

**Žižek and Heidegger - IJŽS Vol 1.4*****Another Step, Another Direction: A Response to Žižek's 'Why Heidegger Made The Right Step in 1933'***

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If, against all odds, and following Žižek's suggestion, we wish to consider the possibility of turning to Heidegger's politics, and to his stance with respect to the political, in a manner that is productive, such a possibility can only stem from the radical and revolutionary nature of his thought alone, from the original task that he set for thought. Inasmuch as, like Heidegger himself, Žižek believes there is always more in a thought than its actuality, we are faced with the possibility – and in fact, according to Žižek, the necessity – to repeat the still untapped and politically progressive resources of Heidegger's thought. However we may wish to identify and present such resources, we must first face the fact that Heidegger's thought is first and foremost non-political. This doesn't mean that it is simply a-political, or without any political relevance whatsoever. Rather, it means that everything Heidegger says about politics, or that can be seen to resonate with our political situation, is articulated from a position or a space that is itself *not* political, a space that, furthermore, defines and decides the *essence* of politics. Everything that Heidegger says on politics amounts to calling it into question, that is, our investment in it, and the assumptions that govern it.

If Karl Löwith was correct in defining the fundamental character of contemporary politics as a *total* politicisation of life, and in noting a remarkable contiguity between democratic and totalitarian regimes in that respect, then Heidegger's contribution might

be seen to consist in calling such a total politicisation into question.<sup>2</sup> With Heidegger, we might want to wonder the extent to which it is indeed the *total* politicisation of life that is the issue, or whether it is the preliminary and unquestioned interpretation of who we are, of our being, in terms of life, a life itself immediately qualified as political (man as the *zoon politikon*), that is precisely what makes this total politicisation of our being not only possible, but inevitable. If Heidegger can be envisaged as a political thinker, it is only (and paradoxically) insofar as he questions the validity and decisiveness of what we normally understand by politics – political action and activism, institutions, regimes, the organisation and distribution of power, etc. This doesn't mean that the differences between, say, types of regimes, don't matter – and in that respect we can only regret with Žižek that he paid so little attention to them, especially in that darkest of times when, for so many, they meant the difference between life and death. It does mean, however, that in order to be fully appreciated and evaluated, they must be related back to the one difference that is *absolutely* (and not simply relatively) decisive, the very opening that stretches between being and beings, one in which we always find ourselves situated, and so always predisposed to think and act in a certain way.

This difference or inter-stice (*Unter-schied*) is the space of history itself, the always-reconfigured event of truth. If we turn away from this one difference and one question, we may be saying all sorts of interesting things, posing all sorts of compelling problems, as Žižek does, but we are no longer operating within Heidegger's problematic. Now Žižek does raise the question of the status of the ontological difference for Heidegger, and suggests a structural parallel with the Lacanian Real. The Real in question goes further than the ontological difference, however, inasmuch as it signals a "rift" within the ontic itself. But is this not what Heidegger himself meant when, in the late 1930s, he abandoned the vocabulary of the ontological difference, or of the difference *between* being and beings, and claimed instead that it had become necessary to think being as difference, rift, or fissure, thus inviting us to think of the world as the inscription and the erasure of its condition of manifestation?

Far from wanting to politicise Heidegger, then, far from wanting to bend this or that analysis towards a problematic and a space that will have been recognised and secured in advance as "political," we should emphasise the distance – indeed the abyss – that Heidegger is concerned to establish between thought proper and political philosophy or theory, between that to which thought responds in being the thought that it is – and for which it is responsible – and political questioning and analysis, however

fruitful and urgent it may be. All of this is to say, then, that if we approach the problem of Heidegger's politics and remarks on politics from the outside, with questions and problems already constituted and of a political nature, we shall never get an answer from it. At the same time, if we follow Heidegger's own path of thought, we shall most certainly never be able to envisage him as a *political* thinker.

The question, then, is one of knowing whether we can extract a political dimension – and indeed a contribution to the current political situation – from a thinker whose thought is intrinsically not political. Can we move beyond this aporia? I believe we can, yet not in the manner suggested by Žižek, which identifies a possibility, or a range of radical, if not revolutionary possibilities, in Heidegger's own position and thought in 1933, but only to leave aside the decisive and defining feature of that thought, thus raising serious doubts regarding the need to turn to Heidegger in the first place (philosophical and political provocations notwithstanding). In what follows, I'd like to suggest there's greater potential to be found in Heidegger's thought after 1933, and especially in his analysis of power (*Macht*) and im-power (*Ohnmacht*) from the late 1930s.

