

Look at his marvellous hands!

Yvonne Sherratt, *Hitler's Philosophers*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT and London, 2013. 336 pp., £25.00 hb., 978 0 30015 193 0.

Yvonne Sherratt's book on the response of philosophers to the Third Reich is written in the style of a docu-drama. There are colourful descriptions of foliage in Heidegger's Todtnauberg and peasants in 'folksy knickerbockers'. Attention is drawn to the scent of fresh roasted coffee and sweet pastries, as Carl Schmitt hears the announcement of Hitler's appointment as chancellor in a Berlin café. Thick dark hair is parted neatly on both Nietzsche's and Schmitt's heads. Men such as Schmitt, Alfred Rosenberg or Kurt Huber are 'handsome', while Arendt is referred to as Hannah, a girl 'ready for total devotion' to Heidegger, who, later, her long dark wavy hair cropped short, 'escaped the gas chambers by the skin of her teeth', and took comfort in the 'solid presence by night and by day' of Heinrich Blücher. The language of *Hitler's Philosophers* wants to be immediate, to express something of the passions and solidity of the philosophers it discusses, whose own disciplinary predilections apparently push them towards abstraction, lack of concreteness, disembodiment. But the effect is largely comic or bathetic, as when Sherratt divines the last thoughts of Walter Benjamin. Behind the thick wooden door of the hotel room in Spain, where he would kill himself, he suddenly remembers the childhood game of hiding, about which he wrote in his childhood memoirs: cue a quotation. In this book, objective and subjective registers mesh oddly. The inner lives of the philosophers are impossibly fictionalized, while the documentary mode is evoked as unproblematic fact. History, what happened, is rendered in broad strokes. Hitler comes to power. Democracy is buried and all the nastiness begins. There are Faustian Pacts and philosophers who offer 'total allegiance'. The thesis is little troubled by memories of the 'civil war' and proliferation of positions within Weimar democracy, or indeed within Weimar philosophy, where a Walter Benjamin (opponent of Nazism) might engage, in the 1920s, in some manner with the work of a Carl Schmitt (protosupporter of the Nazi regime). There is little texturing here. There are either collaborators or opponents, in much the way that Hitler himself might have seen it – those who are for, those against 'us'.

This book claims for itself the honour of being the first text to examine the part played by 'one quiet and unassuming group – the philosophers' in the Third Reich, which may be true to the extent that the emphasis is on philosophers as a somewhat incoherent 'group' comprising past and present ones, those who promoted or accommodated to Nazism and those who were its victims and fatalities. The book is ambitious, for it is an indictment of the moral failure of the whole of classical German philosophy and its heirs. Sherratt sets out to find the traces of disreputable thinking in philosophy, which is to say largely within German Idealism, as well as other somewhat random disciplines, including law, biology and musical composition. Themes of the strong state, the superman, anti-Semitism and biological racism all occur, as is to be expected. She scans the work of Kant, Fichte, Hegel and Schopenhauer, picking out the references to the Jews and the nation. Feuerbach is accused of accusing the Jews of ritual cannibalism, and the hoary old question of Marx and the 'Jewish question' is dealt with in half a page. Wagner features, as does, of course, Nietzsche. Darwin appears, as does the transmutation of his ideas in Ernst Haeckel's eugenicist polymathism.

All this is presented as a stimulus to Hitler's own engagements with philosophy: 'Men of logic or the passions, Idealists or Social Darwinists the highly sophisticated or the very crude, all supplied Hitler with ideas to re-enforce and enact his dream.' Hitler is said to imbibe smatterings of these ideas (in much the same way as Sherratt gives us smatterings). The illustrious philosophers Sherratt lines up are presented as anti-Semites and supremacists, but, at the same time, Hitler is a poor reader of them and abuses them for his own ends. However, whether he is a reader of them at all is not answered decisively in this study. The main sources that Sherratt quotes on his reading and thinking in the 1920s – anecdotal ones by Hitler associates such as Ernst Hanfstaengl and Hermann Rauschning – are not ones that carry much credibility for historians of the Third Reich. But it is certainly the case, as Sherratt outlines in detail, that Hitler enjoyed very favourable conditions in prison in 1924, after the Munich Putsch,

VON BERLIN ZU »GERMANIA« FROM BERLIN TO »GERMANIA«



and he received regular visitors and the opportunity to peruse books by Kant, Schiller, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, as he wrote *Mein Kampf*.

Sherratt chases up whatever encounters between Hitler and philosophy she can find. These mostly consist of little details: Hitler boasted that he carried Schopenhauer in his knapsack in the First World War; the actress and film director Leni Riefenstahl gave Hitler a first edition of Fichte's *Collected Works*, published in 1848. The context of the Führer's philosophical interests established, the book moves on to consider philosophical collaborators, such as the Nazi Party ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, and the forgotten names, Alfred Bäumler and Ernst Kriek, whose bodies of work are unread now, but were once influential. These undistinguished thinkers, who help to force through a purging of the universities of any non-Nazi influence, are a prelude to the infamous names that follow: Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger. Gallons of ink have described their philosophical ideas and their biographical complicities with Nazism and some have woven the two. Sherratt sticks with the gossipy and personal, in the main. We learn of the charlatany of Schmitt's first wife. We read excerpts from his diaries about Jews as goats and apes. We find out that the wartime singer Vera Lynn targeted Schmitt as the enemy. We hear again the story of Heidegger's promotion to rector of Freiburg University and the mean way he shook off his mentor Edmund Husserl. We are told about the affair with Hannah Arendt. We get edited highlights from Farias, Ott and Faye, who have dug

