, Heidegger took "the right step (albeit in the wrong direction)." Not only does such a proposition provide a means to explain the direction Heidegger took in 1933 as it has been infamously pinpointed in his Rector's Address as the newly-inaugurated president of Freiburg, but it also becomes a means to explore Heidegger's turn towards Nietzsche by Winter 1936/1937 in a series of lectures and seminar delivered up to Winter 1944/1945. This turn presents a direction that, as Žižek describes, points to a "domestication of Nietzsche," which arises as Heidegger begins to distance himself from his active involvement with National Socialism. What his turn towards Nietzsche demonstrates, if employing Žižek's proposition, is Heidegger's desire to move in a "right direction."

Keywords: Žižek; Heidegger; Nazism; Nietzsche

The political direction Martin Heidegger takes in 1933 when he officially joined the Nazi Party is the subject of much debate, particularly when viewing these political leanings alongside his philosophical preoccupations. Heidegger's political proclivities are all the more controversial with the emergence of his *Black Notebooks* (or *Schwarze Hefte*), first appearing in German in 2014 and in English in 2016, and what they reveal about Heidegger's private thoughts, as he publicly aligned himself with National Socialism.

Yet, when focusing on the fateful year of 1933, the question that largely remains unanswered is how could Heidegger allow himself to become politically involved with the Nazi Party, especially as a philosopher whose philosophizing was used by the Nazis to tether themselves ideologically—the direction that Heidegger takes can be examined by way of an interesting argument made by Slavoj Žižek in his *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008). Though Žižek is known for and, at times, criticized over his progressive readings of Jacques Lacan, Karl Marx and Georg W. F. Hegel, any discussion of Heidegger is, in itself, noteworthy, precisely as it pertains to such a timely topic as Heidegger's relationship with Nazism.

Rather than strictly adjudicate what Žižek writes about Heidegger with what is generally written about Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism in 1933, I wish to focus, instead, on the implications of Žižek's larger argument about how we can read the direction Heidegger takes both in 1933 and afterwards, particularly up to the end of World War II and the denazification hearings thereafter. What Žižek offers is a means to understand not just the turn Heidegger makes towards National Socialism, but also a means to contextualize that turn in a relationship between the political and the philosophical that ultimately unravels.

Indeed, this relationship has been discussed at length in studies by Mark Blitz's *Heidegger's Being and Time and the Possibility of Political Philosophy* (1981), Pierre Bourdieu's *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* (1991), Richard Wolin's *The Politics of Being: The Political Thought of Martin Heidegger* (1992), James F. Ward's

Heidegger's Political Thinking (1995), and Miguel de Beistegui's *Heidegger and the Political* (1998)—in fact, to even consider this period in Heidegger's life means directly confronting how the political informed Heidegger's philosophy as much as the philosophical sought to inform German politics of 1933. Žižek does traverse this well-treaded terrain, but does so in a way that does not condemn Heidegger completely nor defend him entirely—by largely abstaining and holding a relatively objective view, Žižek's discussion of the choice that Heidegger makes in 1933 situates that choice in terms of the necessity of taking a step in a specific direction, even though Žižek does not provide further contextualization to this. We need not fault Žižek on this. Though this “step,” for Žižek, is undoubtedly taken as a result of Heidegger's undertaking of *Sein und Zeit* (1927, translated as *Being and Time* in 1962) and the incompleteness of the broader philosophical project, along his move to Marburg to Freiburg, what brings Heidegger to this “step” in 1933, as Žižek points out, is the beginning of a direction that Heidegger, at the time, believed was “the right direction.”

