



Situating Martin Heidegger's claim to a “productive dialogue” with Marxism

Dominic Griffiths

To cite this article: Dominic Griffiths (2017) Situating Martin Heidegger's claim to a “productive dialogue” with Marxism, South African Journal of Philosophy, 36:4, 483-494, DOI: [10.1080/02580136.2017.1342464](https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2017.1342464)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2017.1342464>



Published online: 26 Nov 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Situating Martin Heidegger's claim to a "productive dialogue" with Marxism

Dominic Griffiths

Department of Philosophy, University of Johannesburg, South Africa
Division of Studies in Education, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa
dominic.griffiths@wits.ac.za

This critical review aims to more fully situate the claim Martin Heidegger makes in "Letter on Humanism" that a "productive dialogue" between his work and that of Karl Marx is possible. The prompt for this is Paul Laurence Hemming's recently published *Heidegger and Marx: A Productive Dialogue over the Language of Humanism* which omits to fully account for the historical situation which motivated Heidegger's seemingly positive endorsement of Marxism. This piece will show that there were significant external factors which influenced Heidegger's claim and that, when seen within his broader corpus, these particular comments in "Letter on Humanism" are evidently disingenuous, given that his general opinion of Marxism can only be described as vitriolic. Any attempt to explore how such a "productive dialogue" could be construed must fully contextualise Heidegger's claim for it. This piece will aim to do that, and more broadly explore Heidegger's general opinion of Marxism.

Introduction

The long-standing debate over whether the thought of Karl Marx and Martin Heidegger are compatible, and if so, in what terms, is the backdrop of this paper. Its immediate prompt is the most recent substantial contribution to this debate, Paul Laurence Hemming's *Heidegger and Marx: A Productive Dialogue over the Language of Humanism* (2013).¹ Described by one reviewer as a "heroic failure", Hemming's contribution is a valiant and well-considered attempt to more fully explore what a potential dialogue between these seemingly disparate thinkers would look like (Ledwith 2014). He takes his title from Heidegger himself, who uses the phrase "productive dialogue" in "Letter on Humanism" ([1947] 1993). In this famous essay (written as a response to Jean Beaufret), Heidegger makes a number of claims which suggest this potential exchange. He states that the Marxist view of history is superior to other views because Marx identifies alienation as an essential dimension of history. Heidegger sees this complementing his own understanding of history as our ever-increasing homelessness through our abandonment of Being. He goes on to argue that Marx's understanding of materialism is also significant because it aligns with his (Heidegger's) own concerns about technology. Lastly, Heidegger argues that communism, regardless of one's opinion of it, forms part of the unfolding of the history of Being and is "world-historical" ([1947] 1993, 244).

Hemming takes up the challenge of these claims, though from the outset acknowledges that his book is an "introductory attempt" to develop and trace some "strands of thought" that might put Heidegger and Marx in dialogue (2013, 3). Arguably the central strand is the shared concern with history which forms the basis of this "productive dialogue". However, in his eagerness to put Heidegger and Marx in dialogue, Hemming elides significant personal and historical facts about Heidegger's deep antipathy to Marxism. As I will show in this critical review, Hemming fails to take adequate account of the calculated nature of Heidegger's comments on Marx in the "Letter",

1 See also Hemming (2014).

the positive tone of which derives from Heidegger's insecure political position after World War II. Thus the "productive dialogue" Heidegger claims should be approached with genuine caution, and informed fully by the context which produced it ([1947] 1993, 243). A close reading shows that Hemming's book does not take this context into account with sufficient care.

