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Heidegger and Dostoevsky: Philosophy and Politics

Why compare Heidegger and Dostoevsky, two minds that seem to be quite distant from each other in terms of both space and time?¹ The gap between them can be bridged, and in this paper, I will show that Heidegger, in his existentialist thinking, develops key concepts of Dostoevsky's narrative philosophy. He draws on Dostoevsky's view of Russia in his conception of the German people and their historical destiny. Curiously enough, Dostoevsky was the only non-German writer who attracted Heidegger's attention. It is known, for instance, that Martin Heidegger had a portrait of Dostoevsky on his work desk.² Dostoevsky was especially important for the early Heidegger. In a memoir from 1958 the German philosopher includes Dostoevsky in a short list of authors whom he avidly read in the 1910s. In addition to Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Hegel, Schelling, Rilke, Trakl and Dilthey, Dostoevsky appears among the chosen few.³ When Heidegger was appointed professor at Freiburg, he

¹ Research on this topic is quite scant. The most elaborated study is Paola Giulia Belloli: *Fenomenologia della Colpa. Freud, Heidegger, Dostoevskij*. Milano 2001. Belloli concentrates on the question of "ontological guilt" (Schuldigsein) and understands Dostoevsky's elaborations on this topic in *The Brothers Karamazov* as a "prefiguration" of Heidegger's philosophy (123 ff.) Cf. also Horst-Jürgen Gerigk: "Dostoevskij i Čajdeger: eschatologičeskij pisatel' i eschatologičeskij myslitel'." In: *XXI vek glazami Dostoevskogo: perspektivy čelovečestva*. Materialy meždunarodnoj konferencii, sostojavšejsja v Universitete Tiba (Japonija) 22-25 avgusta 2000 goda. Sostavitel': Toefusa Kinosita (Japonija). Redaktor: Karen Stepanjan (Rossija). Moskva 2002: 99-116. In German: Horst-Jürgen Gerigk: "Dostojewskij und Heidegger: eschatologischer Dichter und eschatologischer Denker." In: Horst-Jürgen Gerigk: *Ein Meister aus Russland. Beziehungsfelder der Wirkung Dostojewskijs. Vierzehn Essays*. Heidelberg 2010, 22-40. (Beiträge zur neueren Literaturgeschichte; Bd. 275).

² Heinrich Wiegand Petzet: *Auf einen Stern zugehen. Begegnungen und Gespräche mit Martin Heidegger 1929-1976*. Frankfurt 1983, 128.

³ George Pattison: *The Later Heidegger*. London, New York 2000, 159.

even took personal care to ensure that the university library buy the new complete works of Dostoevsky in Moeller van den Bruck's famous edition.⁴ In a letter to his wife from 1920, Heidegger highlighted Dostoevsky as an author who made clear to him that some human beings live exclusively in relationships and have lost their "fatherland" (Heimat), their "meadows" and "fields".⁵ In the lecture on nihilism that he held at the beginning of World War II at the University of Freiburg, Heidegger quoted extensively from Dostoevsky's "Pushkin Speech," completely subscribing to the Russian author's analysis of the "negative" Russian man: "He is a man who is restless and will never content himself with the existing order, who does not believe in his native soil or its powers, who ultimately negates Russia and himself, who does not want to share anything in common with his fellow compatriots, and who, nevertheless, sincerely suffers from all this."⁶ Incidentally, Heidegger himself took care not to leave his native "meadows" and "fields". He twice turned down a job offer from Humboldt University in Berlin, the biggest and most prestigious academic institution in Germany at the time, and preferred to stay in his native Black Forest region.

What is the gist of Heidegger's preoccupation with Dostoevsky? The German philosopher found a kindred spirit in the Russian writer because both followed a critical agenda. They aimed at a critical diagnosis of the present situation in their nations and hoped that their writings would bring remedy to the reigning misery. Heidegger and Dostoevsky tried to couch their argumentation into a philosophy of history and eventually came up with a political solution for their intellectual seekings. The comparative analysis of both authors' stances towards their nation-states will help to explain Heidegger's allegiance to Hitler and Dostoevsky's worship of the Tsar.

1. The diagnosis of the crisis

Both Dostoevsky and Heidegger try to come to terms with the culture of their times. Dostoevsky's late novels are set in the epoch in which they

⁴ Sergio Givone: *Dostoevskij e la filosofia*. Bari 1984, 27.