Žižek is not suggesting anything new here, particularly in light of what Victor Farías (1987), Jean-François Lyotard (1990), Tom Rockmore (1992), Hugo Ott (1993), Hans Sluga (1993), Julian Young (1997), Rüdiger Safranski's (1999), and Emmanuel Faye (2009) have all notably concluded about Heidegger's Nazism and his allegiance to National Socialism. It is clear Žižek is aware that there are defenders (i.e. Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida, and Otto Pöggeler) and critics (i.e. Pierre Bourdieu, Hans Jonas, Emmanuel Levinas, and Karl Löwith) of Heidegger's episode with National Socialism, such that the former rationalizes Heidegger's alignment with Nazism as a brief excursion, while the latter seeks to demonize him for it. Žižek's handling of the direction Heidegger took is not necessarily concerned with criticizing nor defending—this stance is, in itself, immensely helpful and fruitful. Also, though unmentioned by Žižek, since having been recently published and translated, Heidegger's *Schwarze Hefte* certainly reveal that Heidegger felt he was taking “the right direction” in 1933, which is further corroborated by his *Rektoratsrede* and the series of lectures subsequently delivered up to 1936.

In a section entitled “Radical Intellectuals, or, Why Heidegger Took the Right Step (Albeit in the Wrong Direction) in 1933,” Žižek is not only discussing Heidegger,

but he is also making a comparative argument between Heidegger and Foucault over their direct involvements with totalitarianism, such that the “domestication of Nietzsche” figures into their respective involvements with National Socialism and the Iranian Revolution. In tying the two together, Žižek’s assertion is that both took the “right step” in their political activism, but did so by going into the “wrong direction” with totalitarianism. If we consider this more carefully without his use of Foucault, and without even supposing Žižek’s intentions with Heidegger, Žižek is certainly correct to focus on the extent to which the year of 1933 plays in Heidegger’s development as a thinker—it is in 1933, as Žižek rightly chooses, that Heidegger makes a decidedly political choice and aligns himself purposefully with a political commitment.

Because Heidegger’s politics eventually leads to the failure of his political experience with National Socialism, Žižek surmises that this failure subsequently prevents Heidegger from engaging in politics again. This is certainly true. Heidegger’s political disengagement could be as a result of his initial failures, as Žižek claims, but it may also be due to some other personal or even philosophical reason. Nevertheless, it is still possible to agree with Žižek about Heidegger’s refusal to embark on another political excursion. Still, if we carry forward Žižek’s supposition and indulge him for a moment, he contemplates the following:

Is the premise of this refusal not that, to the end of his life, Nazism remained for Heidegger the only political commitment which at least tried to address the right problem, so that the failure of Nazism is the failure of the political as such? It never entered Heidegger’s mind to propose—say, in a liberal mode—that the failure of the Nazi movement was merely the failure of a certain kind of engagement which conferred on the political the task of carrying out “a project of onto–destinal significance,” so that the lesson to draw was simply a more *modest* political engagement (Žižek 2017: 120).

From this, we see that, through Žižek’s suggestion that Heidegger’s engagement and affiliation with National Socialism was a “political commitment which at least tried to address the right problem,” we will need to parse what Žižek means by “the right problem.”

Žižek defines this “right problem” as liberal democracy, inasmuch as Heidegger was “right in his doubt about [it]” (Žižek 2017: 121). For Žižek, at the core of the meaning of this “right problem” rests “Heidegger’s much-decried aversion to liberalism and (liberal) democracy, which he continuously, to his death, rejected as ‘inauthentic’” (Žižek 2017: 121).

To be sure, Žižek recognizes the political task with which Heidegger uses National Socialism as a method “to address the right problem.” Yet, if we maintain the idea that there was a “right problem” that Heidegger was most concerned with in 1933, we must also maintain that it was not strictly the right, political problem, even if, as Žižek writes, “the failure of the Nazi movement was merely the failure of a certain kind of engagement.” Žižek proposes that “it never entered Heidegger’s mind to propose—say, in a liberal mode” that the right way to engage “the right problem” would be to do so by way of “a more *modest* political engagement.” In Žižek’s view, Heidegger was either unwilling or unable to direct his efforts towards “a more modest political engagement” because, through either that unwillingness or inability, “what he refused to consider was a radical leftist engagement” (Žižek 2017: 121).

