Richard Wolin’s anthology _The Heidegger Controversy_ – reviewed in _RP_ 63 under the heading ‘Righteous Indignation’ – has run into trouble with its original publisher, Columbia University Press. This useful selection of texts dealing with Heidegger’s Nazism appeared in November 1991 and sold well. No doubt part of the reason for the book’s success was the sunny self-satisfaction of its editorialising. Wolin invited readers to join him in chortling at the disorientation of ‘the French left’ after ‘the timely demise of Marxism in the 1970s’. The main object of Wolin’s amusement was Jacques Derrida. One day, shortly after it was published, Derrida came across a copy of _The Heidegger Controversy_ in a New York bookstore, and failed to be charmed. He considered the book a cheap attack on Heidegger; and what’s more he discovered that, without consulting him, Wolin had included a translation of a preface entitled ‘Philosophers’ Hell’. Derrida got his lawyers to write to Columbia University Press threatening action if a proposed paperback version went ahead. Wolin then decided to drop the Derrida interview, but add a preface explaining why it was missing. Columbia asked Wolin to soften his criticisms of Derrida, but Wolin refused. According to his friend Thomas Sheehan, ‘the press was caught between Wolin’s principles and Derrida’s threats.’

Abandoned by its first publishers, _The Heidegger Controversy_ has now been adopted by the MIT Press (London, MIT Press, 1993, 305pp., £33.75 hb, £14.95 pb, 0 262 23166 2 hb, 0 262 73101 pb). The MIT edition is almost identical to the original, except that the Derrida interview is missing. It is hard to understand why it has been removed. Wolin claims that it was published quite legally, and that it was at most a lapse of courtesy not to have consulted Derrida himself. After Wolin and his publishers had shown the courage to come out against Nazism, it is a pity that they did not steel themselves to publish and be damned: to keep the translation of Derrida and let him take them to court if he wished.

In his new preface, Wolin relishes the confirmation of his suspicions about ‘Derrida and deconstruction’. Is it not delicious that Derrida – so critical in theory of the classical notion of authorship – should be making legalistic use of it all the same? Derrida finds it difficult to locate the essential theoretical point of divergence between Nazism and non-Nazism; so who can be surprised that he is now acting like a Nazi himself, censoring books if not actually burning them?

Derrida had argued that Heidegger’s belated affection for the concept of ‘spirit’ or ‘Geist’ acted as a bridge between his philosophical treatment of existence in the 1920s and his political commitment to Nazism in the 1930s. This suggestion may or may not be right, but it is certainly fresh, interesting and substantial. Wolin, however, is not impressed. He accuses Derrida of showing ‘unwillingness to specify the essential differences’ between Nazism and non-Nazism, as if there were no room for hesitation about what these ‘essential differences’ may be. He mocks Derrida for the ‘narrow and arbitrary’ attention he has given to the concept of ‘spirit’, and denounces what he calls his ‘quasi-exoneration of Heidegger’s philosophically overdetermined commitment to National Socialism’. In the correspondence columns of the _New York Review of Books_, Sheehan and Wolin boast that they have caught Derrida ‘in a lie’ and ‘with his pants down’.

Wolin is sure that Heidegger’s writings of the 1930s contain too little invocation of ‘spirit’, not too much. ‘Discourse on spirit,’ Wolin thinks, is ‘essentially and inalienably part of our tradition.’ And if Heidegger is still worth reading today, it is because of his ‘singular contributions’ to this ‘discourse on spirit’. Derrida noted that throughout Europe in the 1930s, thinkers of the most diverse political persuasions, Nazi and non-Nazi alike, joined in a ‘hymn to the freedom of spirit’, and he suggested that this was part of the conceptual background of Heidegger’s Nazi turn. Wolin, however, is sure that the idea of spirit belongs with democracy, human rights and freedom, and that it cannot possibly have any connection with totalitarianism. If Heidegger in 1945 was able to propound the idea that there was a single reality underlying ‘communism or fascism or world democracy’, it just shows that he was no longer able to come to terms with the traditional purveyors of spirit to democratic states. (It is worth noting, though, that Heidegger’s forebodings correspond almost word for word with those of George Orwell – not bad as far as democratic company goes.) ‘We now know – and can state unequivocally – that the most important political event of post-war Europe has been the thoroughgoing de-legitimation of the twin forms of totalitarian rule, fascism and communism.’ Wolin announces. ‘It is only in the aftermath of their virtual elimination that one can go about building a democracy of substance.’

The wilfulness of Wolin’s optimism about building a ‘democracy of substance’ on the foundation of a ‘discourse of spirit’ perhaps deserves one cheer. But two cheers go to Heidegger and Orwell for voicing fears about a ‘world democracy’ which glories itself by opposition to ‘the twin forms of totalitarian rule’, and finds it unthinkable that its ‘spirit’ could have anything in common with that of its imaginary playmates. And three cheers for Derrida. Whilst Wolin welcomes the triumph of the ‘spirit of democracy’, Derrida has the nerve to point out that things may still not turn out entirely well. Congratulating yourself on not being a Nazi may not be quite enough.

_Jonathan Rée_