### **“Power” beneath Politics - What is Power?**

*The most crucial political issue is, and always has been, the question of Who rules Whom? Power, strength, force, authority, violence – these are but words to indicate the means by which man rules over man.*

(H. Arendt, “On Violence” in *Crisis of the Republic*)

*Power means the possibility of making one's own will triumph, albeit over resistances, irrespective of that on which this possibility depends.*

(M. Weber, *Economy and Society*)

*Some people, immediately and with the greatest certainty, want to locate the essence of power, and so the empowering of power, in the political “sphere” [im “Raum” des Politischen], and this at a time when “politics” is no longer an isolated domain of human action, but has taken hold of humanity and determined its direction in the midst of beings. Political planning and doing reveal power relations and struggles in a specific light. But the essence of power in its indeterminacy becomes manifest only when the political itself is experienced on the basis of beings themselves and the humanity that belongs with them.*

(M. Heidegger, *Die Geschichte des Seyns*)

*'Power' must be wrested from the realm of  
'political' considerations, statements and parties.*  
(M. Heidegger, *Die Geschichte des Seyns*)

In a way, whilst not disagreeing with Arendt's assumption regarding "the most crucial political issue," Heidegger questions whether, and to what extent, politics really addresses the question regarding the origin or source (the "essence") of ruling. The question is indeed one of knowing Who or What orients and decides our own actions and thoughts. It is a question of "government," in the most literal sense. This question is precisely the one Heidegger already posed in his most explicitly political and politicised public intervention, in that speech or address that marked his official entry into the NSDAP and the beginning of his rectorate of the University of Freiburg. In that speech, whilst pledging allegiance to – and manifesting a blind faith in – the *Führer*, Heidegger also, and crucially, raised the question of the true source of leadership, which, in his mind, was not human, but "spiritual": it is science, or knowing (*Wissen*) that is the true leader. I mention this text only to stress that Heidegger never quite believed that, at the historically most decisive level, human beings are the ones who rule. Even at the height of his Nazi period (1933-35), when embracing the *Führerprinzip* and its total adequation with the "state" and the "will of the people," as Žižek rightly emphasises, Heidegger always believed that the true *Führung* emanated from "science" and that Nazism was essentially (or *ought to be*) a technocracy. Subsequently, he became convinced that modern politics, including Nazism, can be genuinely understood only by being envisaged from a non-political ruling principle, namely, *Macht*, and not *Wissen*. "All rulers [*Alle Machthaber*]," he writes, "never 'possess' power, for they are 'possessed by it.'"<sup>3</sup>

Power is not in the hands of the powerful, but power distributes and organises relations between subjects, who become the subjects they are through these relations. *Macht* is a principle of action that forces men and women to act in a certain way. It is the anonymous and impersonal principle that rules over politics itself, over power in a political sense. The German and English idioms are both somewhat confusing here, for they do not easily allow us to draw a crucial distinction between *Macht* as an ontological category, or an onto-historical phenomenon, and *Macht* as a political phenomenon, which we could designate with the German word *Gewalt*. In French, as well as in many Latin-derived idioms, the distinction would be that between *puissance* and *pouvoir*, between *potentia* and *potestas*.

Foucault, for example, takes the analysis of *pouvoir* in a political sense very far,

extending its traditional social and juridical boundaries, revealing, for example, how *savoir* (knowing and knowledge) – which includes the scientific disciplines as well as the institutional framework they flourish in – is itself made possible by a certain organisation of power relations, by certain regimes and mechanisms of power (Foucault calls them *dispositifs*) with which he associates certain forms of domination. Power, for Foucault, is not exclusively concentrated in the hands of government and ruling bodies. It is exercised not just through a handful of institutions such as the civil service, the police, the army, and the state apparatus, but also through a number of institutions that only seem to have nothing in common with political power as such, and seem to be independent from it. Such are the family, the school and the university, the hospital (especially psychiatry), etc. The genuinely political task, for Foucault, is to criticise the play of these apparently neutral and independent institutions, to criticise and attack them so that the political violence that rules them be revealed and open to challenge. Foucault, then, extends the analysis of power to virtually the whole of our social life and its institutions. He even takes it beyond the logic of domination, arguing that power is not something that a handful of institutions and individuals possesses, and imposes onto others, but something that is *exercised*, a process of empowering, through which the social itself, in its multifaceted reality, is actually produced. It is far more impersonal, and diffused throughout the social body, than is ordinarily thought. It is not so much a vertical structure, imposed from on high, as a horizontal one, through which the network of institutions and social links is established. In that respect, Foucault comes very close to Heidegger's own position.

Despite this proximity, however, Foucault's analysis remains an analysis of *pouvoir*, and not *puissance*, of *Gewalt*, and not *Macht*. The choice of this philosopheme is all the more significant that it consists of a translation – in the most creative and productive sense of the word – of the Nietzschean concept of *Macht*, itself ordinarily translated into French as *puissance*. And to a large extent, the debate between Foucault and Heidegger, which Žižek introduces by drawing a parallel between Foucault's support for the Iranian revolution and Heidegger's support of the Nazi revolution, would need to revolve around their respective interpretation of Nietzsche's *Wille-zur-Macht*. As I'll go on to show, Heidegger's concept of *Macht* is, like Foucault's concept of *pouvoir*, all encompassing and impersonal, pre-individual and constitutive of social structures and links. For Heidegger, though, *Macht* is first and foremost an onto-historical event, the effects of which are indeed social and political, and indeed of the

sort described by Foucault. This means that today's social and political movements, transformations, priorities, institutions, discourses (*énoncés*) must be interrogated and investigated from the point of view of a complex and differentiated phenomenon that is irreducible to the effects it produces, yet never given anywhere outside them.