Žižek finds that this refusal arising from what eventually becomes “the failure of a certain kind of engagement” is grounded in Heidegger turning to Hegel, such that Žižek sees this as “Heidegger’s smoking gun” (Žižek 2017: 128). Note that this assertion is a question for Žižek.

In this sense, the question for Žižek can be articulated in this manner: can two of Heidegger’s seminars on Hegel in Winter 1933/1934 and Winter 1934/1935 be considered as, in Žižek’s words, “clearly disturb[ing] the official picture of a Heidegger who only externally accommodated himself to the Nazi regime in order to save whatever could be saved of the [Freiburg’s] autonomy” (Žižek 2017: 128)? Žižek’s answer to this is yes.

The two seminars from sequential winter semesters—though only the latter, the Winter 1934/1935 seminar, actually appears on the *Gesamtausgabe* as well as in Richardson’s list in the “Appendix” to *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* (1963) of Heidegger’s teaching activities—demonstrate, according to Žižek, the extent to which “it soon becomes clear that Heidegger only needs Hegel in order to assert the

emerging Nazi ‘total state’ against the liberal notion of the state as a means to regulate the interaction of civil society” (Žižek 2017: 129). This is certainly a reasonable way to read Heidegger’s use of Hegel.

Žižek’s point here requires a bit more pruning. Simply put: Hegel becomes Heidegger’s philosophical weather-vane for Heidegger’s political leanings. Hegel, then, becomes Heidegger’s philosophical foundation not just “to assert the emerging Nazi ‘total state,’” but also to provide Heidegger with a means to take what Žižek calls “the right step,” such that Heidegger can assume a political–philosophical direction “against the liberal notion of the state.” More importantly, just as Heidegger sought to legitimize his personal political leanings with Hegel’s philosophy, National Socialism also sought to legitimize its political thought by way of Hegel—it is not just that Heidegger, as Žižek writes, “only needs Hegel in order to assert the emerging Nazi ‘total state,’” but it is also clear that National Socialism needs Heidegger and his reading of Hegel “to assert the emerging Nazi ‘total state’” as well.

Though both Heidegger uses Hegel’s political philosophy as a “right step,” the underlining misuse of Hegel to substantiate National Socialism takes Heidegger “in the wrong direction.” This is precisely Žižek’s assertion, particularly as a way to understand Heidegger’s eventual use and misuse of Nietzsche for the same political–philosophical purposes.

In reading Žižek, it would appear that Heidegger’s reading of Hegel in Winter 1933/1934 and Winter 1934/1935 is what brought Heidegger to Nietzsche—like Hegel, Nietzsche, for Heidegger, would politically rationalize National Socialism by couching it in a foundational philosophy that could be pitted against what Žižek calls “liberal democracy.” According to Žižek, Heidegger’s “distrust of democracy is a constant feature of Heidegger’s thought, even after the *Kehre*; we find it in his Nietzsche lectures from 1936–1937” (Žižek 2017: 135). Here, Žižek is drawing a connection between Heidegger’s use/misuse of Hegel and his use/misuse of Nietzsche, seemingly suggesting that it is only through Hegel and Nietzsche that Heidegger expresses a “distrust of democracy.” To be sure, though Žižek qualifies this by asserting that this distrust is a “constant feature of Heidegger’s thought,” there is a clear necessity in looking only to Hegel and Nietzsche in Heidegger’s thought, as Žižek forms a

relationship between Heidegger and Foucault by their respective use/misuse of Hegel and Nietzsche in their respective rationalizations of a political commitment to a contingent political environment. Setting aside how he views Foucault this way—which I do not intend to assess here—Žižek oversimplifies Heidegger's path from Hegel to Nietzsche from 1933 to 1936, even within the narrow confines of Žižek's claim that Heidegger took "the right step (albeit in the wrong direction)."

