History of Being, Machenschaft and Anti-Semitism: Implications of Heidegger's "Black Notebooks" for a Critical Theory of Technology

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Introduction

One of the thinkers who influenced the studies on technology throughout the twentieth century was the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. His theory has even influenced many researchers who study the phenomenon of the internet, such as Paul Virilio, Arthur Kroker and Peter Sloterdijk, to name a few. The reception of his work, however, has been marked by controversy, especially because of his explicit support to National Socialism for a period of his life.

For many authors, the concepts formulated by Heidegger are essentially marked by the same convictions that led him to National Socialism. However, until a little over a year ago, despite the stain of his adherence to National Socialism, there was no concrete evidence of anti-Semitism in his work. This changed with the publication of the first part of the "Black Notebooks" at the beginning of 2014, in which there are passages that express a certain resentment toward the Jews.

According to the editor of the "Black Notebooks," Peter Trawny [1], it is quite clear that there are anti-Semitic passages. What is not clear yet is to what extent his work as a whole is affected by them. For the area of philosophy of technology, the question is more specific: How is his newly confirmed anti-Semitism related to his concept of technology? What implications do the anti-Semitic passages from "Black Notebooks" have for the reflection on contemporary technologies and especially on the internet?

In order to contribute to this debate, this paper intends to present the first results of a research that is still in its early stages, namely reflections drawn from an analysis of the main passages of the "Black Notebooks" which refer to the Jews, of the book "Heidegger und der Mythos der jüdischen Weltverschwörung" by Trawny and of some other materials that already dealt with Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism.

The discussion is divided into four parts. Firstly I present Heidegger's definition of technology. This will be done by a revision of the main ideas of the philosopher on the subject, based specially on his text "Die Frage nach der Technik." The second part aims to present the relations between his thought and the ideas of the National Socialism, based on some critics and on Trawny's explanation about the role of the Jewry in his thought. In the third part, I intend to discuss the connections between the Jewry and technology in those passages. The anti-Semitic excerpts contain clear ties to the concept of technology. The argumentation intends to explore these links in order to understand to what extent the concept of technology is tainted by his anti-Semitism. In the fourth and last part I deal with the question whether the conclusions of his concept of technology depend on such anti-Semitic background.

Heidegger's technology

For Heidegger, the decisive question in technology is beyond the technological object. Heidegger believed that the object is only the manifestation of something, not what is decisive in itself. Technology is a mode of thinking, which he calls *calculative thinking*. This thinking seeks to control the development of all processes in order to obtain at the end an optimized product.

In its current phase, when it has become a planetary phenomenon, trying to cover everything and everyone, it turned into *enframing* (Gestell, in the original German), a whole way of framing reality [2]. It represents the hegemony of the calculative thinking. It is an attempt to measure and represent the "real" that culminates in the transformation of everything into raw material (Bestand) for the operation of the very economic, political and technological system. In the age of technology, every aspect of the real (nature, objects and human beliefs and practices) only makes sense if it contributes to the permanent reproduction of this framework and, finally, of technology itself as the only valid mode of thinking.

It is important to remember that the mode of self-presentation of the real for Dasein is exactly what Heidegger had in mind with his concept of "Sein" (to be). In his history of being, things appear to humans from different perspectives, and this is directly related to the beliefs of each era. Depending on what the human beings believe the real to be, they will see it under certain aspects and deal with it in a certain way. In the age of technology, according to Heidegger, the real presents itself for humans as raw material. This moment when everything would be seen as raw material is, for him, the completion of metaphysics, the maximal point of the long history of Western thought since Plato.

Nazism and anti-Semitism in his work

Michael Zimmerman considers this a very interesting interpretation. The history of the West would be a long decline in successive stages of what it means "to be," culminating in the simplistic way of the age of technology in which "to be" would mean "to be raw material for the self-enhancing technological system" [3]. However, Zimmerman suggests that this is exactly the kind of interpretation that the Nazi political right had adopted in Heidegger's period. Then, it would not be original and, even worse, would contribute to a conservative view of society, because it tends to a return to the past and to an escape from the challenges of modernity.

Moreover, far from representing a great novelty, his thought would have been just limited by this political alignment. Johannes Fritsche is even more emphatic. For him, the work of Heidegger "belongs unequivocally to the political right, and Heidegger opted also for its extreme, the National Socialism" [4]. As such, there would be no room for his work on the list of politically progressive perspectives. Victor Farías reached the same conclusions [5].

The picture becomes even more complicated with the emergence of anti-Semitic passages in the "Black Notebooks." According to Trawny, these are passages that clearly point to a "seinsgeschichtlichen Antisemitismus," an anti-Semitism that is connected with the "history of being." Heidegger would have seen in the historical moment of the early twentieth century the last stage of the Greek proposal of understanding of being, when humanity would be living an uprooting phase (Entwurzelung), lack of perspective, nihilism. It would be the opportunity for a new beginning in the history of being, and, according to Heidegger, the Germans were called to propose this new beginning, by bringing back and strengthening the notion of the necessary relation of a people (Volk) with its home (Heimat). Who was imposed as enemy? Precisely those who would be "worldless" (weltlos) and "homeless" (heimatlos), which would adopt a cosmopolitan lifestyle and that would threaten the achievement of the German people's destination. What is clear in the "Black Notebooks" is that Heidegger saw the Jewish people as fulfilling this gap.

