Prequel to the Heidegger debate

Audrey and Sartre

Ian H. Birchall

The question of Martin Heidegger’s Nazism, and its potential relevance to an appreciation of his philosophy, has been discussed over several decades. But most accounts of the debate assume that it began after the Second World War, in particular with the articles published in Sartre’s journal *Les Temps Modernes* in 1946. Indeed, it is often implied that until 1945, when the true extent of the Holocaust began to be revealed, there was nothing to debate about. However, at least one serious attempt to examine the connections between Heidegger’s philosophy and politics, from a critical Marxist perspective, was made as early as the autumn of 1934. This text – not referred to in any account of the debate I have consulted – contains several points of interest and deserves study in its own right. It is particularly noteworthy, however, since the author, Colette Audry, was a close friend and intellectual associate of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

Colette Audry (1906–1990) was a prolific writer and lifelong left-wing activist. Initially attracted to the Communist Party, she was profoundly influenced by reading Trotsky’s *My Life*; she became involved in the Fédération Unitaire de l’Enseignement and, in her own words, ‘fell into a nest of anarchos, Trotskyists and souvariniens’. She was also a member of the Socialist Party (SFIO) and a leading member of its anti-Stalinist left wing, the ‘Gauche Révolutionnaire’ led by Marceau Pivert. However, contrary to the assertions of de Beauvoir and others, she was never a member of a Trotskyist organization.

In October 1932 Audry, teaching in a lycée at Rouen, met Simone de Beauvoir, who had come to work in the same school. They became lifelong friends, and through de Beauvoir she also came to know Sartre well. It was an intellectual as well as a personal friendship; in 1933 she threw away an early novel because de Beauvoir told her it was no good. More significantly, in Rouen Audry frequently argued that it was important to write a book that would inspire women to reject their oppression. De Beauvoir, who at the time had little interest in feminism, was sceptical, and Audry’s frenetic political commitment did not allow her time to write it. But it is clear that those discussions provided the original inspiration that led de Beauvoir to write *The Second Sex*.

Audry’s article appeared in the left-wing teachers’ paper *L’Ecole emancipée*, organ of the Fédération Unitaire de l’Enseignement. This was not an ‘academic’ journal; it combined trade-union news, discussion of classroom methods and material, and general articles of a political and literary nature. Politically it stood firmly on the anti-Stalinist Left. It had a range of talented contributors, notably the historian Maurice Dommanget. Audry’s audience, then, was not composed of professional philosophers, but trade-union activists, mainly schoolteachers – people worried by the rise of fascism across Europe and anxious, within the limited time at their disposal, to keep in touch with current intellectual developments. Her article is short – two instalments of around 950 words each – and popular in style, while being highly serious in purpose and content.

Audry gives a bibliography of the works on which her treatment is based. These are Heidegger’s four main works written before this date – *Being and Time, Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics, The Essence of Reasons* and *What is Metaphysics?* She notes that apart from a fragment of *The Essence of Reasons* none of these has yet been translated into French, but was apparently undaunted by confronting the texts in the original German. Audry begins by making clear the method she is using and what sort of connections she is trying to establish:
Audry moves straight to the heart of the question of what she calls Heidegger’s ‘cult of humanity’. What explains this slight delay, and what it is precisely important to understand, is the fact that it constitutes a translation into philosophical language of the state of mind of the German people since the War, of the problems it has encountered and the solution it devised. By this I do not mean that Martin Heidegger (although he has recently given his solemn support to the Third Reich) has made a conscious effort to manufacture, for the needs of rather more demanding intelligences, a doctrine which the theoretical poverty of Mein Kampf and the absurdities of Alfred Rosenberg made very necessary. All he did was, as a philosopher, to follow a path parallel to that of the petty bourgeois masses. On the same basis as the social and political Germany of today, his work is a product of circumstances, a reflection of the struggles, sufferings and aspirations of his compatriots – a somewhat belated reflection, doubtless, for once again the owl of Minerva has taken flight only at dusk. But since every effect becomes in turn a cause, such a work has been able to serve as a confirmation and support to those intellectuals whom violence, demagogy and blind mysticism alone would not have sufficed to convince. In this land of philosophers, it is one among a thousand factors which have helped to neutralize the middle classes, or even to draw them along behind the storm troopers.