deeply into this lowlife. In the chapters on Schmitt and Heidegger, there are casual moves between the work, the life and the political environment, such that, for example, through Schmitt's auspices, 'Hitler's dream was becoming enshrined in law'. Heidegger, who is labelled 'the intellectual Nazi superman', is said, in a curious metaphor, to have 'provided the icing on the cake of Hitler's dream'. The thinking of Schmitt and Heidegger is not shown to be distorted by Nazism, as Kant's or Schopenhauer's may have been. It is genetically Nazi. Sherratt's move here is not illegitimate in itself. Indeed, it is always entertaining for anyone immune to the lures of Schmitt and Heidegger to read, in various online reviews of the book, how throwing up this material yet again upsets the apple carts of those Schmittians and Heideggerians who would like to separate mere biographical details from the complexities of the work. It is simply that in the shorthand that it appears in here – for example, 'Heidegger's entire oeuvre has been interpreted as founded upon Nazi beliefs', and Schmitt 'enshrined Hitler's tyranny in law' – only those who are already convinced will be convinced.

The section on opponents switches the thesis to one of how Hitler influenced philosophy negatively, or rather how he impacted upon the lives of those 'philosophers' who were politically and racially excluded from Nazi Germany and its institutions: Adorno, Benjamin, Arendt and the Catholic Kurt Huber, who was beheaded for his supportive role in the White Rose anti-Nazi movement. We learn far more about

Arendt's love affair with Heidegger and its aftermath, and Adorno's love of the high life, than we learn about their philosophies and the ways in which these might emerge out of experience of and reflection on Nazi domination. (Sherratt has written elsewhere on Adorno's philosophy, in a study titled *Adorno's Positive Dialectic*, 2002.) The opponents of Nazism are taken-for-granted geniuses, who are destroyed by Nazism. The perspective that Benjamin, for one, was destroyed financially, institutionally, prior to the victory of Nazism, in the pincer grip of capitalism, is not countenanced. But this is a world in which brilliance is a free-floating entity. It is only in such a world that the following question makes sense: 'Why did a man as brilliant as Heidegger succumb to an individual as bluff as Hitler?' Intelligence should somehow override political enmeshment and political self-interest. We hear this question posed in another way, from Karl Jaspers's lips, as he reveals himself to be of the party that believes in the necessary elitism of the ruling class. "How do you think a man as coarse as Hitler can govern Germany?" Heidegger replied, eyes shining with glee, "culture is of no importance. Look at his marvellous hands!" The line from Heidegger is quoted to suggest Heidegger's succumbing to the unintellectual, practical man. But the book does not undermine this perspective, for it seems to hint that politics is truly a dirty business that philosophers should not meddle in, because they, unworldly creatures, will, if given half a chance, be seduced by evil and corrupted by their own vanity. Better to embrace powerlessness and some vague notion of moral authority in the book-lined study.

The shock effects of the book, with its repeated insistence on the atrociousness and barbarity of Nazism – as if we, the readers, or the author, might occasionally forget – are not lessened when the aftermath of war is addressed. A nightmare descended and so did the philosophers, who proved themselves to be bad men, in the main, and did not redeem themselves. Bad people retroactivate philosophical systems in their defence – as with Eichmann drawing Kant's categorical imperative into the nexus of justification of his actions in his Jerusalem trial, and Arendt being unable ever to extricate herself from Heidegger's tendrils. It is indeed chastening to realize that, in the 1950s, former Nazis were reappointed in German universities' philosophy departments. In Heidelberg in 1957 the philosophy faculty was almost entirely dominated by former NSDAP members. But while this raises institutional and political questions, which should not be, as here, disconnected from the founding of the GDR and the reconstitution of capitalism in West Germany, it also

begs a question that the book is not interested in pondering. Could this so-called perversion of philosophy in Nazism be also its realization? Might philosophy have an affinity to Nazism, or at least no allergy against it? And if not, if its complicities with Nazism are an aberration, what is it about philosophy as a discipline that should make it immune to Nazism's lures? Philosophy is assumed here to be a moral doctrine that should – but somehow fails to – guarantee the moral behaviour of its proponents: 'If this discipline cannot set an ethical standard, then which one can?'

Writing from the perspective of the present, it is Sherratt's claim that philosophy, as a discipline, has subjected itself to insufficient soul-searching over its role in the Third Reich and so has failed to act morally. As a consequence, Schmitt, Heidegger and Frege remain on the curriculum, while Benjamin, Arendt and Adorno have struggled to be admitted into the philosophical canon, in the English-speaking world at least; Jaspers, Löwith, Scholem and Huber are largely forgotten or out of print; and Marcuse, Cassirer and Horkheimer are marginalized in other fields. In this assessment, though, perhaps the concentration on biographical details and questions of conduct proves to expose the failure of the book to consider the forcefulness of the discipline of philosophy itself. For certainly some of those marginalized names were not content to rest as philosophers, devising interdisciplinary and specialism-busting frames, such as Critical Theory, which cannot be assimilated back into the business-as-usual of philosophy without disrupting the framework and ushering in questions of history, politics, sociology and economy and a critical relationship to the scope and edges of philosophy itself.

Esther Leslie

Always historicize?

Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor, eds, *History and Psyche: Culture, Psychoanalysis, and the Past*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York, 2013. 347 pp., £57.50 hb., 978 0 23011 336 7.

'Always historicize!' has been a fashionable rallying call in recent times. Yet only a minority of those who scrutinize the workings of mind or body have paid much heed to the summons. As the cultural historian Anthony Ashplant comments in this anthology, even sympathetic critics of Freud's insights have regretted the characteristic disengagement of psychoanalysis