⁵ "Mein liebes Seelchen!" *Briefe Martin Heideggers an seine Frau Elfride 1915-1970*. Herausgegeben und kommentiert von Gertrud Heidegger. München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt 2005, S. 106.

⁶ Martin Heidegger: *Gesamtausgabe*. 102 Bde. Frankfurt am Main 1974 ff., Bd. 48, 2. In the following quoted as: GA.

were written, and they all provide a narrative answer to Dostoevsky's central question: He is convinced that Russia is the holy place where Christ will reappear – why then does it take so long for him to come?⁷ Dostoevsky's answer is quite clear: Russia cannot be redeemed unless the Russians turn to Orthodoxy, form a unified nation and give up their engagement with competing passions such as money, power or sexuality.⁸ Narrative elaborations on this thesis can be found in all the big novels that followed Dostoevsky's return from Siberia.

Heidegger also starts with a devastating critique of modern society, where the "They" dominates (German: Man, French: On). According to Heidegger, Being itself (and being is the central notion in Heidegger's philosophy) is lost in the cultural practices that overlay true existence.

In a lecture from 1929 Heidegger coined the notion of "deep boredom" as a basic mood of his time. According to him, "Being as such has become bored with itself in the present day man." (GA 29/30, 242). Boredom causes nostalgia (Heimweh) in the philosopher, and Heidegger is drawn towards the Being, which he hopes to find in his fatherland (Heimat). (GA 29/30, 8)

In a lecture on Hölderlin, Heidegger makes it clear that being and fatherland were once one and have to be brought together again: "The Fatherland is Being itself, which bears and puts together from the beginning the history of a people that is a being people." (GA 39, 121) However, in the 1930s Heidegger was not ready to grant the German people the highest status of being. In a lecture from 1934 he dwelled at length on the question of whether the German *Volk* is really what it could be: "The question 'Are we the people that we are?' is not as senseless as it may appear at first glance. The question 'Are we the people that we are?' is maybe urgent and necessary in the highest degree. Our self being is quite strange then: We – being ourselves – are not who we are." (GA 58, 69) For Heidegger it is thus clear that a people has to *decide* that it wants to be the people it really is. This act of decision is crucial to him. Heidegger does not know exactly what the content of his decision is, but he has decided to change the status quo. It is possible to put this argument bluntly: The decisiveness as such is more important than the concrete

⁷ Horst-Jürgen Gerigk: "Das Russland-Bild in den fünf großen Romanen Dostojewskijs." In: Uta Gerhardt (Hg.): *Zeitperspektiven. Studien zu Kultur und Gesellschaft. Beiträge aus der Geschichte, Soziologie, Philosophie und Literaturwissenschaft*. Stuttgart 2003, 49-79.

⁸ Ulrich Schmid: „Rogožins Hochzeitsnacht: Figurale Spaltung als künstlerisches Verfahren.“ In: *Dostoevsky Studies. The Journal of the International Dostoevsky Society* (New Series) 3 (1999), 5-17.

decision for Heidegger. "In his decisiveness, man is placed into the process of the future (künftiges Geschehen). Decisiveness itself is an event (Geschehnis) that determines this process by anticipating it constantly." (GA 58, 77)

For both Heidegger and Dostoevsky the culture of the home nation is endangered by a development which they unanimously call "nihilism". Even the best natures can be corrupted by nihilism. Raskolnikov is a case in point, and Stavrogin as well. The difference between them lies in the fact, that Raskolnikov returns into the womb of Russia and finds a new attitude towards his fellow men in Siberia, whereas Stavrogin considers emigration to Switzerland and eventually commits suicide – these are two equivalent tragic solutions for this unrootedness.

Heidegger dedicated a whole series of lectures to the problem of "nihilism". His definition of "nihilism" embarks on a positive vision of truth: "The process whereby the existing world of the extrasensory (God, ethical law, the authority of reason, "progress," "the happiness of the many") loses its power is nihilism. Hence it follows that a reflection on the essence of nihilism has to mean the same as a reflection on truth, in which being stands in the whole." (GA 48, 15f.)

