

Presentations at the Conference  
“Continental Philosophy:  
Towards the Future?”

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# Continental Philosophy: Living With the “Night of Truth”?

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Last week I finished reading the gripping, posthumously published diaries of Victor Klemperer who recorded, on an almost daily basis, what it was to live as a Jew in Germany throughout the years of 1933 to 1945. Klemperer had been a Professor of Romance languages in Dresden and the diaries witness to his intellectual effort to understand the sources of the cruelty which he constantly confronted. In an entry on August 16, 1936, he fantasizes a turning of the tables with his oppressors and writes this: “if one day the situation were reversed and the fate of the vanquished lay in my hands, then I would let all the ordinary folk go and even some of the leaders, who might perhaps after all have had honorable intentions and not know what they were doing. But I would have all the intellectuals strung up, and the professors three feet higher than the rest; they would be left hanging from the lampposts for as long as was compatible with hygiene.”<sup>1</sup> Klemperer was constantly startled by the wickedness, the cowardice, the stupidity, the opportunism of German university professors during the period of National Socialism. And, if one knows something of the historical record, it would be difficult not to be startled. And so I have a question this afternoon: Must a continental philosophy which desires to have a critical ethical and political efficacy possess clear analyses of intellectual practice in the twentieth century’s great age of ideological faiths? Fascism and Communism above all. Indeed, will continental philosophy of the future come to be largely

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years I, 1933-1941* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), p. 184.

defined by those analyses because they are dealing with some of the most significant experiences and legacies of European life?

Immediate post-war amnesia has yielded to steady scholarly research and new appreciation of how extensive the involvement of the academic community was with National Socialism and even with its most distinctive projects of destruction. Philosophers were well represented among those academicians. Indeed there could be a study done of that very distinctive experience of surprise which many philosophers have had in discovering that an author whom they regarded quite highly had also written Fascist or Communist trash. Both Foucault and Habermas shared that experience.<sup>2</sup> One observer at the time even spoke of a "Blitzphilosophie" to describe the rapid advance of philosophers toward the mission of supposedly deepening Nazism's intellectual foundations.<sup>3</sup> Although much work has been done and is being done in this area, too much of the literature seems to fall into the trap of unrefined hindsight or easy psychologizing.

I have personally found Hans Sluga's writings to be among the most impressive in addressing this philosophical crime. His critical appropriation of Nietzsche and Foucault led him to study the German philosophy of that period as a discursive field, in terms of which he posed the crucial question as he conceived it: To what extent was there complicity "not between individual practitioners of philosophy and the National Socialists, but between the discipline in which they were engaged and the Nazi system of power"?<sup>4</sup> Sluga's investigation exhibits German culture's articulation of a set of categories that were both political and philosophical, and philosophers regularly failed to appreciate how political was their statement of those categories. He examines four of these political-philosophical concepts: the true order that legitimates action; the notion of leadership as spiritual; the idea of a nation that embraces a metaphysical essence and biological racism. The last and perhaps most significant category is that of "crisis," the sense of having reached a decisive moment that is not merely political but spiritual-

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, "Politics and Ethics: An Interview," *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 373-374.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Ten Hoor, "The Nazis Purge Philosophy," *The Kenyon Review* 3, no. 3 (Summer, 1941), reprinted by the same journal in Winter, 1989, p. 173.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Sluga, "Metadiscourse: German Philosophy and National Socialism," in *Social Research* 56, 4 (Winter, 1989), p. 818.

philosophical. Sluga claims that, perhaps, in our general sense of Nazism, there is an overemphasis on that movement's visual trappings (uniforms, flags, parades) and not enough on its verbal environment in which "crisis" played an indispensable role.<sup>5</sup> His study argues that this notion of crisis was an historical a priori and not the description of empirical emergencies. Sluga claims that the recourse to crisis is the consequence of modern subjectivity, the projection of individual experience onto the order of history itself. Following Foucault, he calls it "one of the most destructive habits of modern thought."<sup>6</sup> For Sluga, the conduct of philosophers during the Nazi period was not just a moral failure; it was a philosophical failure. Philosophers should have had greater critical distance from an ideology whose worldview seemed to have no need of philosophy and which put forward an intuitive vision of experience rather than a theory.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, there have been numerous suggestions made in the decades since the Fascist period about the lessons that should be drawn from this shameless intellectual collaboration. One tempting lesson that I hope is not yielded to is that of abandoning the very goal of an ethical and political efficacy for philosophy. However, perhaps "temptation" is not the term to use for such a possible withdrawal; in reality, it would be a retreat that was engineered by specific political and cultural forces. Indeed, if John McCumber's recent study of analytic thought's emergence as dominant on the American philosophical scene holds up to scholarly scrutiny (*Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Period*), we have a clear warning of what the future face of philosophy in the United States will be. For those who are unaware of McCumber's investigation, he argues that the decline of alternative philosophical styles, especially politically potent pragmatism, is directly related to the largely forgotten McCarthy assault on American universities in the nineteen-fifties and their consequent desire to be politically innocuous. It is an assault that the American Philosophical Association has hardly kept in our professional memory. Almost all of the incidents McCumber reports were news to me but I was also sobered by the trends regarding

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<sup>5</sup> Hans Sluga, *Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 62.

