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A review of Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. xiv + 426 pp. \$40. ISBN:978-0-674-04713-6

In March of 1929 the International Davos Conference held its second annual meeting. The *Internationale Davoser Hochschulkurse*, as it was known locally, had been established as a venue for professors to present topics of humanistic appeal to students, the public, and each other with the aim of fostering international and interdisciplinary discussion and understanding. In contrast to the formal individual lectures given by individuals up to this point, the centerpiece of these meetings was an evening of relaxed protocol, a “working seminar” designed to be an informal discussion between the participants. It was at this informal working seminar that Heidegger and Cassirer had their famous encounter—the encounter that turned into one of the greatest mythological stories of continental philosophy.

With a long introduction, seven full chapters and a short conclusion, Harvard Historian Peter Gordon provides not only a seemingly exhaustive account of this legendary Heidegger-Cassirer debate at Davos, but also an intricate and detailed exploration of the philosophical issues involved. Three important areas Gordon finds interesting and discusses at length are the political ramifications of the philosophical ideas distinguishing these two men, the meaning of this dispute for philosophy, and the human condition as he sees the main issue separating Cassirer and Heidegger to be a single question: “*What is it to be a human being?*” (4).

Of particular interest to Gordon are the ways in which the relevant philosophical concepts “ramify,” that is, how they are taken up in other contexts and accrue exogenous connotations and influences. This is Gordon’s contribution to the scholarship surrounding this “disputation.” He takes the simple terms of the actual philosophical exchange and illuminates for us how those parts grew and combined with other extraneous historical themes and events to make the disputation larger than life and more than just a philosophical disagreement, but an important moment in the intellectual and political crisis of Europe.

Gordon paints a wonderful picture here of these men, their ideas, and the culture they were affecting: human nature as finitude or freedom, spontaneity or thrownness against a background of philosophical and metaphilosophical contexts, framed in terms of a politics of crisis. His brushstrokes are incredibly detailed, his colors vibrant. In fact there is so much detail that one wonders if one is seeing a painting or a photograph. Such ideas are dispelled, however, by Gordon's continual pointing out of the flaws: missing information, guesswork, reconstructing positions, and inconsistent or non-existent reportage of the events. Despite his expertise, despite the level of detail, and despite his refined understanding of the issues, the resulting picture is necessarily incomplete, only giving us hints at the overall vista. However, the hints Gordon gives us are insightful and plentiful.

After beginning with surprisingly accurate overviews of the thought of both Heidegger and Cassirer, the book quickly attempts to place their ideas into the political, philosophical, and cultural arenas of the time. As many who have read about Europe and European ideas know, during this time just about everything was "in crisis" and intellectuals and power brokers were supposed to somehow resolve the crisis and make the world safe again. Just what this crisis was depended, of course, on the interests of those describing the crisis. Heidegger, in a very Heraclitian manner, thought crisis necessary for progress, whereas Cassirer saw it primarily as a decline in morality and cultural confusion. Gordon places these views on the crisis, the conception of humanity, and the implications of both, in the rift between Heidegger and Cassirer—as if the two were already on different teams playing different games with different criteria for winning.

While this all sounds rather vague, Gordon does a very thorough job of sorting through the issues as he lays out the run-up to the actual meeting at Davos, which took place near the end of March, 1929. In fact, Gordon is so thorough that one wonders if anything else could be said about the actual events and ideas involved. After Davos lays the groundwork of warring Neo-Kantian schools and their adherents, he begins with the actual texts of the independent lectures, breaking them up, offering commentary, and putting the pieces of each philosopher's lectures into the context of the thought of the other, a strategy he continues as he tackles the disputation itself.

In the discussion of this confrontation we learn more about the Neo-Kantian disagreements between Cassirer, the Marburgian Neo-Kantian, and Heidegger, who is more akin to the Southwestern Neo-Kantians. Since Gordon sees the dispute as arising from the differing conceptions of what it is to be human, he points out that Cassirer, as the "good" Neo-Kantian, fixates on—the spontaneous nature of the pure, a priori imagination. In contrast, Heidegger, in keeping with his unorthodox understanding of Kant, took the first *Critique* as a groundwork for ontology, and the imagination as the spring from which both intuition and understanding arise, thus making ontology possible; instead of a pure spontaneity, he saw imagination as both spontaneous and receptive. According to Gordon, Cassirer's thought was suffused with the idea of control and manipulation of the world. We create, we

do, we make, we transform. On the other hand, Heidegger's thought can appear quite passive and resigned, especially when one focuses, as Cassirer did, on Heidegger's concept of "thrownness." This difference is what Gordon believes becomes the kernel of the political debate.

Heidegger's "misunderstanding" of Kant is well known by anyone who has read much of Heidegger and Kant. Gordon is spot on when he plays up Heidegger's use of Kant to expound his own understanding of time and Being; this is at the heart of the disagreement and the impossibility of translating their terminology into mutually-understandable concepts. The distance between these two men here was so great that Cassirer couldn't but see Heidegger as a relativist in his understanding and use of Kant. Going further, Heidegger repudiates the "infinite" of man's spontaneous imagination—that upon which Cassirer's entire work on the philosophy of symbolic forms was based—and instead insists on man's finitude, that there are not an infinite number of possibilities, that man must conform to what is already there; that is, Dasein is "thrown" into a world not of its own making. Since this thrownness arises (as the form of sensibility) *before* the intuition or the understanding begin work, the spontaneity of the imagination finds itself running up against that over which it has no control. Cassirer has no place to go here. It is as if Heidegger is speaking a different and heretical Kantian language, and there is no common ground from which to even begin a disputation.

At this point, having laboriously worked through the disputation almost word for word, Gordon gives us an entire chapter (chapter 5) as an "interruption" in which he tries to provide an even better understanding of the issues at stake in this meeting between Heidegger and Cassirer. This involves much more delving into the previous work of the two philosophers, pulling out the important pieces of disagreement between them at the disputation, and examining the development of those concepts in the thought of each thinker. That this chapter arrives when it does is a bit disconcerting for the reader, as by now one is looking to explore the fallout from the meeting, not more philosophical background. However, as one continues reading, one sees Gordon's genius at work: the philosophical concepts traced in this chapter are precisely the ones at issue in the disputation, and which will have fallout even afterwards in the realm of ethics and politics—even for philosophy itself.

The encounter between these two thinkers at Davos became a cultural metaphor for the future of philosophy and the political future of Europe. The clash between these two thinkers grew in the public's eye after Davos, and took on even more importance in the culture of crisis in Europe at the time. As we examine the remainder of Gordon's book we find a thorough reporting of the chain of reactions precipitating from the confrontation between Cassirer and Heidegger at Davos. As Gordon shows us, without the reactions of others, the disagreement between these two men was nothing more than a simple philosophical argument about the Kantian view of human nature and experience. With the

reactions of others, the wrangle was blown up into a conflict lying at the heart of the crisis of European culture and politics, of history and humanity. As evidence for this impending decline of civilization marching to the end of the world, all we have is the drama created by the overreactions of observers and commentators trying to make Davos much more than it really was. Historians of culture and ideas, however, may find something of interest here amidst Gordon's impeccable scholarship, a keen understanding of philosophy and an exemplary writing style.

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