Nihilism leads to the domination of technology which, enslaves man and leads him into the anonymity and hopelessness of an isolated existence. Dostoevsky denounces the Crystal Palace in London as an embodiment of such a technological threat, Heidegger warns against the vicious circle of technical productivity in which "technical production only serves the absolute possibility of the production of everything."⁹ In a lecture from 1930 he criticizes the fact that man has become the monkey of his own inventions (GA 29/30, 241).¹⁰

Moreover, Dostoevsky and Heidegger agree on the origin of this dangerous development: it is latinity. Under this notion, Dostoevsky lumps together atheism, socialism, catholicism, and rationalism as expressions of one single baleful principle that distracts mankind from redemption. The most explicit wording of this topic can be found in Prince Myshkin's final statement in the novel *The Idiot*:

[...] Roman Catholicism is, in my opinion, worse than Atheism itself. Yes – that is my opinion. Atheism only preaches a negation, but Romanism goes further; it preaches a disfigured, distorted Christ – it preaches Anti-Christ – I assure you, I

⁹ Martin Heidegger: *Vorträge und Abhandlungen*. Pfullingen 1958, S. 91 f.

¹⁰ Reinhart Maurer: "Das eigentlich Anstößige an Heideggers Technikphilosophie." In: Reinhard Margreiter, Karl Leidlmair (eds.): *Heidegger. Technik-Ethik-Politik*. Würzburg 1991, 25-36.

swear it! [...] In my opinion the Roman Catholic religion is not a faith at all, but simply a continuation of the Roman Empire, and everything is subordinated to this idea – beginning with faith. The Pope has seized territories and an earthly throne, and has held them with the sword. And so the thing has gone on, only that to the sword they have added lying, intrigue, deceit, fanaticism, superstition, swindling; – they have played fast and loose with the most sacred and sincere feelings of men; – they have exchanged everything – everything for money, for base earthly power! And is this not the teaching of Anti-Christ? How could the upshot of all this be other than Atheism? Atheism is the child of Roman Catholicism—it proceeded from these Romans themselves, though perhaps they would not believe it. [...] Socialism is the progeny of Romanism and of the Romanistic spirit. It and its brother Atheism proceed from Despair in opposition to Catholicism. It seeks to replace in itself the moral power of religion, in order to appease the spiritual thirst of parched humanity and save it- not by Christ, but by force.¹¹

Heidegger was convinced that German culture stemmed directly from ancient Greece and had to be defended against the pernicious influences of the Latin world. On July 16, 1957 he wrote in a letter to Erich Kästner: "Greece is still the dream, and every new attempt at thinking lives in it."¹² Only in 1962 did Heidegger dare to set foot upon the holy earth of Greece, he was afraid that the factual reality would not live up to his high expectations.

2. The understanding of history

Both Dostoevsky and Heidegger embed their people's history into the larger framework of a history of salvation. Dostoevsky observes two speeds in historical development: Western Europe reached the summit of modern civilization and technology at a fast pace, whereas Russia was still seeking its way. Dostoevsky's main argument is that Europe may have been faster but has now gone astray. In his eyes, it is precisely Russia's backwardness that gives her the chance to reach a better quality of future progress. For instance, Dostoevsky explained the gist of his novel *The Devils* in the context of a historiosophic vision for Russia to the heir to the throne Aleksandr Aleksandrovich. On Feb. 10, 1873 he wrote:

Shamed and frightened by the fact that we lag so far behind Europe in our rational and scientific development, we forgot that we have ourselves, in the

¹¹ Fedor Dostoevsky: *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij*. 30 vols. Leningrad 1972-1988, vol. 10, 450f. In the following quoted as: PSS.

¹² Martin Heidegger: *Aufenthalte*. Frankfurt am Main 1989, 31.

depth and the mission of the Russian spirit, as Russians, the capability, perhaps, to bring new light to the world, if only we stick to the originality (samobytnost') of our development. We forgot in the ecstasy of our self-deprecation the firm law of history that without such haughtiness about our own global significance as a nation, we can never be a great nation and leave behind us something original for the use of all of mankind. (PSS 29/I, 260).

Like Heidegger, Dostoevsky remains very vague about the concrete design of the expected redemption. The goal is simultaneously the means: Russia has to stick to its originality in order to reach its potential originality.