The main aim of this paper is to re-visit and collate these contextual facts, and thus to call into question the potential exchange Heidegger – and Hemming – allude to. The process will be three-fold. Firstly, I will present a brief overview of Hemming's book and why he believes that Marx and Heidegger are fruitfully compared. Secondly, I will place the "Letter on Humanism", on which Hemming's argument chiefly rests, in its historical and biographical context, in terms of Heidegger's situation when he wrote it. Finally, I will contextualise the "Letter" within the rest of Heidegger's corpus, examining the scattered mentions of Marx found therein, as well as discuss Heidegger's views of modern technology which are strongly anti-Marxist. While his engagement is never especially substantial, these mentions make clear that Heidegger felt a longstanding, deep antipathy towards Marxism, in spite of his claims in the "Letter on Humanism". Hemming overlooks much of this negative sentiment in order to promote his claim to a "productive dialogue". While Heidegger considers Marx's thought to be "world-historical" in an implied positive sense in the "Letter", in other seminars, published works and personal notebooks he much more strongly states that Marxism is a dangerous failing, indeed a self-destructive denial of Being, going so far as to describe it as "the most extreme nihilism" (2012c, 77).

Hemming's *Heidegger and Marx: A Productive Dialogue over the Language of Humanism*

Hemming's 2013 book covers a substantial amount of material, nearly Heidegger's entire *Gesamtausgabe* and a significant amount of the Marx and Engels *Werke*. Given the prodigious output of these thinkers, this is no mean feat of scholarship. For taking on the vastness and difficulty of this task and producing a dense but readable book, Hemming deserves credit. While a number of strands developed are evident, arguably two, interwoven strands stand out as significant. One is the thought of Hegel. Both Heidegger and Marx belong to the tradition of writing after, and in response to Hegel, a response characterised as the "self-conscious repudiation" of his thought (Hemming 2013, 17). What grounds Heidegger and Marx in Hegel is their shared concern for what "being-historical" means, and the centrality of philosophy itself as something which has become understood as historical (4, 41). While it is immediately apparent that in Marx history is understood materially – in terms of the ownership of production and labour – and in Heidegger non-materially – as the gradual unfolding of the forgetfulness of Being – for both, the *historical* dimension of this understanding is central in their individual philosophical narratives. This attention to the historical in shaping philosophy is only possible because of Hegel's thought, and only in the wake of Hegel does the interpretative, historical dimension of philosophy fully emerge. Thus a substantial part of Hemming's book is concerned with orientating Hegel's place in Marx and Heidegger (41). Essentially, while Heidegger and Marx do not "speak the same" they speak "from out of the same", meaning that both are concerned with understanding the "essence" of man, an essence which unfolds historically (257, 275). The central insight which drives this claim for Hemming is that it is only in Heidegger's middle work, emerging fully now with the near completion of the *Gesamtausgabe*, that his concern with the historical is fully evident. The "middle work" stands for the seven volumes gathered collectively under the title *Das Ereignis* [The Event] written between 1936 and 1948.²

These volumes form the important background for the marginal note Heidegger added to the 1949 published edition of "Letter on Humanism":

What is said here was not first thought up when this letter was written, but is based on the course taken by a path that was begun in 1936, in the "moment" of an attempt to say

² These begin with *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)* (GA65), the other six volumes are *Besinnung* (GA66); *Metaphysik und Nihilismus*. 1. *Die Überwindung der Metaphysik (1938/39)*, 2. *Das Wesen des Nihilismus (1946–1948)* (GA67); *Die Geschichte des Seyns*. 1. *Die Geschichte des Seyns (1938/40)*, 2. *Koinovn. Aus der Geschichte des Seyns (1939)* (GA69), 1998; *Über den Anfang (1941)* (GA70) 2005; *Das Ereignis (1941/42)* (GA71) (2009); and the still unpublished *Die Stege des Anfangs (1944)*, scheduled to appear as vol. 72, all mentioned in Hemming (2011, 6, note 7).

the truth of being in a simple manner. The letter continues to speak in the language of metaphysics, and does so knowingly. The other language remains in the background ([1947] 1998, 239, note a).