Technology in the anti-Semitic passages

In this context, technology seems to play a crucial role. Firstly, Heidegger associates the increase of power of the Jewry with the Western metaphysics, which "offered the attachment point for the expansion (Sichbreitmachen) of an empty rationality and ability of calculating" [6]. Heidegger speaks further of the Jews as having the "ability of calculating" (Rechenfähigkeit). They "live with their stressed calculated talent" [7].

As previously mentioned, one of the Heideggerian definitions of technology is that it represents the completion of metaphysics and that it is the calculative thinking itself. By associating calculative thinking as a Jewish capacity, Heidegger suggests somehow that technology is at least a significant embodiment of the Jewry. Trawny points out that Heidegger does not want to suggest any kind of biological association. Bernhard Radhoff had already made clear that Heidegger's concept of people was radically different from the one of National Socialism, and–instead of collective subject–meant the horizon from which the being differentiates itself from other beings [8]. Anyway, the Jewish people would be provided with this technological calculative thinking.

Moreover, Heidegger clearly relates the global Jewry with "machination" (Machenschaft). Machination was the first concept coined by the philosopher to define the essence of technology, later replaced by Gestell. Machination highlights how the human being in the technological stage of history understands the real as "makable" ("machen", in the original language, means "to make"), available to the human experiences. In the "Black Notebooks," Heidegger affirms that machination established *race* as a principle of the history, by which human life can be better measured, controlled and cultivated, typical processes of technology. "The establishment of racial breeding does not come from 'life' itself, but from the overpowering of life through the machination," adds Heidegger [7]. It is a "consequence" of the power of machination.

This passage is preceded by a sentence partially mentioned above, in which it is said that the Jewry has already lived for a long period according to the principle of *race*. That means that their way of living is the one that is set in motion by the machination, an explicit relation between global Jewry and technology. To live "worldless" would be just a consequence of machination, and as Trawny places, Jews were characterized by Heidegger as worldless. They would, according to Heidegger, be dominated by machination. "The Jew appears as the worldless calculative subject, dominated by 'machination'" [9]. The global Jewish, thus, would be the first people dominated by technology. With this, the Jews would have become a vehicle of the technological uprooting, to transmit to the world a worldless lifestyle.

Alternatives

There seems to be no doubt that Heidegger's concept of technology was born embedded in his resentment against the Jewry, seen as the enemy of Germany in the fulfillment of its destiny. The question now is whether his conclusions on the matter depend on this anti-Semitic background. To approach this question, it is interesting to evoke some critical theses about the contemporary technological world derived from Heidegger's ideas. Many of the most provocative ideas about technology are based on his concepts without containing any anti-Semitism.

By itself, stating that technology causes uprooting cannot be discarded immediately, although in the context of the philosopher that is related to the Jews. Arguably, along with Paul Virilio [10], for example, the contemporary technological thinking is causing an uprooting process while it removes its reference to time-space and accelerates human life. This is not in itself an anti-Semitic thesis.

Specifically regarding the internet, at least part of its success seems to lie precisely in its amazing ability of representation, measurement and control (contacts on social networks, visits to pages, file downloads, profiles, surveillance etc.), as Baudrillard noticed [11]. While this interpretation corresponds to Heidegger's thesis that in the age of technology the human being is eager to represent, measure and calculate everything, it does not seem to depend on a political position that identifies a people or specific ethnic group as its vehicle, even less as an enemy to be overcome.

No doubt Heidegger was a conservative, but the very thesis from Fritsche, that the only thing Heidegger craved was to repeat the past, needs to be reassessed, for instance, when taking into account the text "Gelassenheit" [12]. Heidegger says that it is not the case of exterminating technology–back to a past that no longer exists–but of developing a peaceful, serene relationship with it, not the mere refusal but at the same time without the illusion that, by adhering to it, we are taking significant steps toward progress.

Fierce critics like Zimmerman acknowledge that Heidegger's work is ambiguous. "The fact that he chose to interpret his own texts as consistent with National Socialism does not mean that others must interpret them in the same way" [13]. It can be read without the political background that Heidegger chose to it. The internet can be understood as a phenomenon that expresses human drive to control the real and as a symptom of enframing and uprooting, without incurring a reactionary thought and even less anti-Semitism. But the imminent risk of a conservative interpretation of the internet must always be kept in mind when using Heidegger. The internet as an uprooting phenomenon, for example, can only be understood without a nostalgic trace when one reads it consciously, that is, if one realizes how easily this kind of interpretation leads to a yearning for forms of pre-industrial life.

Conclusions

Although this research is still in its initial phase, the results above strengthen the thesis that the anti-Semitic passages in the "Black Notebooks" present problems for Heidegger's idea of modern technology. There is no doubt that Heidegger saw technology in the light of his anti-Semitism. Whether this means that all Heidegger's interpretation of technology needs to be discarded is another point. Some of the most fruitful critics of the technological world, such as Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio and Arthur Kroker, developed provocative theses based on Heidegger's insights, without there being any trace of anti-Semitism in their works.

To summarize, his concept of technique was coined in the context of his anti-Semitism. To some extent, one can even admit, updating Zimmerman's thesis, that his anti-Semitism has restricted his understanding of technology. But at least important parts of his concept do not depend on anti-Semitism. However, even if one can enjoy aspects of Heidegger's conception of technology as a critical reflection on the contemporary context, especially in relation to internet, it is clear the need to build a new narrative to such criticism, rescuing it from the hornet's nest in which Heidegger himself put it.

References and Notes

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