

2011

Infinite Conversation

Robert S. Lehman
Cornell University, rslehman@noctrl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

Recommended Citation

Lehman, Robert S. (2011) "Infinite Conversation," *Criticism*: Vol. 53: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol53/iss1/9>

INFINITE
CONVERSATION
Robert S. Lehman

*Continental Divide:
Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*
by Peter E. Gordon. Cambridge,
MA: Harvard University Press,
2010. Pp. 448. \$39.95 cloth.

The public debate that took place between Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) in the spring of 1929 at the second annual Internationale Davoser Hochschulkurse in Davos, Switzerland, is remembered by scholars of twentieth-century culture not only for the light that it sheds on these figures' opposed philosophical positions but also as an indication of the path that European philosophy—and, more controversially, European politics—would follow in the years to come. Cassirer, an assimilated Jew and staunch supporter of the Weimar Republic, had studied under the neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen and made a name for himself both as an historian of philosophy and as a formidable philosopher of science. The younger Heidegger, whose *Being and Time* had been published a few years earlier (1927), had broken from the transcendental phenomenology of his mentor, Edmund Husserl, and was now viewed as a representative of the “new philosophy,” as a champion of life and the irrational opposed to attempts to codify philosophy as a rigorous science. A few years after the debate, concurrent with the rise of Nazism, Cassirer would leave his post in Hamburg and move to England, then Sweden, before settling in the United States. Heidegger, to whom hindsight has tended to award victory in the debate, would assume the rectorship at the University of

Freiburg (though he would resign just a year later) and join the Nazi Party. Both philosophers would remain productive into their final years, though with time the incommensurability of their respective positions would only become more pronounced.

In his exciting new study, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*, the intellectual historian Peter E. Gordon attempts to separate the philosophical kernel of the Davos debate—ostensibly, the correct interpretation of Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy—from its political shell. Indeed, Gordon's claim that what occurred between Cassirer and Heidegger was above all a philosophical conversation ought to be read as a challenge to the more politically charged analyses of the same event developed by, among others, Hans Blumenberg, Pierre Bourdieu, and Geoff Waite. This is not to say that politics plays no role in *Continental Divide*. Gordon is quick to admit that the afterlife of the Davos debate has been decidedly extraphilosophical. But, he notes, the danger of an allegorical interpretation of this event is that "by dissolving the philosophical into the political, it threatens to divest us of any remaining criteria by which to decide intellectual debate other than the anti-intellectual contingencies of sheer power" (357). By reducing philosophy to politics, Gordon avers, we sacrifice the ability to ground our political

choices in anything other than force. His opposed strategy is to locate the exchange between Cassirer and Heidegger in an intellectual-historical force field that includes neo-Kantianism and phenomenology, existentialism and vitalism, all the while stressing that the heart of the debate remained a clash between two incompatible readings of Kant's project. When Cassirer and Heidegger's respective positions are grasped on their own terms, as well as in relation to the wider situation of Weimar-era philosophy, Gordon wagers, we will finally begin to understand why a relatively specialized discussion came to be treated as a critical juncture in both the intra- and the extraphilosophical culture of Europe.

In the first chapter of the book, Gordon provides a summary analysis of the intellectual climate during the years of the Weimar Republic. Though the title of this chapter, "Philosophy in Crisis," points synchdochally to the wider transformations occurring in Germany at the time, the core of the crisis that Gordon describes is the usurpation of neo-Kantianism as Continental Europe's dominant philosophy. In brief, neo-Kantianism, especially in the form given to it by the Marburg School philosopher Hermann Cohen, sought to downplay the metaphysical dimension of Kant's work in favor of the epistemological dimension. The result of this endeavor was a reconfigured

Kantianism *qua* logic of scientific knowledge, for which the more mysterious dimensions of Kant's project—the pure spatiotemporal forms of intuition, as well as the thing-in-itself—were either reduced to logical operations or eliminated altogether. Though Cassirer retained the essentially neo-Kantian faith in human consciousness as a spontaneous faculty that “constituted and animated” the world of experience (86), Gordon writes, he nonetheless “modified the basic character of neo-Kantianism almost to the breaking point” (84), moving from the analysis of natural science to the symbolic operations basic to human culture. Heidegger, too, came of age in the milieu of neo-Kantianism, and though his reading of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) was diametrically opposed to the reading set forth by the neo-Kantians, he continued to associate himself with Kant's project. Where Cohen and, after him, Cassirer looked to Kant's philosophy as a means of setting science (in the broader German sense of *Wissenschaft*) on a secure intellectual ground, Heidegger read Kant as a metaphysician, as a Heideggerian ontologist *avant la lettre* whose project reached its apogee in a radical thinking of human finitude.

Gordon's rejection of political interpretation and his translation of the respective positions of Cassirer and Heidegger into the common language of Kantianism

dovetails suggestively with the professed aim of the Davos Hochschule during its four years of existence (1928–31): to heal through philosophical conversation the political wounds inflicted by the Great War. As Gordon notes in the second chapter, “Setting the Stage,” the standing of the Hochschule was secured already in its first year, when it counted among its guests Albert Einstein, who both lectured on the theory of relativity and performed on the violin. In 1929, the theme of the conference, *Was ist der Mensch?* (What is the human being?), was intended as general enough to be open to a variety of philosophical approaches while still gesturing more or less explicitly to the work of Kant (who had suggested in his *Jäsche Logic* (1800) that the central questions of critical philosophy come together in the “anthropological” question “What is man?”). It succeeded in its cosmopolitan mission insofar as it welcomed not just Heidegger and Cassirer but future greats such as Ludwig Binswanger, Jean Cavailles, Eugen Fink, Maurice de Gandillac, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Joachim Ritter.