Hemming makes much of this note as an important development to a second strand of his book, which is to explore what Heidegger's claim in the "Letter on Humanism" that the Marxist view of history is superior to other historical accounts could mean ([1947] 1993, 243). Again, as with the first strand, the importance of the historical dimension is noteworthy. Hemming argues that only by acknowledging the significance of Heidegger's marginal note and this "other [*Ereignis*] language" are we able to fully contextualise how a "productive dialogue" with Marx is possible. This other language refers to the "non-metaphysical" thinking Heidegger was experimenting with in the seven *Das Ereignis* volumes. *Ereignis* thinking is meant to overcome traditional philosophical thinking which makes subjectivity an absolute standpoint, and replace such metaphysics with thinking that gives proper importance to the history of being (Hemming 2013, 46).³ Thus Hemming argues that Heidegger's discussion of Marx must be placed within and informed by the broader context of these "background" texts if this dialogue is to be pursued (2013, 40). Only now, with the near completion of the *Gesamtausgabe*, is this previously hidden language available and thus, only now is the possibility of understanding Heidegger in relation to Marx possible in this way (257).

"Letter on Humanism", read with the *Ereignis* volumes in mind, centres on the question of what constitutes the essence of human existence and whether, for Heidegger, humanism, in whatever guise it appears, offers a sufficient description of this essence.⁴ The letter is generally considered the most cogent expression of his post-war thinking and serves as an important starting point for tracing the interpretative "turn" [*Kehre*] or "reversal" Heidegger's thought undergoes after *Being and Time*. In the letter, Heidegger is explicit about this reversal, stating that what was supposed to be the third division of *Being and Time*, titled "Time and Being" was held back ([1947] 1993, 231). This is because he came to perceive the language of metaphysics which characterised *Being and Time* as being unable to articulate how this "reversal" could be conveyed adequately. This fundamental inadequacy was the motivation for the *Das Ereignis* volumes, which are meant to evoke a language which "abandons subjectivity" (Heidegger [1947] 1993, 231). In an important preface Heidegger wrote for William Richardson's book *Through Phenomenology to Thought* which explicitly traces the unfolding of this "turn", Heidegger further affirms the distinction Richardson makes between "Heidegger I" and "Heidegger II" with an important caveat: the distinction is justified only through acknowledging that Heidegger's later thought is possible because of, and through, his earlier (2003, xxii).⁵ Seen within this broader context the letter is a vital essay which orientates and articulates how Heidegger understands his turn, and the limitations, or "blind alleys" of *Being and Time* ([1947] 1993, 246).

It is difficult to exactly characterise the reversal in Heidegger's thought. Partly this is because he deliberately abandons the more analytic language of *Being and Time* and its focus on Dasein for a more meditative and, particularly with the *Ereignis* volumes, arcane and experimental language. Whereas *Being and Time* describes omni-temporal features of our existence – such as being-towards-death – Heidegger's later work is more focussed, among other things, on the history of Being and its meaning, as something which is disclosed and withheld through various epochs. Another marked difference is Heidegger's emphasis on Dasein's relationship with Being. In the early work the sense is that Dasein's temporal structure dictates what Being could mean (Polt 1999, 117). However, in the later work, Being "holds us in its power", we are beholden to, and beckoned by it (117; emphasis in original). Heidegger captures this notion succinctly in "Letter on Humanism" with the claim that "Man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being" and is "called by Being itself" to this shepherding ([1947] 1993, 245).

3 See also Powell and McNeill (2015, xiii).

4 Much has been written on the "Letter on Humanism", for example, see Kockelmans (1984), Rockmore (1995), Rabinbach (1997), Kleinberg (2012), and Mitchell (2013).

5 For a recent revisionist appraisal of the continuity of Heidegger's early and later thinking, see Sheehan (2015).

Returning to the question of humanism, in the letter Heidegger singles out Marxism from among other humanisms, describing it as a view of history which is “superior to that of other historical accounts” because it identifies “estrangement” or “alienation” [*Entfremdung*] as an essential dimension of history, understanding its thrust to be directed by the ongoing attempt of the masses to overcome their alienation from their labour through class struggle ([1947] 1993, 243). Heidegger implies that this parallels his own diagnoses of our ever-increasing spiritual and existential “homelessness”, understood as the “abandonment of Being by beings”, also an unfolding historical estrangement, though not of a material kind (242). Both our abandonment of Being and the distortion of our existence through alienation are part of the “destiny of the world” (243).