It is a measured introduction. Audry, taking for granted the anti-fascist sentiments of her readers, is anxious not to overstate Heidegger’s political importance and sees no point in indulging in moralistic denunciations. Yet Heidegger’s share of responsibility is firmly apportioned. In her quest for an approach that is not crudely reductionist yet avoids attributing autonomy to intellectuals which they exist, and for them the world is neither the universe…

Having established her methodological stance, Audry moves straight to the heart of the question with an account of what she calls Heidegger’s ‘cult of humanity’:

Since in Heidegger’s eyes the foundation of all philosophy is the description of existence, it is above all to this description that he is to apply himself. Now the essential existence is human existence. Man is at the centre of the universe and surpasses the universe…

Thereby we have, as it were, a religion of man before we have one of God. The ontological argument whereby the existence of a being is implied in its essence, this argument which hitherto was the privilege of the Divinity, is now applied to man first of all. God is not excluded, but there is nothing to enable us to make a positive or negative judgement with regard to his existence.

And she goes on to draw the parallel with the Nazi attitude to religion:

It’s the whole fascist metaphysic: idealist as opposed to dialectical materialism (primacy of man over the universe), anthropocentric as opposed to established religions. Hitler doesn’t fight the church, he consigns it to the shadows, uses it and subordinates it…

From this she proceeds to discuss the Heideggerian concept of man and again to show how this has parallels with the ideas put into practice in Nazi society. In particular she shows how the idea of ‘totality’ has been appropriated by Heidegger and by Nazi thought and used for their own ends:

What measures the value of man is therefore not such and such a faculty arbitrarily detached from the rest: it is the complete man. Hence a man who is contrasted to the rational man of Descartes, and who can be no less easily contrasted to the homo economicus which the ignorant always attribute to Marxism. Let us not forget that it is under the pretext of forming this complete man that in German schools and universities today ‘good feelings’ and physical strength are given priority over culture and the faculties of judgement.

And she goes on to show that Nazi ideas of race are rooted precisely in this concept of the complete man:

This complete man is also a rooted man, a man who has his place somewhere, who above all has his traditions. Since the characteristic of existence is that it unfolds in time, tradition is not a part of being, but its constitutive essence. The being of human existence is essentially historical. In this respect we can consider the idea of race as a materialization (one which is more stirring in the eyes of the common people) of the idea of tradition and milieu: man is a complete, concrete, real man, who has real relations with other men, German men like himself, not with men from Sumatra or Buenos Aires…

Audry then goes on to outline some of the main themes of Heidegger’s account of the human condition. Human beings cannot be separated from the world in which they exist, and for them the world is neither object of knowledge nor springboard for action, but cause of care (Sorge). Amid the banality of existence human beings strive to flee from themselves;
care becomes boredom, fear or curiosity; intelligence is enslaved to public opinion. For some, however, it is possible to escape the banality of existence; care is transformed into anxiety. The human being feels abandoned in face of the abyss, crushed by anxiety; but thereby he detaches himself from the world and is restored to himself. Primordial anxiety, on the boundaries of commonplace existence and rediscovered existence, is the anguish of death. The essence of existence is Being towards death (Sein zum Tode). But this rediscovered existence is stretched out towards the future, while commonplace existence is limited to the present.

Audry then moves on to the notion of destiny, and like many later commentators shows how the idea of destiny in Being and Time can be linked to the Nazi notion of national destiny:

Such is human destiny, individual human destiny. But is it not also the very destiny of the German nation such as it was seen by certain founders and ideologists of the National Socialist Party, such as it was described by Hitler in Mein Kampf? Just as the individual becomes aware of the world through care, runs the risk of being lost in commonplace existence, and rediscovers himself in anxiety, so Germany, just after the war, shaken and weakened, began by launching itself into the commonplace existence of social democracy. It was only by immense anxiety that she gradually saved herself. The new Germany was born of anxiety, anxiety of an existence that was ‘abandoned, humiliated, forsaken’, anguish in face of the abyss, anguish in face of death. The Third Reich, like the renewed man of Heidegger, was born not of reflective contemplation of the world, not even of primitive will, but of an immense emotion. So that the Third Reich might live, it was necessary that in the heart of every Nazi should be affirmed the resigned resolve to die. The renewed life of the individual is that very resolve. The rediscovered life of the nation was the will to sacrifice of the Führer’s troops. The Third Reich, for the mass of sincere fascists, was the renewed existence of the German people, for existence stretched out towards the future becomes ever more beautiful. Let us remember that at every moment, in all the towns of Germany, lectures are being given with the purpose of examining the nature of the new man, the man of tomorrow born of the revolution.