The question is one of knowing the nature of the phenomenon that produces the social and political: is it power in Foucault's sense (*pouvoir*), or in Heidegger's (*Macht*)? In any case, to claim, whether in relation to Heidegger or Foucault, that power produces the social-political body, does not amount to characterising it as a cause, least of all a substance that would exist somewhere independently of the effects it produces. It is only its effects – and these effects are, amongst other things, yet exemplarily and most importantly, power-effects. By that, we need to understand effects of regimes, of peace and war, of production and consumption, but also of discourse, information, and even truth. As a principle of organisation of practices and discourses, power exists only as already differentiated and disseminated. Yet it is one and unified throughout this dispersion. It spreads across and saturates every corner of the social-political realm, allowing its every point, however small, to communicate with all the other points, enabling the totality of power to resonate within each and everyone of them.

Although Power is visible and analysable only in the effects it produces, these are such that they reveal something like a structure, or, better said perhaps, a set of distinctive traits. Heidegger identifies them most clearly in a section of *Die Geschichte des Seyns* entitled "The Essence of Power" (*Das Wesen der Macht*).<sup>4</sup> Before listing and analysing them, I need to emphasise the specific historical period (1939-40) in which these thoughts were developed: World War II had just broken out, unleashing the most formidable display of military power the world had ever seen, thus casting a shadow and a sense of imminent end over the continent once blessed by the gods' presence and the gift of thought, by a belonging to truth and a quest for beauty.

Heidegger begins his analysis by claiming that Power is a trait not of the human, but of Being (or History). This, however, does not mean that the human is not implicated in the unfolding of Power: it is actually entirely implicated, called upon, or mobilised in a distinct way. Power, for Heidegger, is a distinct and singular mode, or phase, of the historical unfolding of Being, a distinct regime of truth that he encompasses under the philosopheme of "the first beginning": 'Being as Power is the non-essence [*Unwesen*] of the unfounded essence [*Wesen*] of Being as *phusis* in the first beginning'.<sup>5</sup> This unfolding of Being as *phusis*, and its non-essence as *Macht* in the first beginning, in other words,

the distinct relation between man and being as one of power and nature, will be contrasted with the unfolding of Being as *Ereignis* in the other beginning, that is, as this other relation, this other alliance between man and Being, one described as “im-power” (*Ohnmacht*). For the moment, let us leave the word *Ereignis* untranslated, allowing it to stand as a question and a problem we shall have to return to.

In the first beginning – and by that Heidegger means in the stretch of time that spans across the whole of the history of the West – but especially in modern times, beings, as things of nature, are unified in a chain of concepts that all revolve around the drive of power (*dynamis, potentia, potestas*, force, energy, will, and of course “power” itself): 'Being as Power abandons beings to mere effectiveness [*Wirksamkeit*] (force [*Kraft*], violence, [*Gewalt*], etc.), and in this unleashing Power is from the start unconditional Power'.<sup>6</sup> Power is the power to disclose beings in their effectiveness and efficiency, their producibility, productivity, and reproducibility, in short, their “machinability.” As such, it is accompanied by a series of processes of “rationalisation”: of labour, of economic productivity, of social practices and political discourses, of scientific research, etc. It is nature itself that is envisaged as effectiveness, efficiency, reserve, and power. And this, it can be only to the extent that beings as a whole are held and represented as what can be calculated in advance and predicted, and so subjected to planning, control and domination. Power is revealed not in military displays and power relations, in institutions and work relations alone; it is also revealed in the will-to-plan-and-control that has permeated all sectors of life, from the sciences to the economy, from the factory to the home. Ultimately, it is not the Nazi regime, but the communist state, which, according to Heidegger, is best equipped to carry out this systematic demand for control and rationalisation (in that, he was wrong: the forces of capital have proven far more adept, for more flexible, at organising and exploiting resources, whether natural or human). Any attempt, such as Žižek's, to engage with the problem of the means of production from a Heideggerian perspective needs to take into account the question of production itself as a metaphysical question. From that perspective, the debate concerning the *means* of production is not radical enough, and the politics based on that debate, whether Marxist-Leninist or capitalist, is never going to get to the heart of the problem. The problem concerns ends and origins, not means.

The second trait of Power that needs to be stressed is that it is self-moving. It is constantly aiming to surpass and enhance itself, to increase its power, to move towards hyperpower. This is what Heidegger calls the “overpowering” (*Übermächtigung*), or also,

following Nietzsche of course, but with a very different interpretation, the will-to-power (*Wille-zur-Macht*). Power is intrinsically wilful, that is, animated by an inner drive for more of its own nature, for hyperpower. It has no goal outside itself, no other *raison d'être* than the drive towards more power. It is, in Heideggerian terminology, its own unconditional, or absolute self-empowering, one that unfolds in and through its limitless and goalless self-overpowering. There is only one response to the question regarding the object to which the will to power is directed, or the direction in which it is heading, and that is: more power, the self-overcoming and overpowering of power itself, or power brought to the *nth* power. The violence that is intrinsic to Power derives precisely from this logic of self-overcoming in ever greater modalities of power, or this intensification of a phenomenon that knows no limit: "Power 'needs' power (violence) [*Macht 'braucht' Macht (Gewalt)*]." <sup>7</sup> Power needs violence in order to grow. Its self-overcoming amounts to the unleashing of violence. In fact, it is violence – especially political violence – as *such*. This the very violence that Žižek seems to defend and justify, but which Heidegger seeks to delimit, analyse, and neutralise.