<sup>6</sup> *Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany*, pp. 70-74.

<sup>7</sup> *Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany*, pp. 255, 194-195.

philosophy in general in the States to which he draws attention, specifically the decline in the number of departments. The Directory of American Philosophers gives the statistic of 2,110 departments of philosophy in 1994; four years later it was 1,723; the current directory (2002-03) gives the figure of 1,676, a loss of 434 departments (more than 20%) in less than ten years. *The New York Times* reported in an article that America is getting out of the philosophy business and McCumber himself concludes his study with the claim that, if it continues as it is, American philosophy is “doomed to further shrinkage and irrelevance.”<sup>8</sup> And for those of us who are ancient enough to remember how significant a discipline Classics once was on the academic scene, this fear is not far fetched. But perhaps it is precisely the more critical awareness of this recent past and its political sources that will facilitate a reinvigoration and integration of the Continental Tradition with an American political philosophy. And that might be among the most important of the challenges—and opportunities—that faces our department at Boston College.

I believe that those who think within Foucauldian lines have a contribution to make to philosophy’s development and I see two streams in that influence, both of which are profoundly nourished by the publication of his Collège de France lectures that is now underway. The first is the more identifiably philosophical stream, his study of the Greeks in search of a more critical attitude than modern thought made possible. His fresh emphasis on philosophy as a way of life, as a way of caring for one’s self, rather than as a mere academic discipline is a response to the political failure of philosophy in the last century. I regard Ed McGushin’s work at this point as the most thorough articulation of this Foucauldian philosophical project that I know of. The second stream is the work of those who are continuing to develop some of the insights of and do the research entailed by Foucault’s original project of a history of sexuality, a project that was unfortunately eclipsed by the shift in his concerns represented in the published volumes 2 and 3. Foucault’s first plan opens out into a program of cultural studies that have already had extraordinary influence upon feminist and gay communities. The plan for his sexuality series was to include a volume *Flesh and Body*, which

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<sup>8</sup> John McCumber, *Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2001), p. 167.

was to study the contrast between the modern notion of the body and the Christian experience of flesh; there were to be studies of the sexualization of children (*The Children's Crusade*), of Women (*Woman, Mother and Hysteric*), and of the sexually abnormal (*Perverts*). Then there was to be the concluding study of this investigation of political sexuality which he had tentatively titled *Population and Races*. As Foucault's lectures demonstrate, he had done significant investigations in each of these areas. I am particularly struck by how his examination of population, and its importance as a category, anticipated today's discussion among historians of overpopulation as the central social issue for Nazi thought. I believe Hannah Arendt was the only other thinker who placed such emphasis on that theme.<sup>9</sup>

One response to the failure of philosophy in face of ideological creeds is to join with those who assert the need for a more sophisticated and critical conversation with religion. I am not going to be able to develop this point here but in an essay that is very critical of McCumber, David Hollinger argues that the political history of American philosophy was mapped on top of an ethno-religious demographic matrix and that its specific character today is due to the mode of its own secularization. He claims that, in order to understand its current isolation in the United States, the "central transition to be studied is not from pragmatism to logical positivism, but from religiously engaged philosophy to styles of doing philosophy that ignored religion, and did not even treat it as a respected rival."<sup>10</sup> The damage from that disdain is substantial, for it made philosophers less alert to the religious dynamics of 20th century political movements than it should have been. Foucault certainly felt the need for such analysis and conversation with religion, although that has been largely ignored, at least up until recently. Although his volume on Christian sexuality has never been published, this interest should have been much more difficult to overlook inasmuch as he lectured frequently on such topics as ascetical practices, penitential forms and pastoral power. For example, he had devoted much of his very last

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<sup>9</sup> Götz Aly and Susanne Heim, *Architects of Annihilation: Auschwitz and the Logic of Destruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> David Hollinger, "Religion, Ethnicity, and Politics in American Philosophy: Reflections on McCumber's *Time in the Ditch*," *Philosophical Studies* 102 (2002), pp. 179-180.

lecture at the Collège de France on March 28, 1984 to New Testament articulations of *parrhesia*, of speaking frankly. In that lecture, Foucault draws a very interesting contrast between two poles in Christian development: the tradition which stresses a fearful obedience to God and suspicious examination of oneself through tests; and then the pole of *parrhesia* that represents the mystical tradition which he claimed was one of the sources in our culture for the very development of a critical attitude.

