

984 Heidegger's children:
political theory with a human face

Richard Wolin. *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Lowith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse*. Princeton University Press, Princeton N.J., 2015.

Dejan Matlak

Heidegger's children, written by Richard Wolin, is a study of a one of the most significant philosophers of the twentieth century, and it has two points of interest: to understand Heidegger's waste intellectual heritage, and to show how his theory and life decisions (during and after Nazi Germany) influenced the interpretations of his work. The author of this book does so by analyzing the life and work of Heidegger's most prominent Jewish students. All of them went to Freiberg University, when he was lecturing and came under the influence of his existential philosophy. The intellectual interaction that occurred between the mentor and his students left a significant mark on their academic careers, as did the fact that their bellowed mentor became a Nazi. The fact that he supported a political fraction that wanted to annihilate them and all that where considered Jewish, made it impossible for them to use his writings without first giving a critique of their mentor's philosophy in the light of his life decisions. But in doing so they made it possible for Heidegger's existentialism to find new grounds in the World post World War II.

Wolin gives an account of Hanna Arendt, Karl Lowith, Hans Jonas and Herbert Marcuse life, student days, and their intellectual work by making unique biographies of the mentioned authors. This account of their lives is not given just by mapping Heidegger's philosophy in the many studies done by his "children", but also by giving the reader exes to their personal lives and correspondences with their mentor, and with each other. This allows the reader to get a glimpse of the era of totalitarian politics in Europe, and the way these events influenced their lives, but above all the way they wrote about the world that was rapidly changing, and had never before seen such wide spread destruction, and such quantities of human life being lost.

I will not attempt to give an account of the details of every chapter in this book, nor will I explain the many questions that Wolin ponders on thru his exploration of Heidegger's significance for the 20th century. Instead I want to give an account of the book as a whole, and to note the dominate themes that are found through the book.

Certain points of interest can be noted through this study, and the author makes a reference to them in almost all the chapters. This gives the book a new dimension; it is not merely concerned with philosophy as such, or its development and different continental traditions. This dimension shows the personal, and political side of philosophy.

First of all, the question of German Jews and the way they perceived their identity is broth to light many times. Most of the authors mentioned in the book perceived themselves as secular German citizen's, and wanted to distance their lives from the traditional Jewish ghetto mentality they were often pushed into because of their ethnic heritage. Each of his "children" had their own battle with this problem, and during their professional lives they gave different solutions or perspectives on the problem of anti-Semitism in the European context before the begging and during the II World War. Their cases were peculiar because the basis of their thinking, or the father of their thinking, was seemingly against their existence. This fact was something they had to come to terms with. Not just because their mentor rejected them, but because the society they perceived they belonged to was rejecting them, and marking them with an identity that made them an enemy of a cloture they felt they belonged to, that they cherished and one can say felt patriotic towards.

Beside the fact that Heidegger sided with the Nazis, his intellectual influence is not absent from his "children's" writings. Wolin suggest that the mentor had an irreversible impact on their lives, and that his "children" newer got free from him, and his existentialism. What one discovers while reading this study is the fact that Heidegger had a mesmerizing presence in the classroom, and that all of his students were struck by his charisma and knowledge. What I understood from reading this emotionally and intellectually stimulating book is that Heidegger acquired a unique position among his colleagues. He was perceived as a sort of "savior of western though". His life style and success in the classroom, added to his mystification. And then after the publication of *Being and Time* he sealed his reputation, and if I may say so, occupied the philosophical throne of Europe (for a short time). What I asked myself while I was reading this book is whether I would have resisted his allure if I had found myself in a similar situation? Have in mind that this was a period when the West had an intellectual crises, and a young thinker found himself in an atmosphere of dissatisfaction with the existing intellectual traditions. What kind of influence and mark could the "savior of western though" leave on you? Well that is all speculation now, but the fact is that he is treated, not just by the mentioned authors, but by many others as a creator of a new train of thought in philosophy.

But this does not make him a figure that cannot be criticized, and one finds that his children were capable of asserting their own stand. Wolin introduces us to four original thinkers, and their intellectual biographies revile not just Heidegger's impact on their lives, or their lives impact on their work. He also shows the concepts that they developed in order to come to terms with the changes that where occurring in the World. They tried to look outside the conventional way of thinking, guided by their mentors instruction to understand the world and not to presume to know it, they developed some of the most stimulating, and controversial, ideas of the 20th century.

Before concluding my review of *Heidegger's Children* I would like to mention another team that is present; it is concerned with the relation of Heidegger's political though (and of the mention authors) and the way the democratic political discourse constitutes our relation to power and governing. Heidegger's political though is rooted in a critique of the World, and the way it is governed. But unlike Marxism that see the solution in a positivistic approach to the problem, Heidegger and his children see the solution in understanding one's self and the meaning of one's life, and existence. The tension with democracy is precisely around the point of how the state of the World is treated, and whether true political action exists in the present political arena. Wolin explains this problem, and gives a critique of both perspectives, but asserts the democratic one more frequently. But he also admits that the point of view taken by them should not be put aside and treated as argumentation in favor of the totalitarian approach to governing. Neither do the authors them self's ever imply this, even though they employ some of the concepts associated with totalitarian rule. What they do is try and explain the political process as something that is routed in everyday life and has a historic dimension that cannot be ignored, this inevitably makes them prone to asking questions about the nature of governing and whether politics is merely a rational in devour.

Wolin offers a unique perspective on the development of political theory. He achieves this by layering five biographies, with historical references and their own intellectual work, and in doing so makes a wholesome account of an age, and a generation of thinkers that developed a separate approach to politics and the question of human existence.