The third and last trait I wish to emphasise concerns the connection of essence between Power and what Heidegger calls the end of the first beginning, or the end of metaphysics: "The essential unfolding of Power as machination negates the possibility of the truth of beings. It is itself the end of metaphysics." <sup>8</sup> It is metaphysics itself, and metaphysics in its entirety, that is *of* Power. This means that all metaphysics is metaphysics of power, and that power itself is through and through metaphysical. How does Heidegger understand metaphysics? As the negation of the possibility of the truth of beings, as the systematic and radical impossibility of an awakening to the truth of being. What do the thematic of power, the interpretation of nature, and of the human, in terms of power, amount to? They amount to the ultimate degree of occultation of truth. And yet, Power, or, more specifically perhaps, the horizon of power that serves as the backdrop against which all things and all situations are evaluated, or simply come to be seen, is itself a possibility and an epoch of the truth of being. It is the regime of truth in which the event of truth itself is least visible, most concealed. It is the uttermost *non-essence* of truth, yet still a modality of its unfolding.

This, in turn, means that any reversal or overcoming of metaphysics, any recovering of the truth of being will amount to an overcoming, or at least a neutralising of Power itself. It will amount to the constitution of a horizon other than that of Power and its will to dominate. Will such a reversal, or such an overcoming, greater than any



revolution, ever take place? And might it be a matter of and for politics? No, at least no longer in 1940, no longer after the absurd and blind hope invested in Nazi politics. Witnessing the war, and the years that immediately preceded it, Heidegger seems convinced that politics can only remain in the hands of Power, that it can only be one of its most patent (and destructive) effects. We now need to turn to such effects, and to politics in particular, before returning to the question regarding the possibility of a politics of powerlessness, or *Ohnmacht*. Regarding the latter, I shall try to show how this specific aspect of Heidegger's thought can be played against other aspects of his thought, and how one might be able to advance towards something like a post-metaphysical politics.

### **The Effects of Power**

Having identified and analysed the most significant traits of Power as an onto-historical process, let me now turn – albeit only briefly and schematically - to the various types of effects it generates. For the sake of clarity, let us regroup these effects under two main categories, or types: ideological, and political.

If we look at the dominant political-ideological conceptions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the first type of effects consist in the interpretation of the human in terms of matter, life, race, and spirit. Despite the way in which they have been opposed to one another, and have led to the bloodiest conflicts in history, such determinations can be traced back to an interpretation of the human that is more or less directly, more or less explicitly derived from the central dualisms of ancient and modern thought: that between form and matter, matter and mind (or spirit), mind and body, and subject and object. All such oppositions testify to a specific interpretation of the human, and of the human in relation to the world. All fail to understand the phenomenon of world itself from the perspective of its hidden side, one that Heidegger calls “earth.” The world is itself understood as “nature,” and this means in such a way that the human finds itself in a position of centrality and domination in relation to it. The total realisation or the consumation of subjectivity is visible on a number of levels, which could be called ideological, economical, and political. Ultimately, such categories turn out to be inadequate from Heidegger's perspective, since, for him, it is a matter of revealing their common onto-historical root, their common metaphysical origin, with the consequence that the boundaries between the various domains these categories serve to define appear less secure, less decisive.

§ 38 of *Die Geschichte des Seyns*, locates very clearly the roots of the concepts of “people,” “community,” and “nation” in the metaphysics of subjectivity. Nationalism, as well as socialism, we are told, are consequences of the metaphysics of subjectivity. At the heart of the former lies an interpretation of who we are as “life.” Life itself is understood as blood (and also soil) and, more dangerously, but also quite naturally, as race. “The idea of race,” Heidegger writes, that is to say, “the reckoning with race, springs from the experience of Being as subjectivity, and is itself nothing “political” [*ist nicht ein ‘Politikum’*].”<sup>9</sup> “Race-breeding [*Rasse-züchtung*],” he goes on to write, “is one way in which domination asserts itself [*ein Weg der Selbsbehauptung für die Herrschaft*].” “Race-fostering” [*Rassen-pflege*] is not so much a political measure as it is a measure of Power, that is, a measure rooted in Power. It may be introduced in this or that way, terminated in this or that way, but, “in its implementation and its promulgation, it depends on the prevailing conditions of domination and Power.” As such, “the metaphysical ground of race-ideology [*Rassedenkens*] is not biologism, but the subjectivity that underlies the Being of all beings and that remains to be thought.”<sup>10</sup> Whether it is carried out in the name of the purity of the race and the need for vital space, or in that of the proletariat, political action testifies to an unrestrained struggle (*Kampf*) for the securing of power.

Today’s wars, Heidegger claims, are but the most visible and most devastating forms of the empowering and unleashing of power. They have become “world” wars and “total” wars, necessarily so, given the hegemonic and totalising drive of power. Worldly armed conflicts are only one aspect of this struggle for power. As Jünger had already recognised, peace is now organised in a way that is also entirely subservient to the will-to-power: “Peace is now the all-powerful control and domination [*Beherrschung*] of the possibilities of war and the securing of their mode of realisation.”<sup>11</sup> The very difference between war and peace has become tenuous, if not altogether untenable. It is only in the context of what Jünger calls a “total mobilisation,” that is, a mobilisation of the whole of the real understood as resource, including human, that the figure of the Worker can be revealed as the other side of the figure of the Soldier.