In conclusion, Audry significantly identifies the essential pessimism of Heidegger’s thought and its link to the underlying contradictions of the newly established fascist society:

It is undoubtedly a tragic doctrine, but Germans have a taste for the tragic. For Heidegger man may indeed be saved, but the abyss which causes him anxiety is never crossed, the enigma of the world is not solved – just as the Third Reich will not solve the problems which led to the advance of fascism. The fundamental pessimism of the philosopher does not succeed in transforming itself into optimism despite the ecstasy of the future and the consciousness of rediscovered life. Likewise he fails to overcome the contradiction between the greatness of man transcending the universe, and the humiliation, the forsakenness of man in face of this universe. All this should not surprise us; fascism accumulates contradictions in a tight knot but does not overcome them. Despair and optimism, pride and humiliation, grip of the past and anticipation of the future are mixed and mingled in the speeches of the leaders, in the minds of the masses and in the systems of the philosophers, without ever coming together in a strong explanatory synthesis.

And in her final paragraph Audry returns to her starting point, the question of method, enquiring how Marxism should respond to the problem. Once again seeming to anticipate some of Sartre’s concerns of two decades later, she laments the fact that mainstream (Comintern) Marxism has become fixated with the economic and the political, at the expense of giving a more complex materialist account of the totality of human culture:

Marxism had the means of achieving this synthesis. The bases had been laid. It is deplorable that in the fields of philosophy, morality and psychology, Marxists have stuck too closely to those foundations, failing to pursue the analysis, to respond to the needs of the moment, to enrich human experience; as a result they leave to their opponents the monopoly of intellectual audacity in everything which goes beyond the scope of the purely economic and political.

It is not necessary to claim that this is a comprehensive, or even wholly accurate, account of Heidegger’s thought; Audry did not claim so much herself. She was, after all, working from the raw texts, with little in the way of commentary or scholarly exegesis to guide her. But it is an interesting and in many ways perceptive account of some of the themes in Heidegger which link most closely to Nazism. Certainly Audry’s stance bears comparison with some of her more eminent contemporaries. Croce had denounced Heidegger for stupidity and dishonouring philosophy, but he did not go beyond moral outrage to analysis. As acute a Marxist as the young Herbert Marcuse nourished considerable illusions in Heidegger for quite a long time.

Why, then, has Audry’s article not received more discussion in accounts of the Heidegger debate? Some
fairly obvious reasons for her neglect spring to mind. Audry was a woman, and, even worse, she was not a professional philosopher. She was not merely a Marxist, but a dissident anti-Stalinist Marxist. She wrote her article in a review for trade-union activists, not a journal for academic philosophers. After 1945 she continued her career as writer and political activist. She published several novels, contributed regularly to *Les Temps modernes* and wrote a study of Léon Blum. She attended Lacan’s *Séminaires* and published two introductory studies of Sartre’s work. She was an active campaigner for birth control and abortion rights, a member of the left-wing Parti Socialiste Unifié in the 1960s and a leading figure in Mitterrand’s Socialist Party in her last two decades. On 8 May 1968, at the very beginning of the student upsurge, Audry, Sartre and de Beauvoir (with Daniel Guérin and Michel Leiris) issued a statement calling for full moral and material support for the students.

Audry did not pursue her philosophical interests – apart from the two books on Sartre – but the concern with Heidegger never left her. In a letter written a little over a year before her death she noted that one of the issues which still interested her was the ‘Heidegger affair’ – ‘I have a whole dossier on it, it had grabbed me, I think, because our whole epoch as well as the content we give to the word “culture” are implicated in it.’