In the first issue of the journal *Time* Dostoevsky wrote: "We have become convinced, at last, that we are also a nationality of our own, original in the highest degree, and that our task is to create for ourselves a new form, our very own native one, taken from our native soil, taken from the spirit and the principles of our people." (PSS 18, 36) In the 1876 issue of *A Writer's Diary* Dostoevsky went so far as to say: "In the earth, in the soil there is something sacred" (PSS 25, 95-99).¹³

Dostoevsky maintained that the Tsar embodied all Russian values. According to him, the Russians had to recognize their own Russianness in the Tsar. In the 1881 issue of *A Writer's Diary* Dostoevsky wrote:

For the people the Tsar is not an external power, not the power of some conqueror, but the power of all the people, an all-unifying power the people themselves desired, one they have nurtured in their hearts and have come to love, one for which they have suffered, because their deliverance from the land of Egypt was only through that power. For the people, the Tsar is the incarnation of themselves, of their whole idea, their hopes and their beliefs. (PSS 27, 21).

Dostoevsky is here very close to Heidegger's argument that the German *Volk* is still bound to become the people it really is.

Heidegger had quite a fatalistic understanding of history.¹⁴ In his infamous inaugural speech as the newly elected rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933 he spoke about a "spiritual mission that forces the destiny of the German people into the characteristics of its history."¹⁵ In other words, history does not just happen, rather it is the adequate expression of a spiritual mission that directs the chosen people in a certain direction.

¹³ Cf. R.V. Pletnev: "Zemlja." (Iz raboty "Priroda v tvorcestve Dostoevskogo"). In: A.L. Bem (red.): *O Dostoevskom*. Sbornik statej I. Praga 1929, 153-162.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Andrew Barash: *Heidegger und der Historismus: Sinn der Geschichte und Geschichtlichkeit des Sinns*. Würzburg 1999.

¹⁵ Heidegger: *Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität*. Breslau 1934, 5.

In his 1933 lecture on "Being and Truth," Heidegger spoke of the "greatness of the historical moment" in which the "German people as a whole comes to itself, i.e. finds its leadership." The people creates its own state from this leadership, and, in this state, the *Volk* "grows up" (wächst hinauf) into the nation. Again, Heidegger stresses the fact, that the German *Volk* has a premonition of its destiny, but the precise content is unknown.¹⁶

All essential leadership lives from the power of a great, but basically hidden destination. And this destination is first and foremost the spiritual-popular mission, that destiny has reserved for nations. It is important to wake and to root (zu wecken und einzuwurzeln) the knowledge about this mission in the heart and the will of the people and its individuals. (GA 36/37, 3).

The German philosopher Karl Löwith remembers how he met Heidegger in Italy in 1936 and asked him if his philosophy was the reason why he sided with the Nazis. Heidegger confirmed this and added that his own understanding of "historicity" was the basis for his political "engagement."¹⁷

Both Dostoevsky and Heidegger thus find themselves in a dilemma that is not dissimilar to the dilemma of the Marxist philosophy of history: If the development of history has a distinct direction, what is the role and importance of individual action in such a framework? Should history be pushed forward or should it be left alone?

Both Heidegger and Dostoevsky stress the fact of leadership. However, they leave the leader out of the field. The political programs of Alexander II or Hitler, respectively, do not interest them. Both authors consider their political leaders to be an incarnation of the people's will.¹⁸ Karl Jaspers once asked Heidegger how a man as coarse as Hitler could possibly govern Germany. Heidegger answered: "Culture is of no importance. Look at his marvelous hands!" According to Heidegger, politics and philosophy are craftsmanship and can be likened to the work of the peasant.¹⁹

Both Dostoevsky and Heidegger seem to advocate the same solution: Since the course of history of a people is prepared by destiny, the most important point is not to push history forward towards its goal, but to help

¹⁶ Victor Farias: *Heidegger und der Nationalsozialismus*. Frankfurt am Main 1989, 186, 190, 194, 207ff.

¹⁷ Karl Löwith: *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933. Ein Bericht*. Stuttgart 1986, 57.

¹⁸ Victor Farias: *Heidegger und der Nationalsozialismus*. Frankfurt am Main 1989, 220.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 241.

the people perceive its destiny. As soon as a people sees its true destination, history will take its course and turn a people's destiny into a historical being.

3. The role of the author

Dostoevsky is not a pure writer just as Heidegger is not a pure philosopher. Dostoevsky uses his literary works to promote a distinct ideology whereas Heidegger believes that philosophical truth is "at the mercy of language".²⁰ In other words: Dostoevsky is as much a philosopher as Heidegger is a writer.