The Worker is the soldier of times of peace, when the struggle is economical, but extreme and violent in a different way, where the imperatives are of production (and, nowadays, in our global capitalist economy, of consumption, fuelled with 24hours/day advertising, political incentives, with the sole aim of keeping the machine running, an eye riveted on the risks of inflation, another on those of deflation, a third eye, perhaps,

riveted on the natural resources available around the world and on the best way to secure them, but utterly blind to the real force driving the whole process), but where the vocabulary and strategies of war are implemented: we talk of “conquering” shares of a market, of “targets”, of “global offensives” and “defence strategies”, etc. Our techno-discourse, eco-techno-nomics, and techno-politics are a direct expression of the will-to-dominate that is the driving force of Power.

What Heidegger is analysing in those pages is indeed the phenomenon of totalitarianism, one which, for him, is not limited to the political or ideological sphere, and also not to those regimes traditionally identified as “totalitarian.” For it is not just the wars themselves that have become global; it is the world itself and in its totality that has become war-like, that is, the surface or the territory on which the struggles for its domination are played out. The world has become this space, or this arena, of which every inch, every corner has been colonised by the will-to-power. It is the sense of world itself that has changed, and this radical transformation is the phenomenon that needs to be analysed.

Let me now turn to the more political effects of Power, and by that I mean the various regimes that follow from the metaphysics of subjectivity underlying modern politics. All regimes, on Heidegger’s reading, are regimes, or modalities of Power. “One day, he writes, the common sense of democracies and the rational method and planning of the ‘total authority’ will be discovered and recognised in their identity.”<sup>12</sup> This, Heidegger believes, can be achieved only by looking at the structure they have in common, and that is the State. The State, on Heidegger’s reading, turns out to be the mode of political organisation best equipped to maximise and rationalise the imperatives of power, and it is characterised primarily by its inability to call itself into question as an institution, that is, to bring into questioning its own metaphysical principles and imperatives of organisation, domination, and control. It is characterised by what Heidegger calls its *Fraglosigkeit* (a lack of questioning to which Heidegger himself fell prey when embracing the Nazi state). It is *fraglosig* in connection with the nature of the relation to beings that characterises it:

The basic modern form, in which the specifically modern and self-positing self-consciousness of man orders the whole of being, is the State. Such is the reason why the “political” becomes the normative self-certainty of historical consciousness. The political determines itself on the basis of history conceived in terms of consciousness, and this means experienced technologically. The “political” is the completion of history. Because the political is thus the

technological-historical certainty underlying all doing, the “political” is characterised by the unconditional lack of questioning [*Fraglosigkeit*] with respect to itself. The lack of questioning of the “political” and its totality belong together.<sup>13</sup>

What does this mean? That the modern political is essentially totalitarian, that is, driven by a logic and a demand of total power over which it itself has no power, a drive it itself cannot call into question. “Totalitarianism” is a direct consequence of the lack of questioning, that is, of thought in the most fundamental sense, which characterises the logic of the will-to-power.

It is not the political, or politicians, that lead and guide. For they are themselves driven, that is, subjected to a force that is nothing personal, nothing like a lust for personal power, for what, too often, and especially in the case of the so-called “tyrants” or “dictators,” we call megalomania. The psychopathological does not operate at the level at which issues of power, politics and history, can be adequately dealt with. The reason for the belonging together of the lack of questioning of the political and its totality, or for the existence of totalitarianism as the politicisation of Being in its totality, Heidegger goes on to write, does not lie, “as some naïve minds believe, in the free will of dictators,” but “in the metaphysical essence of modern actuality in general.”<sup>14</sup> It is customary to locate issues of power in the types of regime that exercise it. And classical political philosophy argues over just that, that is, over which regime is the most suitable, or the most just, over how to define such regimes, and possibly how to reform or overthrow them. Thus debates have emerged over the merits and limitations of democracy, monarchy, aristocracy, and, in the last 150 years, over socialism and fascism. Now, as I suggested earlier, Foucault has done a lot to reveal how power, whilst in many ways indissociable from state apparatus (government, the police, the penal system, the bureaucracy), is more diffuse and more complex, not simply identifiable with state-structures.

In a way, Heidegger goes further still, by attempting to reveal a single unifying structure, or, better said perhaps, a single historical event, of which all relations of power, including those regulating institutions such as the family, the school and the university, healthcare, etc. would be an effect. Without ever going into any of the microanalysis Foucault develops, Heidegger tries to extract a convergence or a common hidden commitment in those political regimes that are traditionally opposed and declared to be incompatible. It is normally assumed, Heidegger argues, that those regimes that give a free rein to the unlimited unfolding of power are the so-called “authoritarian” or,

we would say today, “totalitarian” states. In the case of such regimes, it seems that power is entirely concentrated in the hands of one or a handful of individuals, who secure their power through the submission and exploitation of the masses. From the point of view of parliamentary democracies, such a display of unrestrained violence is attributable to the blind rage that is indissociable from the bare lust for total power. Power, it is thought, is abused, and the counter-power (*Gegenmacht*) of the people contained and silenced. By contrast, parliamentary democracies see themselves as involved in a process of cheques and balances and alternative governments aimed at securing the sharing of power. Their power game takes on the appearance of “free” negotiations and consultations, and this appearance generates the following appearance, in which this organisation of power alone is deemed to be “ethical.”