From this outline of her career it is easy to see why the historians of philosophy might have failed to notice her. But the history of ideas does not always flow through the ‘authorized channels’. Elaine Showalter has commented that in the history of women novelists there is a tendency to concentrate on the mountains and neglect the ‘terrain between’. In the case of the relation between Heidegger and Sartre, that intermediate terrain is of considerable importance. Sartre’s ideas did not spring fully clothed from his skull; they were elaborated in debate and discussion with many of his lesser-known contemporaries. Contrary to the prevalent myths that Sartre was a crypto-Stalinist and that Marxism and Stalinism can be equated, Sartre engaged throughout his life in a lively intellectual dialogue with representatives of the anti-Stalinist revolutionary Left. As well as Audry, the names of Daniel Guérin, Pierre Naville and Claude Lefort are particularly important.

Audry’s political location on the revolutionary Left of the SFIO undoubtedly helped her to recognize the symptoms of Nazism at a time when much of the rest of the Left was still in a state of bewilderment. The Communist Party was still painfully readjusting after the débâcle of the ‘Third Period’, in which social democracy had been equated with ‘social fascism’, allowing Hitler to take power over a divided labour movement. Meanwhile the mainstream of the SFIO was afflicted with dangerous complacency; many members hoped that if Nazism was ignored it would go away of its own accord. Léon Blum defended the German Social Democrats’ decision to vote for Hindenburg rather than the Communist Thaelmann as President in 1932.

So it was from the ranks of the ‘Gauche révolutionnaire’ that some of the earliest and most perceptive thinking on fascism came, notably the work of Daniel Guérin, who largely shared Audry’s political alignment. Guérin toured Germany in the summer of 1933, smuggling out clandestine leaflets in the frame of his bicycle. In 1936 he published *Fascism and Big Business*, in which he analysed the social and economic roots of fascism in Germany and Italy. He also, in the same spirit as the conclusion of Audry’s article, lamented the fact that contemporary Marxists confined themselves too exclusively to the economic level, and argued that it was necessary to counterpose socialist ‘idealism’ to the ‘fascist mystique’.

It is important to recall that dissident Marxists like Audry and Guérin were alive to the dangers of Nazism from the very outset. It makes a nonsense of Heidegger’s grotesque claim in his 1948 letter to Marcuse that ‘the bloody terror of the Nazis’ was ‘kept a secret from the German people’. The horrors of Nazism were visible from the very outset – for those
who had eyes to see. It is in no way to belittle the enormity of the Holocaust to recognize that the nature of Nazism was clear from the very beginning. Some of Heidegger’s apologists suggest that his allegiance was to some ideal spirit of Nazism that was superior to the actual reality of Hitler’s rule. Presumably such a ‘Nazism with a human face’ would have kept the working class in its place without having to go to the extreme lengths of massacring millions of Jews.

Audry was a close friend of Sartre and de Beauvoir at the time of her article on Heidegger. Admittedly there was a certain amount of friction between Sartre and Audry. He was sceptical of her political commitment; moreover, Sartre was often less than sensitive to the question of women’s oppression, and irritated Audry profoundly by telling her that women had no place in politics. None the less Audry records that she found her discussions of Marxism with Sartre and de Beauvoir ‘both exhilarating and liberating’, and she considered the two among her closest friends.

Sartre spent the academic year 1933–34 in Berlin, studying Husserl and, to a lesser extent, Heidegger. During this time Audry and de Beauvoir used to breakfast together almost daily before work; and Audry helped de Beauvoir to arrange absence from work on a spurious medical pretext in order to visit Sartre. Unfortunately all the letters Sartre sent to de Beauvoir from Germany in this period are lost, so we lack firm information on what exactly Sartre was reporting back of his experiences in Germany. However, it seems highly probable that Audry would have been involved in discussions of Sartre’s studies in Germany and his impressions thereof. Audry’s article must have been written immediately after Sartre’s return from Berlin, and on the face of it it seems highly likely that she would have discussed its preparation with Sartre. It is clear that Sartre’s thinking developed in close contact with the ideas of de Beauvoir; Beauvoir’s intimate friend Audry must also have played a part in the process.

One thing seems more or less certain. Audry was an inveterate paper-seller: she did regular street sales of the SFIO paper Le Populaire, and she tried to involve her friends in trade-union activity. It is inconceivable that she did not sell copies of the issues of L’Ecole émancipée containing her Heidegger article to Sartre and de Beauvoir. If this supposition is correct, then Sartre was confronted with the thorny problem of Heidegger’s Nazism at the very beginning of his long relationship with the German philosopher, and it must have coloured all his subsequent reflections.