The deepest intellectual reason for Foucault's examination of Christian writers and disciplines was the very nature of his project as a history of the present: the forms of knowledge, power and subjectivity which he saw as animating our culture are often constructed in decisive ways in argument with religious practices and concerns. One of the most significant decisions Foucault's thought took, and perhaps a major source of its continuing relevance, was his refusal of what he called the "blackmail of the Enlightenment," that either-or acceptance of it as some new rationality liberated from the superstitions of a religious past. His history of the present came to ignore the customary epochal divisions and concluded that, between different historical eras, the "typography of the parting of the waters is hard to pin down."<sup>11</sup> In a 1975 lecture, he mentioned the insight which would greatly shape his studies of the next decade: "Now we must ask what happened in the sixteenth century. The period which is characterized not by the beginning of a dechristianization but by the beginning of a christianization-in-depth."<sup>12</sup> My own studies of the Holocaust are guided by that insight. It may very well be the case that, as Charles Taylor asserts, Christianity is the source of modern liberal political culture's proclamation of universal human rights and that this is a "great advance in the practical penetration of the gospel in human life."<sup>13</sup> The murder of European Jews and others, however, may force us

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<sup>11</sup> "What Is Enlightenment?," *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 40-43; "The Battle for Chastity," in Foucault, *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997) p. 196.

<sup>12</sup> Course lecture of February 19, 1975. The lectures from this course have now been published as *Les anormaux* (Paris: Gallimard and Le Seuil, 1999), p. 164.

<sup>13</sup> *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Adward Lecture*, edited by James Heft (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 18.

to take account of some toxic effects in Christianity's continued penetration.

In following Foucault's investigation of sexuality's role in genocide, I argue in my work that no less than the homosexual, the Jew, the Nazi and the Christian possessed sexual identities for a fascist theory and practice that operated in terms of a certain logic of spirit-flesh. These identities are theological, religious artifacts. Using Foucault, I have tried to examine an ethical practice in which National Socialism forged a regime of erotic danger, a manner of relating to sexual life that was less indebted to biology than it was to an inherited sphere of spirituality, the struggle of spirit with flesh. Within that field, Nazism presented itself as overcoming dualisms: a Christian alienation of the soul from the body and a Jewish alienation of the carnal from the spiritual. National Socialism was a confession of faith. There was a sanctification of biological life that was transformed into an adoration of national life. Political life was sacralized as sacral language was politicized. National Socialist religious mythology made of Hitler a messianic figure, constructed God as a symbol of vital forces, and articulated doctrines of human nature and redemption.<sup>14</sup>

To my mind, the Continental Philosophy of the future will continue to be burdened with the obligation to understand the depths of the academic community's collaboration with totalitarian experience in both action and thought. Surely a daunting, even unending task. As Derrida puts it:

Nazism was not born in the desert. We all know this, but it has to be constantly recalled. And, even if, far from any desert, it had grown like a mushroom in the silence of a European forest, it would have done so in the shadow of big trees, in the shelter of their silence or their indifference but in the same soil. I will not list these trees which in Europe people an immense black forest, I will not count the species. For essential reasons, the presentation of them defies tabular layout. In their bushy taxonomy, they would bear the names of

<sup>14</sup> See Robert Pois, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 91. Also Philippe Burin, "Political Religion: The Relevance of a Concept," *History and Memory* 9, 1-2 (Fall, 1997), pp. 321-349.

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 110.



religions, philosophies, political regimes, economic structures, religious or academic institutions. In short, what is confusedly called culture, or the world of spirit.”<sup>15</sup>

But perhaps philosophical conversation with that world of spirit, with religion in particular, may remind us of the faith and hope that may inhabit even the most difficult of enterprises.

A very brief concluding word about the book which I have coedited with Jeremy Carrette. One of the greatest pleasures for me in working with other students of Foucault is the range of interests and commitments that they bring to the conversation. The collection reflects those interests and originated in a conference that I organized at Loyola University in Chicago when I was a visiting professor there. Our hope was to have Foucault’s perspectives on sexuality, subjectivity and knowledge-power serve theological self-examination. If there is a common insight that weaves through these essays, I believe it is captured in Foucault’s expression, the “night of truth.” There is an acute awareness among the authors of truth’s negativity, of our profound ignorance of our selves, of our actions’ consequences, and of the complex forces out of which we and our culture have emerged. It is certainly an insight that is appropriate for a future philosophy that wishes to recover from last century’s ideological frenzy. And only that would be a philosophy which is properly prepared for any faith worthy of the human person’s commitment. ☺