There is no doubt that such differences matter, and mattered especially in Heidegger’s lifetime. There is no doubt, also, that Heidegger chose to ignore such differences, preferring instead to equate “Americanism” and “Bolshevism,” refusing – even after the war - to condemn national-socialism, and to acknowledge its criminal responsibility in the deaths of millions of Jews, gypsies, communists, and other political or religious groups. The question, however, is one of knowing whether there is anything to Heidegger’s claim regarding the fundamental unity of destiny between totalitarian and democratic states. There is something deeply disturbing about such a claim. Yet it is a claim that today, after the collapse of the Soviet empire, and the victorious emergence of the forces of Capital and their formidable political vectors (the Western democracies), merits careful consideration (and one that, to his credit, Žižek recognises and faces). On the one hand, it is thought, Heidegger argues, that the despot, or the tyrant, monopolises power, when, in actual fact, he himself is entirely in the hands of a logic and an economy of power that is perhaps best served and certainly most visible in totalitarian regimes. On the other hand, democracies, Heidegger believes, are under the illusion that power comes from the people, that it is an expression of the will of the people. The illusion consists in believing in something like a straightforward collective or popular will, in the belief that what is most decisive is a matter for us to decide, that we, the people, can *be* in power and hold it, when the situation is quite different – when we are in its grip, when power itself is that over which we have no power, when we cannot decide to not be involved in such power relations, in such a drive for power, when power, as the one dominating currency in the world, the one value that is recognised across the board and throughout the world, cannot itself be called into question, itself evaluated, and possibly

overcome, transformed into something else.

The problem, Heidegger believes, is that we remain blind with respect to the real origin and siege of power, blind as to who, or rather what is really in power. And this is primarily because there is a general "occultation of the true ruler" (*eine Verschleierung der eigentlichen Machthabe*), a self-concealing of Power in its imperatives, effects and general unfolding. The question, as Arendt asked, is indeed one of knowing Who or What is in power, Who or What governs, or rules. But, unlike Arendt, Heidegger believes it is Power itself that governs and rules, and this in such a way that it is itself never visible as such in the effects it generates. Power is what "authorises," or "empowers" (*ermächtigt*) political power, but also economic and symbolic power. It is what authorises us as powerful beings, what empowers us in the face of nature, of the world, and of others. There is something like an authorisation of power, or a process of empowering, through which our relation to all beings becomes one of power. The only thing it does not empower us to do is to resist power, to turn power back upon itself and replace it in the site of its own metaphysical origin.

In 1940, at the peak of Germany's military power and territorial gains, looking ahead, into the future, Heidegger sees not Germany, but communist Russia and America as the two super-powers, that is, as the two modes of social, economic and political organisation suited to the demands of Power in its total and global tendency. Under the section "*Koinon*," *Die Geschichte des Seyns* develops a long analysis of communism, and one that, I believe, is relevant to the debate Žižek introduces. Specifically, it interprets a number of socialist policies in the Soviet Union - the communisation of the land, of resources, of work and goods, the transformation of the bourgeois society into the classless society via the dictatorship of the proletariat, the nationalisation of the industry and the banking system, the abolition of religious institutions, in short, the unification and homogenisation of the country as a whole - in the light of a maximisation of power and control, the ultimate horizon of which is the world itself and as a whole.

By 1940, Heidegger seemed already convinced that national-socialism, far from heralding a thousand year empire, was no match for the superior mode of rational organisation set up in Russia. The power of the third Reich was merely transitory. It is only because our time has been sealed in advanced by the stamp of the power of homogenisation and hegemonisation that the single class, the single party, the single thought can be held as a solution and a way forward. And if, through such measures,

the proletariat is indeed freed, it is not from the yoke of the bourgeoisie, but *for* the systematic exercise of its destiny, for its own call to power. Nowhere, Heidegger argues, is the logic of power more visible than in communism: it reveals the extent to which power belongs neither to a class, not to a few, nor to the people as a whole, but to power alone. Power rules and dominates for the sake of its own self-empowering and over-empowering. Communism, in its essence, is nothing like a humanism. Like all regimes, it is a political and socio-economic response to an onto-historical problem (but then, all problems are onto-historical for Heidegger). Such is the reason why Heidegger rejects something like a Christian (or any other) spiritualism as an alternative to Marxist-Leninist materialism.