Sartre’s first encounter with Heidegger had come in June 1931, when the magazine Bifur carried the first translation of Heidegger into French – What is Metaphysics? as well as a text by Sartre entitled La Légende de la vérité. Sartre and de Beauvoir read the Heidegger text, but found no interest in it because they could not understand it. Sartre’s close friend, the Communist Paul Nizan, who had considerable influence on Bifur, had developed an interest in Heidegger before Sartre. In January 1933 Nizan published an article in which he stated: ‘The philosophy of Martin Heidegger may provide theoretical justifications for a fascist doctrine.’ However, the whole tone of the article is marred by Third Period Stalinism; Nizan saw emergent fascism on all sides and listed Kierkegaard as one of the sources of ‘a future fascist philosophy’. This was exactly the kind of mechanical reductionism which made Sartre so long distrustful of Marxism.

On Sartre’s own account, in his diary for 1940, he had begun to study Heidegger in Berlin in 1934, but had been so immersed in Husserl that he had not got very far. It was only in 1939 that he had begun to study Heidegger in depth. He attributes this in part at least to the appearance of Corbin’s 1938 translation of What is Metaphysics? (Despite his year in Germany, Sartre does not seem to have been at ease reading German.) But, as he notes, that translation was not an accident; it was the product of an intellectual movement of which Sartre himself was part:

the publication of What is Metaphysics? is a historical event which I in fact played a part in producing. For just about the time that I was setting off for Berlin, a wave of curiosity about phenomenology arose among the students. I was part of this movement, just as I was part of the movement of Parisians towards winter sports. That is to say, I picked up words that were lying around all over the place; I read some of the few French works dealing with the question; I pondered about notions that I did not properly understand and I wanted to know more about them. Thereupon I left for Berlin. There were many students in my situation – and young teachers too. When I came back, I knew a bit more and taught what I knew. So I increased that audience of people who were curious. One of my former pupils, Chastaing, even published an article on Heidegger’s concept of ‘das Man’. I certainly do not intend to say I am responsible for that article. I merely want to show how I inserted myself as an active and responsible member into a community of interested people and researchers which constituted itself into an audience. It was for us that Corbin did his translation. That initial curiosity was needed.
Although Sartre does not mention the specific contributions of Nizan and Audry, he is here quite clearly acknowledging that his own development towards an interest in Heidegger can be understood not as the convergence of two 'great minds' but as part of a complex collective process. And he goes on to echo Audry's analysis in stressing the tragic nature of Heidegger's thought and hence its relevance to the historical epoch of fascism:

For Heidegger's philosophy is a free assumption of his age. And his age was precisely a tragic age of decline and despair for Germany. It was the postwar period, the age when, for a mass of people who had hitherto found it entirely natural to be Germans, poverty and war were making Germany appear like a contingent reality with a destiny ... I don't want to claim that circumstances are identical for us at the present time. But it is true that there is a relationship of historical correspondence between our situation and his. And both are a development of the 1914 war; they fit together.44

By 1945, however, it was not enough to merely draw such parallels between Heidegger and his epoch. The question of Heidegger's Nazism, which Audry had confronted in 1934, had to be dealt with explicitly. Already during the German occupation some Communists had sought to arouse hostility to Sartre by labelling him a disciple of Heidegger.45 After the Liberation, Communist hostility to Sartre became stronger, since 'existentialism' represented an alternative pole of attraction for the radical youth the Communist Party hoped to influence. Jean Kanapa, a former student of Sartre's and a malicious ignoramus, made much of the links between Heidegger and Nazism in his L'Existentialisme n'est pas un humanisme.46 In a somewhat more sophisticated attack Henri Lefebvre – who dismissed existentialism as a 'groupuscule of stars and snobs' – accused Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre alike of making a gulf between subject and object.47

Sartre had already made an initial reply, in a statement published in the pro-Communist paper Action in December 1944. In a brief survey of existentialism he devoted one paragraph to the accusation that Heidegger was a Nazi:

Heidegger was a philosopher long before he was a Nazi. His support for Hitlerism can be explained by fear, perhaps by careerism, certainly by conformism: not a pretty sight, I agree. But that suffices to undermine your fine logic: 'Heidegger,' you say, 'is a member of the National Socialist Party, so his philosophy must be Nazi.' But that is not the case: Heidegger was lacking in character, that's true; will you dare to deduce from this that his philosophy is a defence of cowardice? Don't you know that it happens that men do not rise to the level of their own works? Will you condemn the Social Contract because Rousseau abandoned his children? And anyhow, what does Heidegger matter? If we discover our own thought in relation to that of another philosopher, if we ask it for techniques and methods with which we can gain access to new problems, does that mean that we espouse all its theories? Marx borrowed his dialectic from Hegel. Will you say that Capital is a Prussian work? We have seen the deplorable results of economic autarchy: we should not fall into intellectual autarchy.48

It is a neat piece of rhetoric. By invoking Rousseau, the forefather of Jacobinism, and Hegel, the acknowledged source of Marx's philosophy, Sartre puts his Communist critics on the defensive. It also offers a clear statement of how Sartre saw his own relation to Heidegger. But by seeing Heidegger's Nazism merely as a character defect, it leaves many questions unanswered.

A year later Les Temps modernes – the monthly journal produced by Sartre and his circle – decided to confront the issue head-on. The January issue contained two accounts of recent visits to Heidegger. The first, by Maurice de Gandillac, suggests that Heidegger's support for Nazism was short-lived and due to weakness rather than conviction; the second, by Alfred de Towarnicki, makes a rather implausible attempt to turn Heidegger into an anti-Nazi.49 The two articles are of rather feeble biographical value and contain no philosophical reflections. Of rather greater interest is the editorial note which preceded the two articles, generally considered to have been written by Sartre himself.50 The first two paragraphs of this take up some of the issues covered by Audry eleven years earlier:

The French press has spoken of Heidegger as a Nazi; it is a fact that he was a member of the Nazi Party. If we were to judge a philosophy by the political courage or lucidity of the philosopher, then Hegel's would not be worth much. It happens that the philosopher is unfaithful to his best thought when it comes to political decisions.

However, it is the same man who philosophizes and who makes political choices. It is possible, and it will be necessary to enquire what in Heidegger's existentialism could motivate his acceptance of Nazism, just as it has been possible to enquire what, in Hegelianism, made possible Hegel's going over to the Prussian monarchy and the reactionary Hegel of the final period. When such an analysis was made for Hegel, it removed any taint of suspicion from the essence of Hegelianism, dialectical thought. When it is done for Heidegger, it will remove any
tant of suspicion from the essence of his philosophy, existential thought (which is not unrelated to dialectical thought). Furthermore, it will perhaps show that an ‘existential’ politics is the diametrical opposite of Nazism.

The statement neatly avoids both crude political reductionism and any suggestion of the autonomy of ideas. The debate continued in November when Les Temps modernes published Karl Löwith’s essay on the political implications of Heidegger’s philosophy, a serious and balanced piece and one of the first contributions to take the argument further than Audry had done twelve years earlier.51

But Sartre’s Stalinist critics thought there was more mileage in the issue. In 1948 the veteran Marxist Georg Lukács published his own contribution to the debate. Lukács stressed the link between Heidegger and Sartre, while acknowledging that Sartre was a sincere anti-fascist. He explained Sartre’s position by asserting: ‘Existentialism raises its protest not against the totality of the crisis, but against fascism in particular.’52 It was ironic that this accusation should come from Lukács, since he had been one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the Communist ‘Popular Front’ line, which had precisely sought to separate anti-fascism from the struggle against capitalism in general. One wonders why Lukács did not address the criticism to his hero Thomas Mann. A heated debate ensued between Lukács and Sartre in the columns of the Paris daily Combat.53

In 1952 Sartre visited Heidegger, though without any significant result.54 But Sartre’s main concern was with his Marxist critics; in the introduction to the Critique of Dialectical Reason he returned to his debate with Lukács:

Heidegger was never an ‘activist’ – at least in as much as he expressed himself in philosophical works. The very word, however vague it may be, demonstrates the total incomprehension of the Marxist with regard to other schools of thought. Yes, Lukács has the instruments to understand Heidegger, but he will not understand him, for it would be necessary to read him, grasp the meaning of the sentences one by one. And to the best of my knowledge there is no longer any Marxist who is still capable of doing that.55

Here it is clear that Heidegger is no longer the main point under consideration; he has become merely the pretext for Sartre’s polemic against reductionist Marxism.56