Before we can even contemplate what can be ascertained from the meaning of a "wrong direction" for Heidegger, it is important to take a closer look at what Žižek means by "right step." As much as Heidegger's "right step" is initiated with his reading of Hegel in Winter 1933/1934 and perpetuated in a directedness by the time Heidegger begins his confrontation with Nietzsche in Winter 1936/1937, Heidegger's first reading of Hegel after his *Rektoratsrede* is in Summer 1933 with "*Die Grundfrage der Philosophie*," translated as the first text in *Sein und Wahrheit* as *Being and Truth* (GA 36/37). Žižek does not mention this. To this end, Žižek does not mention Heidegger's repeated small seminars on Hegel in Winter 1934/1935, Summer 1935, and Winter 1935/1936. Furthermore, Žižek does not include other key figures in the intervening years between where he recognizes Heidegger's beginnings with Hegel and when Heidegger commences his lectures on Nietzsche—the following contributed to the directedness of Heidegger after 1933 and the situatedness of his focus on Nietzsche: Fichte (Summer 1933), Plato (Winter 1933/1934), the notion of "*Volk*" (Summer 1934), Hölderlin (Winter 1934/1935), Parmenides and Heraclitus (Summer 1935), Kant (Summer 1933, Winter 1935/1936 and Summer 1936), Leibniz (in small seminars in Summer 1933 and Winter 1935/1936), and Schelling (Summer 1936).

Because all of the above lectures and seminars occur as a result of and after his initial "right step" towards Hegel in Winter 1933/1934, the direction that Heidegger takes is only "wrong" in the sense that it is based on verifying and validating the philosophical underpinnings of National Socialism. To Žižek's credit, Heidegger's "wrong direction" arises not just from aligning himself with the direction that National Socialism sought to take Germany and the German people in 1933, but it is also in Heidegger purposefully reading a companionate Nazi thought into the thought of key Greek and German thinkers.

So, if we are to consider Žižek's suggestion that Heidegger follows a "wrong direction" in 1933, and the extent to which that "wrong direction" includes Nietzsche, I want to be clear about what meaning can be made by proposing that there is, indeed, a "wrong direction" in Heidegger. Žižek's claim stands on its own, working through Heidegger's political commitments and how these commitments mirror Foucault's—it is in this context that Žižek refers to there being a "wrong direction," and the implied notion that Heidegger could have taken a "right direction."

I do not wish to follow Žižek from what he seems to imply, since it requires mitigating Heidegger's philosophical intentions from his political preferences, or vice versa. Instead, in drawing a relationship between what Žižek points to as a "wrong direction" and what this can be mean for the possibility of a "right direction," Heidegger's confrontation with Nietzsche in 1936 is as much the culmination of Heidegger's "wrong direction" as it is the beginning of his "right direction." This is especially so when, by 1936, Heidegger's turn to Nietzsche—in lectures, seminars, and other associated texts—represents a transition away from Heidegger's active involvement with National Socialism, as Heidegger became increasingly alienated from the Nazi Party. Heidegger writes of the direction—what we can call a "right direction"—he takes through Nietzsche in a letter to the Rector of the University of Freiburg, dated November 4, 1945.

Though the purpose of his letter was "to request to be reinstated in [his] professorial duties (reintegration)," Heidegger divides the letter in three parts, relating specifically his Rectorship of 1933–1934, his entry into the Nazi Party, and his relation to the Nazi Party after 1933 (Heidegger 1993: 61). It is in this third and final section of the letter that Heidegger discusses his directedness from National Socialism in the context of his directedness towards Nietzsche, by writing:

Beginning in 1936 I embarked on a series of courses and lectures on Nietzsche, which lasted until 1945 and which represented in even clearer fashion a declaration of spiritual resistance. In truth, it is unjust to assimilate Nietzsche to National Socialism, an assimilation which—apart from what is essential—ignores his hostility to anti-Semitism and his positive attitude with respect to Russia. But on a higher plane, the debate with Nietzsche's metaphysics is a debate with

nihilism as it manifests itself with increased clarity under the political form of fascism (Heidegger 1993: 65).