First, Heidegger argues, Marxism is itself a spiritualism (it is the “spirit” of metaphysics that speaks in Marxism). Second, the opposition between matter and spirit is itself a product of metaphysics, and so in no way begins to address the problem, that is, Power. It is not, he says, the flight from political actuality into the “spiritual” that will allow us to overcome the horizon of Power that is, to paraphrase Sartre, the unsurpassable horizon of our time, but the thinking through of the political (*das Durchdenken des Politischen*), back into its unthought essence, namely, Power, as the drive towards beings as such and as a whole, and away from the *truth* of Being. This is the reason why, to use Žižek’s own words, Heidegger “refused to consider a radical Leftist engagement.” If such an engagement signals the desire to transform the “capitalist relations of production,” and to promote “universal emancipation,” then Heidegger’s own engagement, and his subsequent questioning of politics, was never, and could never have been, “leftist.” On the other hand, to the extent that Heidegger’s critique of politics, power, and metaphysics, is also a critique of production, then a radical – albeit non-leftist, or leftists in a new sense – agenda can indeed be extracted from Heidegger’s thought.

### **Overcoming Power?**

Having broadly established modern politics as a response to a certain metaphysical demand, having revealed its various aspects as solutions to a problem that differs from it in nature, the question is one of knowing whether Heidegger is able to think something in place of politics, in place of the modern state, so as to neutralise Power and put it into question, bring it forward as a question. This, in a way, is a far

more delicate and complex task. But it is one that Heidegger set out to achieve, in ways that were perhaps only partly successful.

In the face of Heidegger's diagnosis regarding the will-to-power-and-domination that has taken over the human in its relation to the world as such and as a whole, the question is one of knowing whether something can be opposed to power, whether we, humans, can mobilise a certain power against power itself. Or could our very powerlessness in the face of Power be the very form of our resistance to Power? Could it be an opportunity to reawaken ourselves to another power - not another form of power, of distribution and organisation of power, but another *sense* of power: our power, and so our freedom to *be*, our power to be free. From what? From nothing – other than from Power itself. For what, then? For that which, from the start, and irreducibly, points beyond the will-to-power, beyond the current consummation of metaphysics in the drive for power, and into the truth of Being. Perhaps our own utter and extreme powerlessness in the face of the will-to-power marks the point at which we become free for something else, for that which is simply otherwise than the will-to-power. Perhaps it marks the moment at which we become empowered in the face of what, following Heidegger, we may want to call the *Ohnmacht*, or that which is simply without power, otherwise that powerful, and which would need to be distinguished most clearly from the *Machtlosigkeit*, or the powerlessness of our own will in the face of the will-to-power.

Ultimately, and once this possibility held in reserve has been extracted, it will be a question of knowing whether there would be any sense in talking of a politics of powerlessness or, better said perhaps, of the otherwise than power (*Ohnmacht*). Žižek makes it very clear that it's precisely not this solution that a radical, progressive, and leftist agenda should promote. Instead, he advocates a revolutionary politics, and an irreducible, necessary violence, closer to the one Heidegger himself supported in 1933. Still, an alternative presents itself. It may be worth considering, inasmuch as it is entirely compatible with a progressive politics concerned with issues of production, consumption, and social relations.

What sort of reality, of possibility, can *Ohnmacht* designate? Freedom, as the ability to *be*, as this power or this ability that, already in *Being and Time*, Heidegger characterised as a *Seinkönnen*, and with which he identified Dasein as who we are. Our ability, or power to *be*, is radically different from our power to dominate and subjugate, produce and consume. It is a power to be Being itself, a power of letting-be. From this concept of *Ohnmacht* follows that of earth, and from the coming together of earth and



powerlessness, we shall be able to sketch something like an infra-national cosmopolitanism.

Unlike the world, which is always involved in the process of its own territorialisation, and which is an object of perpetual rivalry, a disputed object, something we long to conquer and possess, the earth does not belong to anyone. It does not even belong to all. Rather, we, as humans, belong to it: we are *of* it. It is our allotment and our destiny. It is that which is withheld, withdrawn from the world and the will-to-power that blows over its surface. It is that which does not allow itself to be captured, or secured through a rational apparatus, that which unfolds otherwise than through rationalisation and power, discreetly, almost imperceptibly. It is the im-power of power itself, its condition of possibility and impossibility, the condition of its historical unfolding as well as of its impossible totalisation and closure. It is, so to speak, the other side of power, the reverse or the lining of the totality and its tendency towards totalisation, the singularity that marks the suspension of totalitarianism as such. It is the line through which power has always already begun to flee, and in the flight of which the most thinking of thoughts is engulfed. It is this extreme possibility that is there from the start, yet nowhere less visible than when man rules over the world.

If the world today is indeed envisaged as a reserve of resources (including human), and so governed by an imperative of maximisation and optimisation, the earth must be seen as a horizon of sacrifice, as an uneconomical space, or a space in which an altogether different economy would prevail. If our relation to the world is indeed economical, our relation to the earth is, following Hölderlin's idiom, poetic. Bataille understood this very clearly: the value of poetry, literature, and art rests in its sacrificial potential, that is, in its ability to transform our relation to the world by turning to the earth as its uneconomical excess. Between metaphysical poetics, which understands nature and culture, humanity and animality, in productivistic terms, and historical poetics, in the space of which the question of our being is played out, the boundary may seem fragile. And it is true that both possibilities share a common origin, namely, truth. Yet they are two possibilities separated by an abyss.