It is not the purpose of this article to examine the philosophical similarities and differences between Heidegger and Sartre. It is obvious from a reading of Being and Nothingness that Sartre drew many specific insights and observations from Heidegger.57 It is also obvious that Sartre is frequently severely critical of Heidegger; he denounces his idealism and failure to discuss action, and requires that his entire work be subjected to ‘critical examination’.58 Those critics for whom Sartre’s literary and philosophical work exists merely to provide illustrations for Heidegger’s arguments have clearly failed to approach Sartre with proper care.59 But a comparison of specific points in Heidegger and Sartre, however worthwhile, presents the risk that we may not see the wood for the trees. Heidegger’s philosophy, as Audry rightly pointed out, is tragic. Sartre’s is resolutely non-tragic, in that its central assertion is the possibility that human action can change the world. Both may share certain features, and both may originate from the same social situation – a profound crisis of bourgeois ideology, in which the old values are decaying but their replacements have not yet crystallized. But the solutions proposed are very different. For Sartre, existentialism is supremely optimistic: ‘There is no doctrine more optimistic, since the destiny of man is within himself.’60 Heidegger, on the other hand, seems to have had little interest in enabling humanity as a whole to exercise greater control over economic and social conditions. It is this, ultimately, that puts Sartre and Audry on one side of the fence, and Heidegger on the other.

Yet the question of Heidegger remained; for Sartre, Heidegger was not part of the solution but part of the problem. Audry’s 1934 article raised the issue of the relation between – to use Marcuse’s terms – ‘Heidegger the philosopher’ and ‘Heidegger the man’. Thanks to the work of Farías and Ott we now know rather more about Heidegger the man – and the record is more damning that Audry could have imagined back in 1934.61 Yet those who confront the question still have to transcend the dichotomy between crude reductionism and the total autonomy of the text. Those who insist that Heidegger’s politics and philosophy are related have to face critics who accuse them of mechanical reductionism.62 And obviously the text must be studied in its own right, not simply dismissed by reference to its author. Yet if we abandon any attempt to link the two, we allow philosophy to float free in sublime contemplation of the ontological, utterly detached from such merely ‘ontic’ considerations as extermination camps.

Hence Sartre’s concern to establish the complex interconnections between ‘man’ and text. The series of existential biographies that runs from Baudelaire to Saint Genet and The Words to The Family Idiot are
all biographies of writers, so that a major component of Sartre's life-work can be seen as an attempt to solve the problem of the relation between writer and text – a problem first posed by a Rouen schoolteacher back in 1934.

Perhaps there was another even more fundamental impact of the debate. Heidegger, his admirers tell us, is indisputably one of the great philosophers of our century. But if philosophy, even at the highest level, cannot tell us not to be Nazis, then we may reasonably enquire what is the value of philosophy. After Being and Nothingness Sartre never published another volume in the same mode of philosophical writing. Increasingly he turned to biography, to Marxism and to political activism.63 Professional philosophers, often great admirers of Heidegger, frequently tend to dismiss Sartre as merely a literary figure, as though he were not good enough for their discipline. The rather more uncomfortable alternative exists that their discipline was not good enough for Sartre.

Notes

I am grateful to Hamish Watson and Barbara Read for comments on a first draft of this article.


3. La Statue, p. 203. Souvarieniens were followers of Boris Souvarine (1893–1984), expelled from the French Communist Party in 1924.

4. Volume XVI (1981) of Maitron and Penetier’s Dictionnaire biographique gives a complete lists of militants known to have belonged to Trotskyist organizations before 1939; it does not include Audry.

5. La Statue, p. 8.


9. In its cultural aims, L’École émancipée can be seen as taking up the ideas of Marcel Martinet (1887–1944), editor in the early 1920s of the cultural page in the French Communist daily paper, L’Humanité, and advocate of the idea of ‘proletarian culture’, by which he meant not what was understood by the term in 1920s Russia, but rather a struggle to raise the cultural level of the proletariat.

10. In fact she was mistaken; a French translation of What is Metaphysics? had appeared in 1930. See note 38 below.

11. Audry was a talented linguist. During the Spanish Civil War she produced a French version of the POUM’s journal.

12. If this sounds like an exaggeration, it is worth recalling the comment of Karl Löwith, one of Heidegger’s students, on Heidegger’s inaugural speech at Freiburg University: ‘at the end of the speech, the listener was in doubt as to whether he should start reading the pre-Socratics or enlist in the SA’ (Wolin, The Heidegger Controversy, p. 176).