Chapters 3 and 4 of *Continental Divide* culminate in a retranslation of the debate in its entirety, supplemented by Gordon's copious explanatory notes. Though Gordon takes the opportunity to reaffirm that the debate hinged on opposed

readings of Kant's project in terms of either spontaneity (Cassirer) or finitude/thrownness (Heidegger), he also acknowledges that it soon became clear that "the Kant interpretation Heidegger presented at Davos served as merely a pretext for expounding his own philosophy" (161). It is with this in mind that we might read the intervention in the debate by the Dutch linguist Hendrik Pos, an audience member sympathetic to Cassirer's project and the only figure other than Cassirer and Heidegger to speak. "Both men speak a completely different language," Pos observed, and "it is a matter of extracting something common from these two languages" (189). The establishment of a common language seems to have been a hope shared by Cassirer, as well as by the organizers of the Hochschule, and, as I've already noted, it is also more or less explicitly Gordon's aim in *Continental Divide*. For Heidegger, however, who would later reflect on the ontological significance of *polemos*, a common language seems to have been less important. In fact, near the end of the debate, Heidegger stated straightforwardly that "what I describe by Dasein does not allow translation into a concept of Cassirer's" (195). It is worth noting this issue of translatability because, despite Gordon's very evenhanded treatment of Cassirer's and Heidegger's respective positions, the viability of *Continental Divide's*

method hinges on the availability of something like the common language projected by Cassirer, Pos, and the organizers of the Hochschule. We will return to this point in a moment.

The end of the debate takes us only a little beyond the midpoint of *Continental Divide*. Gordon uses the second half of the book to "break from history and . . . pause to consider some of the deeper and conceptual issues at stake in the debate" (215). This interruption allows him to treat the positions of the participants in greater detail and, most interestingly, to interpret Cassirer's and Heidegger's post-Davos writings in light of some of the issues that arose in 1929. For example, Gordon quite convincingly reads some of Cassirer's late texts, the much-celebrated *Philosophy of Enlightenment* (1932) and the posthumously published *Myth of the State* (1946), as two defenses of rationality against the perceived irrationalism embodied by Heidegger. In the latter text, written during his brief term in the philosophy department at Columbia, Cassirer finally took the opportunity to reflect on the specifically political significance of Heidegger's project, ultimately condemning it as a symptom of "the return of fatalism in our modern world" (310). Heidegger, on the other hand, never really took the time to engage with Cassirer's thought after their Davos encounter; his further

philosophical studies led him out of Cassirer's ambit, backward in time before Kant to the pre-Socratics. A real dialogue with Cassirer became impossible.

In the last chapter of *Continental Divide*, on "Philosophy and Memory," Gordon interrogates the reappearance of the Davos debate in contemporary thought, not as a philosophical conversation but as a cultural-political allegory. In allegorical renderings of the encounter between Cassirer and Heidegger, the smallest details take on grand significance. Gordon thus dedicates a brief section to Pos's recollection that, at the end of the debate, Heidegger refused to shake Cassirer's hand. If it happened, this slight would have at least indicated Heidegger's lack of manners. More seriously, it could also substantiate charges of anti-Semitism. No one but Pos claims to have witnessed this incident, and Gordon is rightly skeptical that it ever happened. Nonetheless, in a 1945 discussion of the debate, Heidegger remarked that "he had not hesitated 'to shake publicly the hand of the Jew Cassirer'" (340). Heidegger's questionable defense of his behavior suggests that the disputed handshake was, at any rate, on his mind. Gordon leaves the question of the handshake unresolved, letting it stand as evidence of the weight retroactively afforded to each of the debate's (non)events.

In the last pages of his study, Gordon makes some of his most contentious claims about the relationship of politics to philosophy, writing that "the ultimate tragedy of the Davos encounter is not that it ended in victory for politics of the wrong kind. The deeper tragedy is that it ended in politics at all" (357). Obviously, this remark warrants further reflection. Gordon's claim, as I noted earlier, is that the reduction of philosophical disputes to their political subtexts results in the sacrifice of rational standards for adjudicating these disputes. In the absence of these standards, *la force fait loi*. And yet, Gordon's turn to a philosophical metalanguage—in this case, the language of Kantianism—as a response to the threat of a political overreading is not entirely satisfying. Indeed, Gordon's need to demonstrate that a philosophical conversation (rather than a political struggle) took place at Davos occasionally results in a somewhat narrow reading of Heidegger in particular. The latter becomes more of a Kantian (and, thus, less of a Husserlian, Diltheyan, Kierkegaardian, or Aristotelian) than he really was so as to appear closer to the Kantian Cassirer. Is it possible, one might wonder, to accept that the core of the Davos debate was philosophical while denying that Cassirer and Heidegger were ever speaking the same language? A larger question

is whether belief in the autonomy of philosophy vis-à-vis politics necessarily entails the belief that all philosophical disputes can be, philosophically, resolved.

No doubt such questions are bound to arise in any attempt to deal with the work of a figure so controversial as Heidegger, and Gordon's book has much to recommend it. In addition to wonderfully clear treatments of Cassirer's and Heidegger's philosophies, particularly as they dovetail with Kantianism, *Continental Divide* is packed with anecdotes, which range from Heidegger's high opinion of his own abilities as a skier to Emmanuel Lévinas's guilty recollection of his mocking portrayal of Cassirer in a comical restaging of the debate. Perhaps these small flourishes interest Gordon less than the fundamental questions of philosophy, but they make his book not only informative but a pleasure to read.

Robert S. Lehman recently completed his doctorate in the Department of English at Cornell University. His writings on modernism and philosophy have appeared or are forthcoming in Theory & Event, New Literary History, Journal of Modern Literature, Angelaki, and diacritics. He is currently completing a book entitled "The Impossibility of Being Modern."