If Jünger's analysis of the figure of the worker and of the modern age as total mobilisation, if Nietzsche's will-to-power and Marx's thesis regarding the material forces of production have all contributed decisively to the way in which modern man relates to its world, Hölderlin's poetic voice, and poetics in the most essential, counter-effectual sense, is still awaiting us on the other side, on the side of earth. It is on the basis of

Hölderlin's poetry, and following Heidegger, that we can begin to sketch the idea – I hesitate to say the programme – of a citizenship of the earth. Of the earth, and not of the world, for all worldly determinations will turn out to be metaphysical, especially those of blood and soil, still operative today, when it is a question of attributing citizenship. It is remarkable that we have not yet been able to invent a citizenship outside the two highly problematic criteria of blood and soil. The citizenship of the earth, then, would translate into something like a geopoliticism, and precisely not cosmopolitanism.

Could such a politics, such a possibility, begin in Europe? Could it begin in Europe, at a time when Europe, struggling with the debate regarding its constitution (or impossibility thereof), is wondering how to define itself as an Idea, that is, as more than just a socio-economic space defined by the imperatives of capital?<sup>15</sup> If Heidegger is in any sense correct in saying that what characterises humanity as such is the fact that, from the start, it is open to, and so always made to respond to, and so responsible for – in what amounts to a paradoxical logic and an ethics of responsibility in the face of the inevitable - something that exceeds it, and which is its own abyssal ground, something which it can never itself ground and secure, namely, Truth; if he is in any sense correct in envisaging Europe as a certain response to this exposure, and so a destiny, a response that consisted in shutting down the space of thought opened up by truth, and of directing thought towards the world understood as nature, towards itself as rationality, and towards the human as power - then, to be a responsible European would be to call into question the history of Europe itself, and the way in which it has spilled over other continents, other parts of the world, exporting its will-to-dominate and its imperatives of power and production, turning the world as such and as a whole into one, all-encompassing Europe.

Such a responsibility can be met not by developing yet a more integrated economic and industrial space – no matter how beneficial such an integration may have been for peace and stability in Europe in the last sixty years – but by developing a new sense of place, as the place of and for questioning. This means: as the place where the destiny of the human *in terms* of truth is taken up again, this time from the essence of truth itself, in what amounts to a repetition of Europe's history, but from what, in that history, had remained withdrawn, forgotten. Questioning, here, needs to be understood as a mode of being, as the mode of being in which we find ourselves when turning to that which, from the start and always, has turned itself towards us, summoned us, called upon us. It is Heidegger's ambition and, yes, despite what he often says, his hope, that

Europe return to its “nearness to the source,” that it recognises its exposedness and destination to truth as the very source of its historicity, that it measure up to it by remembering and repeating it, by enacting this turn within history, thus initiating this “other beginning” he speaks of. And if the first, metaphysical beginning is understood as the history of a certain closure, the closure of the world itself, its enclosure and total appropriation, the other beginning, and the questioning it presupposes, is marked by a radical and impossible closure, for one that springs from the Open as such.

Could Europe, then, come to stand for this impossible closure, could it ever be strong enough to affirm its own impossible closure, its own, essential and irreducible powerlessness in the face of the earth, to which it belongs? Could it do so not just negatively, by default, but positively, in what would amount to a joyful and mature gesture? Could that be “politics” in the highest and ownmost sense? Perhaps, if we understand politics as the questioning that is concerned with our place on earth. Perhaps, if the *polis* (or whatever the name for this other space might be) designates the very space in which the future of Europe could be determined on the basis of its exposedness to the Open as such. “Perhaps,” Heidegger writes in a way that demonstrates the programmatic and tentative nature of his enterprise, “the word *polis* is the name for the domain that became increasingly and continually questionable and remained question-worthy.”<sup>16</sup> Perhaps this domain ought to be revived, and provide something like a passage, a transition, or a way into “politics” in the other beginning. This is revolutionary politics in the strongest sense, insofar as it presupposes a break with the metaphysics of power, production, and desire that rule today. Yet it is also the most silent, most imperceptible of revolutions, insofar as it turns powerlessness into *praxis*.

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper, entitled "Questioning Politics, or Beyond Power," was published in the *European Journal of Political Theory*, 2006, 6(1), 87-103.

<sup>2</sup> K. Löwith, "Der okkasionelle Dezisionismus von C. Schmitt," in K. Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften*, 1: 33.

<sup>3</sup> *Die Geschichte des Seyns*, Gesamtausgabe Band 69 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1998), 64. Henceforth GA 69, followed by page number.

<sup>4</sup> GA 69, § 57.

<sup>5</sup> GA 69, 62.

<sup>6</sup> GA 69, 63.

<sup>7</sup> GA 69, 75.

<sup>8</sup> GA 69, 71.

<sup>9</sup> GA 69, 70.

<sup>10</sup> GA 69, 70-71.

<sup>11</sup> GA 69, 179-80.

<sup>12</sup> *Besinnung*, Gesamtausgabe Band 66 (Frankfurt am Main, 1997), 234.

<sup>13</sup> *Hölderlins Hymne "Der Ister"*, Gesamtausgabe Band 53 (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1984), 117-18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>15</sup> This question must be immediately nuanced, as many "Europeans" precisely refuse the idea of a Europe that would be anything other than a space for the free circulation of goods and workers.

<sup>16</sup> GA 53, 99.