In this, what is interesting is Heidegger's understanding of National Socialism and Nazi Party as functioning as a "political form of fascism." To see Heidegger use this term demonstrates that, though, as Žižek argues, Heidegger had "distrust" for liberal democracy, fascism, "as a political form," was a bridge too far for him both politically and philosophically.

In other words, whatever suspicions or disagreements Heidegger had with liberal democracy, fascism embodied a form of politics that was too radical for Heidegger, particularly if Heidegger viewed nihilism, as he writes, "manifest[ing] itself with increased clarity under the political form of fascism." From this, because Heidegger's "debate with Nietzsche's metaphysics is a debate with *nihilism*," we can surmise that this debate, for Heidegger, is not sufficiently had in the passing years dating back to Hegel. In those intervening years, Heidegger comes to Nietzsche finding that "the right step (albeit in the wrong direction)" brings him to a confrontation with metaphysics and nihilism in a way that none of the previous confrontations with Hegel and others allowed. It is "on a higher plane" that *the right direction* reveals itself "with increased clarity."

What makes recognizing "the debate with Nietzsche's metaphysics is a debate with *nihilism*" important for Heidegger by 1936 is that it arrives after a precipitous decline in his public involvement with the Nazi Party. In one sense, as Heidegger points out, what leads him away from the Nazi Party, as he "embark[s] on a series of courses and lectures on Nietzsche, which lasted until 1945," is what he refers to as "a declaration of spiritual resistance." I take this mean that, in an effort to move in "the right direction," Nietzsche's thought allows for a philosophically-grounded spiritual resistance to National Socialism, such that Heidegger is able to conclude that "in truth it is unjust to assimilate Nietzsche to National Socialism." Yet, in another sense, this "declaration of spiritual resistance" puts forth a political aversion to the Nazi Party, by which Heidegger realizes that, for example, the party "ignores [Nietzsche's] hostility to anti-Semitism." These two reasons contributed to Heidegger's disenchantment with National Socialism and the Nazi Party—by 1936, Heidegger was no longer frequently attending Party meetings, no longer wearing Nazi regalia, and no longer beginning his courses and

lectures with the Nazi greeting (Heidegger 1993: 66). However, in speaking of praxis, though this decline initially begins with Heidegger's resignation as Freiburg Rector in April 1934, Heidegger maintained his Nazi membership, even though, as he cites in his letter, at some point in time later in 1934 and again in 1937, he was excluded from the German delegation to two international philosophy conferences (Heidegger 1993: 65). These exclusions were a result of the Party's censorship of Heidegger, when, as Heidegger claims, "the [Nazi] Party functionaries also took note of the spiritual resistance of my courses on Nietzsche" (Heidegger 1993: 65).

When reconciling what Heidegger writes in his 1945 letter, what Žižek says about Heidegger's "right step (albeit in the wrong direction)" in 1933, and what can be ascertained from Žižek as the possibility of a "right direction" existing for Heidegger, it is clear that Heidegger's turn to Nietzsche in 1936 holds a special significance in Heidegger's initial turn away from National Socialism and the Nazi Party. To this end, what did this turn to Nietzsche ultimately turn Heidegger towards? If Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche by 1936 comes as a culmination to his recognition that he had moving in "the wrong direction" with National Socialism and the Nazi Party, what direction does Heidegger proceed—if we call this a "right direction"—after 1936?

To say that there is, indeed, a "right direction" requires surmising Heidegger's intentions with Nietzsche. Certainly, we are treading in very dangerous territory when we speak of surmising intentions, since it is largely impossible to conclusively determine what Heidegger intended to do with Nietzsche in 1936. Nonetheless, it is possible to locate Heidegger's intentions in what he writes at the end of his 1945 letter, even if Heidegger believes that "there was nothing special about my spiritual resistance during the last eleven years" (Heidegger 1993: 66). Here, Heidegger traces his spiritual resistance to 1934 and his resignation as Rector, though he suggests that, as it has already been pointed out, his embarking on the Nietzsche lectures represented a "declaration of spiritual resistance." There may be something contradictory here, if our focus is on when his direction towards Nietzsche began. The qualifications of "declaration" and "even clearer" for Heidegger implies that he views his resignation as Rector as a clear form of spiritual resistance. It would seem that, by the time he turned to Nietzsche, Heidegger had already distanced himself from National Socialism enough