13. In using the term ‘man’ I am adhering to the use of ‘l’homme’ by Audry, a pioneer feminist.


15. For example, Rockmore, On Heidegger’s Nazism and Philosophy, p. 59.


18. The only reference to it I have found is in the article on Audry in the Dictionnaire biographique, cited in note 2.

19. She passed the agrégation in ‘lettres classiques’.


22. Le Monde, 8 May 1968.


27. In Derrida’s terminology, the German Communist Party deconstructed the binary opposition between Nazism


31. In a recent issue of *Radical Philosophy* Jonathan Rée quotes with approval Derrida’s statement that ‘We still do not know what Nazism is or what made it possible.’ (*RP* 63, Spring 1993, p. 55). But as Rée and Derrida are both well aware, fascism is still very much with us, and we cannot wait to resolve the finer points of theorization before committing ourselves to action.


34. Ibid., pp. 182–3; see also *La Statute*, p. 212.


36. See however note 38 below for one reason why this may not have been the case.

37. See K. and E. Fullbrook, *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1993), where it is argued (p. 3) that de Beauvoir was the ‘driving intellectual power in the joint development of the couple’s most influential ideas’. While the Fullbrooks’ thesis taken as a whole is highly debatable, the assertion that de Beauvoir played a role in the elaboration of Sartrean philosophy is certainly valuable.

38. The bibliography to Audry’s article lists this work as untranslated; this is one reason for thinking she may not have consulted Sartre on the details of her article.


44. Ibid., p. 229.


50. This is not entirely certain. It could well have been drafted by Merleau-Ponty, who played a key role in the early years of *Les Temps modernes*. Richard Wolin asserts that ‘clearly it was Sartre himself who had authored the disavowal’, but confuses the issue by mistakenly claiming that the editorial note appeared before Karl Löwith’s article in November 1946. This merely carried a standard disclaimer that it did not necessarily express the views of the editorial board (Editor’s introduction to K. Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, p. 11).


53. 13 and 20 January, 3 February.

54. The discussion seems to have been a dialogue of the deaf; Sartre later compared Heidegger to a ‘retired colonel’. But on leaving, Sartre found his railway compartment full of bunches of roses. Sartre, who hated flowers, threw them out of the window (Jean Cau, *Croquis de mémoire*, Julliard, Paris, 1985, p. 253).


56. In an interview in 1975 Sartre was more critical of Heidegger’s Nazism. He stated: ‘It is not for his Nazism that I would reproach him [Heidegger], but rather for a lack of seriousness.’ When challenged by Oreste Pucciani, Sartre expanded: ‘You know I am not that fond of Heidegger… In any case he was wrong, very wrong to adhere to Nazism, even discreetly as he did. It is possible that Nazism was a philosophy or political theory in which he really believed. But I think not; and this neither brings me closer to nor separates me farther from his philosophy’ (P.A. Schilp, ed., *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, Open Court, La Salle IL, pp. 32–3).

57. He probably continued to do so even in his later work; for example, the famous bus queue in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* might have been inspired by Heidegger’s comment that ‘in utilizing public means of transport … every Other is like the next’ (*Being and Time*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1978, p. 164).


60. *L’existentialisme est un humanisme* (Nagel, Paris, 1966), p. 62. In an interview given shortly before his death Sartre claimed he had never experienced Heideggerian Angst. ‘I have never had anxiety… That also came from Heidegger, they were notions we used all the time, but for me they did not correspond to anything’ (J.-P. Sartre and B. Lévy, *L’espoir maintenu*, Verdier, Lagrasse, 1991, p. 24).


62. According to Jean-François Lyotard, anyone who attempts to deduce Heidegger’s Nazism from the text of *Being and Time* is guilty of ‘sinister monkey-tricks’ on a level with the Moscow Trials (*Heidegger et les juifs*), Editions Galilée, Paris, 1988, p. 109).

63. In 1970 Sartre ended up selling newspapers on the streets, just as Colette Audry had done four decades earlier. Perhaps Audry provided a model of the political ‘activist’ which Sartre felt he had to catch up with, however long it might take.