Heidegger maintains that the Marxist view of history is “superior” to other views because of its attention to this historical dimension. Pointedly, he singles out phenomenology (specifically Husserl) and existentialism (specifically Sartre) as showing a *lack* of attention to the “essential importance of the historical in Being” which closes off the possibility of a “productive dialogue” with Marxism ([1947] 1993, 243).⁶ Heidegger implies that he perceives in his own thinking the possibility of such a dialogue, a possibility already signalled by his earlier comment regarding alienation and homelessness. He warns that such a “productive dialogue” can only take place when “naïve notions about [Marx’s] materialism” are discarded. Materialism is not merely the assertion that everything is “simply matter”, but rather a much more searching claim, a “metaphysical determination according to which every being appears as the material of labour” (243). The essence of this conception of materialism is concealed in “the essence of technology” (244). Marx sees technology as driving production, which increases the worker’s experience of alienation. Heidegger sees this process as part of “technological enframing” which is the destiny of the history of Being ([1954] 1993, 325–326). The point is that Heidegger implies generally that he and Marx are both attentive, in different ways, to the gradual unfolding of this historical, materialist conception of reality, driven in its modern form by technology.

The final statement in the “Letter” which affirms the potential for such a dialogue is directed at communism itself. Heidegger goes so far as to say that communism contains, from the view of the history of Being, “an elemental experience” which is “world-historical” ([1947] 1993, 244). His perception of communism goes beyond the ideological, perceiving it instead as a metaphysical constitution of modernity, emerging as we draw near to the end of metaphysics (2015b, 34).⁷ Again, as with the previous points, Heidegger perceives communism as part of the destiny of the history of Being and the unfolding of metaphysics, and loosely aligns his own thinking of the history of Being as something patterned, with that of Marx’s conception. Evidently the overall historical emphasis here is central for Heidegger (and Hemming). The question remains though: can we take Heidegger’s comments on Marx in the “Letter on Humanism” literally?

The “Letter on Humanism” in its historical context

What is problematic about Hemming’s position is the lack of consideration he gives to the historical context in which Heidegger wrote the “Letter on Humanism”. Given the centrality of the “Letter” in forming the basis of Hemming’s argument, this is an oversight. Heidegger wrote the essay as a letter, addressed to Jean Beaufret, and in it he responds to Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Existentialism is a Humanism”.⁸ The ostensible purpose of the essay is to address what Heidegger sees as anthropological misunderstandings made by Sartre in his argument that existentialism (including Heidegger under this label) should be understood as a humanism.⁹ Heidegger argues that Sartre’s existentialism is still based on the centrality of human subjectivity and not on the primordial

6 This claim about Sartre was true when “Letter on Humanism” was first published in 1947. However, Sartre went on to write *Critique of Dialectical Reason* ([1960] 2004), a work of existentialist Marxism.

7 Heidegger develops this position on communism in *The History of Being*, a text written during 1938–1940. Here he writes substantially about the emergence of communism representing the era of “consummate meaninglessness” (2015b, 174).

8 This lecture was delivered in 1945 and attracted immediate, widespread attention which *Being and Nothingness* failed to attract, see Rockmore (1995, 84).

9 These misunderstandings arose partly because of the way certain ideas from *Being and Time* were translated into French. Heidegger address this in “Letter on Humanism” ([1947] 1993, 232–233).

significance of Being ([1947] 1993, 237). “Existentialism is a Humanism” explicitly affirms human values and remains bound up within a traditional Cartesian metaphysics (Sartre 2007, 24). In spite of his claim that existentialism means, concisely, that existence precedes essence, Sartre misses the radically ecstatic and nihilistic existence Heidegger actually intends, and the “Letter” aims to address this.¹⁰