to have contextualized that distance as “spiritual resistance.” To the contrary, a majority—if not all—of Heidegger’s lectures beginning in Winter 1933/1934 through to the Summer 1936 sought to provide readings of Fichte, Plato, Hölderlin, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Kant, Leibniz, and Schelling that, in some form or another, assimilate these thinkers to the ideology of National Socialism. It is not too much to suppose that, during the years before 1936, Heidegger considers it just to do so, even if he knows and writes that “it is unjust to assimilate Nietzsche to National Socialism” by 1936.

In fact, despite his dismissal that “there was nothing special about [his] spiritual resistance,” I would argue that there is, indeed, something special about Heidegger’s spiritual resistance. If we look specifically at 1936, there is “something special” about Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche, as a “declaration” of Heidegger’s spiritual resistance. It is not until Nietzsche that Heidegger veers into a new direction after the “wrong direction” of the previous years, dating to 1933. Because the *Rektoratsrede*, at that time, can be viewed, in itself, as a “declaration” as much as it is a constitution of Heidegger’s spiritual resistance to liberal democracy, when considering Žižek’s argument. For that matter, Heidegger’s *Rektoratsrede* expresses a spiritual allegiance to National Socialism. Heidegger’s “series of courses and lectures on Nietzsche” can be considered similarly—on one hand, as Heidegger writes, they embody, again, a “declaration of spiritual resistance” to National Socialism, but, on the other hand, they also embody a “declaration” of spiritual allegiance. The question is: to what are Heidegger’s series of courses and lectures on Nietzsche in spiritual allegiance?

If Heidegger’s Nietzsche lectures beginning in Winter 1936/1937 are in spiritual allegiance to something other than National Socialism, this is what precisely guides Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche in a specific “direction.” More than that, to see this direction as a “right direction” that does meaningfully reconcile with what Žižek calls a “right step” in 1933 suggests that Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche arose out of necessity. This necessity is oriented by a spiritual resistance as much as it is aligned by a spiritual allegiance—this means that Heidegger’s turn to Nietzsche in 1936 is too complicated and ambidextrous to simply be thought of as one specific direction.

Žižek’s assertion about Heidegger taking the “right step, (albeit in the wrong direction)” only considers part of the implications of Heidegger’s public involvement with

National Socialism in his *Rektoratsrede* of 1933. Though it implies that there is a “right direction,” Žižek’s disinterest in assessing what this “right direction” could be only makes it possible to propose that there is a direction that Heidegger goes as a reaction to having pursued a “wrong direction”—this “right” direction, for Heidegger, is not until the Winter 1936/1937 and not until his turn to Nietzsche. To some extent, Žižek recognizes the role that Nietzsche plays in Heidegger’s directedness as grounded on a “distrust of democracy”—it is this “distrust” that undeniably exists in Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche.

If there is, in fact, a “distrust” that remains in the Nietzsche lectures, having carried over from Heidegger’s confrontations from Hegel to Schelling, even though Heidegger’s 1945 letter does not concede to this. Rather, Heidegger situates his approach to Nietzsche as a “spiritual resistance” that is distrustful of National Socialism. In this way, it is through Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche that, with respect to Žižek’s proposition, Heidegger’s initial “spiritual allegiance” to National Socialism is redirected towards a “spiritual resistance” to it. If following Žižek, we can read Heidegger’s explicit preoccupation with Nietzsche from Winter 1936/1937 (GA 43) to Winter 1944/1945 (GA 50), alongside Heidegger’s decreasing involvement with the Nazi Party as assuming a “right step” in a “right direction.”

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