Both authors engaged in a life project of raising their readers' insight to the level of their own consciousness. Dostoevsky dedicated much of his time and energy to his publicistic projects and tried to get hold of his audience in two ways: He fed them interesting novels and taught them with his capturing essays.²¹

In his famous "Pushkin Speech" (PSS 26, 148) Dostoevsky hailed Pushkin as the spiritual leader of the Russian nation. Pushkin is, of course, merely a stand-in for Dostoevsky's own aspirations. It is not only with pride, but with the deep satisfaction of the successful prophet that Dostoevsky related how the hall went wild when he "proclaimed the universal unity of mankind" (30/1, 184) in a famous letter to his wife.

Similarly, Heidegger tried to expand the narrow boundaries of university teaching and organized student camps in which he tried to influence his students and strengthen their community.²² In a letter from 1933 he wrote: "Halfway through the camp I had to dismiss 20 people who did not fit in. Such a camp is a big test – for everybody – and dangerous. In the beginning there was a huge resistance against me – from students from other universities – but at the end I had them all." Generally, Heidegger was very much preoccupied with the range of his impact. Also in 1933 he pondered the possibility of accepting a professorship in

²⁰ Adolf Sternberger: *Der verstandene Tod. Eine Untersuchung zu Martin Heideggers Existenzial-Ontologie*. Leipzig 1934, 13. (Studien und Bibliographien zur Gegenwartsphilosophie 6)

²¹ Horst-Jürgen Gerigk: "Die Gründe für die Wirkung Dostojewskijs. Machiavelli als Künstler." In: Horst-Jürgen Gerigk: *Ein Meister aus Russland. Beziehungsfelder der Wirkung Dostojewskijs. Vierzehn Essays*. Heidelberg 2010, 160-188. (Beiträge zur neueren Literaturgeschichte; Bd. 275)

²² Hugo Ott: *Martin Heidegger. Unterwegs zu seiner Biographie*. Frankfurt am Main, New York 1988, 214ff.

Munich because he would have a broader audience there.²³ But his most ambitious plan was to establish an academy for university lecturers – in order to influence the pupils through the teachers.²⁴

In a lecture from 1934/35 Heidegger said: "The truth of a people is the appearance of the Being in the Whole [...]. The truth of a people is the appearance of the Being, out of which the people knows what it wants historically, by wanting itself, by wanting to be itself. The truth of the being of a people originates from the poet, but the manifested existence of the being is understood and structured and thus opened only through the thinker." In the same lecture Heidegger links poetry and philosophy to state agency and maintains that one of the three aspects prevails at different times.²⁵ No doubt Heidegger believed that the philosopher stands at the center of the national project in the 1930s – Karl Jaspers relates Martin Heidegger's famous statement that he intended to lead the Führer (den Führer führen).²⁶

Ultimately, both Heidegger and Dostoevsky dissolve politics in art. Heidegger asks that the work of art beget truth, which, in turn, begets history (GA 5, 65). Only in an artful presentation can truth make itself understood. And as soon as the truth of being has manifested itself with the help of the artistic thinker, no one can withstand it.

The same holds true for Dostoevsky. For him, beauty is the ultimate quality of truth, which prevails over rationalistic logic. When beauty becomes evident, everyone submits to this ultimate force.

It is clear that this supreme self-will is at the same time the supreme renunciation of one's will. My will consists in not having a will, for the ideal is beautiful. (PSS 20, 192)

The comparison between Dostoevsky and Heidegger thus shows that neither author worships the political leader out of blindness or opportunistic reasons. Both deeply believed in the historical mission of their people. Compared to the greatness of the people, the figure of the leader was insignificant. The leader was needed only as a focus for the self consciousness of the people; and it was the author's task to help his people recognize its own greatness and its necessary, yet unknown destiny.

²³ Peter Trawny: *Martin Heidegger*. Frankfurt am Main 2003, 189.

²⁴ Victor Fariás: *Heidegger und der Nationalsozialismus*. Frankfurt am Main 1989, 263.

²⁵ Otto Pöggeler: *Philosophie und Politik bei Heidegger*. Freiburg, München 1972, 28f.

²⁶ Otto Pöggeler: "Den Führer führen? Heidegger und kein Ende." In: *Philosophische Rundschau* 32 (1985), 26-67, 27.