Numerous commentators have noted that the timing of the “Letter on Humanism” was evidently premeditated. At this date, serious questions were being raised about Heidegger’s involvement with National Socialism; he was isolated and had lost credibility in Germany. Since the territory of Baden, in which Freiburg was located, was under French Allied occupation, the essay can be seen as an overture to the French philosophical community, particularly the now famous and influential Sartre. Tom Rockmore sees the essay as an offensive to deliberately attract French attention away from Heidegger’s Nazi past (1995, 88). Jean Beaufret was a member of the Resistance and had “impeccable credentials”. His sometimes near hagiographic endorsement and defence of Heidegger contributed to the ambiguity surrounding the latter’s involvement with Nazism, which lingered for some decades (Rabinbach 1997, 119–120).¹¹ Even more damning, Ethan Kleinberg points out that only after Heidegger’s attempts to contact Sartre had failed did he address the “Letter on Humanism” to Beaufret, making the gesture seem even more “calculated” (2012, 394). The text’s positive statements about Marxism can be read as a similarly self-protective, pragmatic effort. Anson Rabinbach writes that the endorsement of Marx is “to say the least” out of character for Heidegger, which does suggest an alternative motivation is plausible; not only would acknowledging the Marxist view of history as “superior” to others be an explicit overture to the left and a way to court the French connection, and put some distance between himself and accusations of Nazism, but also, Heidegger’s sons were still in prisoner-of-war camps in 1948, and a public affirmation of Marxism could potentially help them (1997, 103, 112–113, 121). Robert Bernasconi argues that Heidegger’s openness to a productive dialogue with Marxism was “playing it safe”, given the proximity of the Soviet army (2013, 370). All in all, the “Letter”, as Rabinbach puts it, exemplifies Heidegger’s ability to “assume a position of the highest philosophical rigor while positioning himself in the most opportune political light” (1997, 97).¹² Hemming does not mention any of this background context.

The negative opinion of commentators is supported by the comments of Herbert Marcuse, whose condemnation of the “Letter” carries particular weight due to his personal knowledge of Heidegger. Marcuse tried to develop a dialogue between the work of Marx and Heidegger, long before the latter, as discussed below, suggested such a possibility himself. In his early work, Marcuse attempts to create an alignment between Heidegger and Marx, a bridge between phenomenology and historical materialism.¹³ By placing the “historicity of Dasein” within the framework of the “dialectical method”, Marcuse argues for the possibility of the existential authenticity of the proletariat through radical, “revolutionary” action (2005, 2, 4, 19). Initially, in the late 1920s and early 30s, Marcuse saw in *Being and Time* a concrete philosophy which spoke to the immediate and real concerns of existence and the human condition (2007, 116).¹⁴ He perceived in these real concerns the strong possibility of an alignment with Marxism, a philosophy which, above all, is grounded in the concrete. Heidegger’s public conversion to Nazism – which took many of his students completely by surprise – contributed greatly to Marcuse’s deep disillusionment with Heideggerian philosophy (Wolin 1998, 157). Re-reading *Being and Time* after Heidegger joined the Party in 1933, Marcuse decided that the “concrete” philosophy offered in *Being and Time* was a “phony, a false concreteness”, and that Heidegger’s philosophy was just as “abstract” and disconnected with reality as the previous traditions which had dominated German universities (2007, 117). Heidegger

10 For a detailed account of Heidegger and Sartre’s relationship, see Bernasconi (2013).

11 See Rockmore (1995), page 107 onwards, for an engrossing account of Beaufret’s unwavering discipleship of Heidegger.

12 As Rockmore puts it: “If Heidegger’s intent in writing his ‘Letter on Humanism’ was not only further to develop his thought but also to influence the French philosophical discussion – through correcting the anthropological misinterpretation of his thought, then through securing allies abroad for his person and thought when few were available in his own country, and finally through limiting the threat to his own person and thought represented by the incipient debate on his Nazism – then he succeeded brilliantly” (1995, 94).

