

# LETTER

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Dear *Radical Philosophy*,

I am not sure how the interview with Hans-Georg Gadamer earned its presence within the pages of a journal called *Radical Philosophy*. I am no expert on him, and I would like to be corrected, but it appears that the interviewers allowed him to slide away from what should have been some fundamental issues for a journal of this kind.

Karl Löwith was a contemporary of Gadamer's and also a critical member of Heidegger's circle at Freiburg in the twenties. In *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933: A Report* (1989, translated by Elizabeth King, University of Illinois Press, 1994 – written in 1940) Löwith describes how, despite being a Jew, he kept his university post longer than most because of his valiant war service. (Many of his German colleagues were surprised that he was not grateful and resented the purchase of his post with his war-time exploits.) Nevertheless, Löwith was forced to leave Marburg in 1934, and Gadamer was one of four colleagues who were at Löwith's leaving dinner. After living in Italy, in Japan, and then in America, Löwith returned to Germany in 1952. The invitation to the chair of philosophy at Heidelberg, the cause of his post-war return, appears to have been made at Gadamer's instigation.

The charge that Bauman makes in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Polity, 1989, pp. 109–10) is that the German intelligentsia did little or nothing to defend Jewish university colleagues as first their careers were destroyed, and then, in many cases, if they had not emigrated, the Jews themselves. Löwith, writing in 1940 and therefore before the mass exterminations but close to the recorded events themselves, was obviously intent on scrupulously noting any acts of support for Jews or opposition to the regime amongst colleagues, apparently because they were so rare. He is thankful for the Gadamer's generous hospitality in the late twenties and notes Gadamer's attendance at his sparsely attended leaving dinner, but that is all that I could find in that source in Gadamer's favour.

In the interview, Gadamer extols the virtues of friendship over individualism as an antidote to present day racial division and hatred. Gadamer did not repudiate Löwith but neither does he appear to escape Löwith's regret that 'A protest by professors of the most diverse faculties against the dismissal of their Jewish colleagues was never made public' (Löwith, p. 78). In the whole of Germany, only three German professors and the Swiss Karl Barth, Löwith claims, openly protested. Even when the Student Society at Marburg circulated a national student leaflet ('Against the Non-German Spirit') which stated, *inter alia*, that Jews could only think as Jews and when they spoke German they lied, none of the university staff protested. By this time there were only four Jewish lecturers left at Marburg, besides Löwith.

Gadamer replies to (avoids?) a question about his politics in the Nazi period by implying that the most important issue was for philosophers to avoid censorship in order to keep critical intelligence alive. This was relatively easy, we are told, because philosophy was above the heads of the censors. It is worth contrasting this with Löwith's observation that in 1935, after the exclusion of Jewish university staff, and the zealous embrace and application of national-socialist doctrine by many of the remainder, 'on the basis of the miserable exam results, the Minister declared that he would no longer tolerate any professors dabbling in politics. The results of the "populist" scholarship indeed led to a depoliticization for political reasons, and the total state, paradoxically, again became the advocate of neutrality in intellectual matters!' (Löwith, p. 80).

There is an oppressive silence which surrounds the social history of this period, for those who try to penetrate it are threatened and harassed. This silence, on the anecdotal evidence I have, even envelops those who behaved courageously, perhaps for fear that they shame the rest. For whatever reasons, we must not be complicit in this silence.

*Radical Philosophy* arrived at my house on the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Perhaps it was that contrast that made this interview appear both at once insubstantial and offensive. I especially took exception to Gadamer's complacent view that philosophers like himself had lived up to the challenges of democracy, but the German media and the German 'masses' were not yet capable of doing so.

**Andrew McCulloch**