13 The fullest expression of this is Marcuse’s 1932 *Habilitationsschrift* (1987).

14 See also Marcuse (2005, 24).

was using his “existential analysis to get away from social reality rather than into it” (2007, 118). Feeling duped and betrayed, Marcuse came to judge his attempted integration of the two traditions as a failure (Wolin 1998, 153).¹⁵ In an important interview in 1977, Marcuse referred directly to the “Letter on Humanism”, arguing that since it was written under Allied occupation of Germany, when “one didn’t know yet how things would go”, Heidegger’s seeming sympathy with Marxism must be seen as a calculated endorsement, written as a protection against imminent denazification (2007, 117). In a comment that is even more damaging to the view that the essay’s support of Marxism deserves serious attention, Marcuse stated that he believed Heidegger had never really read Marx, although he admitted this was an “open question” (117). Again, Hemming does not mention any of this, even though, for example, he quotes other parts of the interview with Marcuse.

Heidegger on Marx: beyond the “Letter”

When we consider Heidegger’s corpus more broadly, what is apparent is the generally vitriolic opinion Heidegger has of Marxism, which is distinctly at odds with the tacit endorsement that appears in the “Letter on Humanism”. To further reinforce the calculated nature of Heidegger’s comments about Marx in that essay, this section will collate and discuss some of the more significant mentions of Marx in Heidegger’s corpus. The bulk of these appears in *Introduction to Metaphysics* (lectures presented in 1935, published 1953), the Le Thor and Zähringen seminars (1966–1973) and a late television interview (1969). Other scattered comments on Marx can be found, but these mentioned are the most substantial.¹⁶

Heidegger’s first significant, hostile engagement with Marx predates the “Letter on Humanism”. In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, presented in lecture form in 1935, Heidegger states that Marxism forms part of the “disempowering of the spirit” and the “darkening of the world” ([1953] 2000, 47; emphasis in original). This is a world caught between the “pincers” of Russia and America which are “metaphysically the same” with regard to their “world-character and their relationship to spirit” (48). Heidegger is quite specific in *Introduction to Metaphysics* that “spirit” is to be understood through direct reference to his infamous Rectoral address of 1933, two years before these lectures (52). Here spirit is

...the determined resolve to the essence of Being, a resolve that is attuned to origins and knowing. And the *spiritual world* of a Volk is not its cultural superstructure...rather, it is the power that comes from preserving at the most profound level the forces that are rooted in the soil and blood of a Volk... ([1933] 1993, 33–34; emphasis in original).¹⁷

Heidegger’s appeal to a Nationalist essentialism avoids theoretical ideological claims, and instead focuses on an emotional, psychological and historical folk identity which is meant to embody and carry this spirit. He suggests through the course of the Rectoral address that a resolute reinvigoration and promulgation of this spirit will lead the German people to greatness, and through the mire that is the unfolding collapse of “moribund” Western “pseudocivilization” ([1933] 1993, 38). “Spirit” is that depth of being which inheres in Germany because of the weight of its heritage, the unique contributions of its peoples and its language, and its close affinity with the Ancient Greeks ([1953] 2000, 60).¹⁸ This creates a sense of worldhood which is always, Heidegger thinks, in its foremost sense “spiritual” (47). The very deliberate distinction made that the spiritual world *is not* merely part of the “superstructure” is evidently a veiled attack on Marxism. Spirit is rooted in the blood and soil of a people, the very grounding of their identity, their base, whereas Marx would regard these beliefs as part of the bourgeois pretence of maintaining power over the proletariat.

15 According to Richard Wolin, the full story of their interaction is “yet to be written” (1998, 152).

16 For example, see Heidegger (1968, 24; 1998a, 338; 2001, 195, 223, 284, 289; 2010, 118, 161; 2012a, 90, 132; 2012b, 44); Marx is also mentioned in anti-Semitic terms in the fourth volume of the *Black Notebooks* (1942–1948) still only available in German, see Heidegger (2015a). For a discussion of some of the contents of this in English, see Christian Fuchs (2015).

17 Heidegger directly refers to this definition of spirit in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, see ([1953] 2000, 52). For a fuller discussion of the guises “spirit” assumes in Heidegger’s work, see Jacque Derrida (1989). Derrida points out that Heidegger takes up the term “spirit” most deliberately in his explicit alignment with Nazism, see Derrida (1995, 184–185).

18 See also Heidegger (1998b, 113).

In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, it is the increasing lack and diminishment of “spirit” in the modern world which Heidegger bemoans. “Spirit” emerges through attention to the “originary questioning about grounds and the bonding to such grounds” which are no longer asked ([1953] 2000, 48). Its absence is marked by the present lack of “depth from which the essential always comes” to human beings (48). Instead, in the present time, “spirit” is replaced by “extension and measurement”, what Heidegger will go on to call “enframing” or “positionality” in his later work (48). Marxism is also a symptom of this “disempowering” and decline, for it is a reduction of the world to a technological materialism which replaces “spirit” with “intelligence”. “Intelligence” is understood as the regulation and mastery of the material relations of production. Intelligence strips away the world as “spiritual”, because all “originary questioning about grounds...are hidden and obscured”, reducing our experience of Being to one which is wholly explainable and self-contained, “ever-identical” and “indifferent” (48). “Spirit”, now replaced and substituted by “intelligence”, becomes the “powerless superstructure” whose effort is directed at the mastery of the “material relations of production”, for it is only *this* material reality which counts as “authentic reality” (48).¹⁹

Heidegger lumps capitalism and Marxism, America and Russia together, which is no coincidence. Both ideologies, seemingly antithetical to each other, are governed by our concern with material reality in terms of labour, production, capital, consumption and exchange value. Their central distinction concerns the control and distribution of that reality. This conception of materialism, as Heidegger says in “Letter on Humanism”, is the world reduced entirely to the material of labour ([1947] 1993, 243). This is the case in both ideological frameworks in that they are driven by the same metaphysical presuppositions about what the *real* really is. Both ideologies emerge as part of the disenchanting industrialisation of the world which becomes wholly fixated on what is calculable, what later Heidegger calls “enframing” or “positionality” [*Ge-stell*].²⁰

Heidegger’s critique of technology can be interpreted as a forceful rejoinder to Marx’s material conception of reality. Essentially he characterises modern, industrial technology as a force which orders and positions the world in a predetermined way, according to the dictates demanded by this technology itself. In his most well-known essay on this subject, “The Question Concerning Technology”, he argues that the essence of technology is a particular way of revealing Being, which he calls a “challenging” [*Herausfordern*] ([1954] 1993, 320). The earth and its inhabitants become “standing reserve” [*Bestand*], meaning that everything is reduced to only its resource potential. Natural resources are set upon through mechanisation in order to extract and store them for future use. One of the numerous examples he gives of enframing is the current of the Rhine, which is manipulated to supply hydroelectricity. Unlike a traditional windmill which was built in a suitable place dictated by the river’s flow and dependent on the wind’s blowing, the hydroelectric plant demands the certainty of a reliable current of water. This entails manipulating and damming the river itself to ensure this constant output of energy. Even the aesthetic dimension of the Rhine as a landscape is commodified under the gaze of vacationing tourists (321). Thus the essence of technology everywhere reveals or “positions” Being according to the dictate of “challenging-forth” (321).

What underlies *Ge-stell* is the sense that this current epoch is part of the historical unfolding of the forgetfulness of Being itself. We may assume that technology and the need for “standing reserve” are driven by our own demands and intelligence, but fundamentally, we do not control the mystery of unconcealment itself. We are beholden to the sending of Being and our modern epoch, characterised as *Ge-stell*, is its current manifestation. The danger essentially is that the possibilities of Being granted to us, and our openness to these possibilities, are overwhelmed and overtaken by this one dominant mode of revealing ([1954] 1993, 330). The principle of enframing, the centrality of measure, and the replacement of “spirit” for “intelligence” all precipitate the erasure and

19 It is worth noting the close proximity of the pejorative use of “superstructure” in the Rectoral address (1933) and in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, which was initially presented in lecture form in 1935.

20 In the essay “The Question Concerning Technology” (Heidegger [1954] 1977; [1954] 1993), the term *Ge-stell* is rendered as “enframing”. However, in later translations of other texts such as the *Four Seminars* and the *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, the translators have chosen the word “positionality”; see Mitchell (2012, xi), and Mitchell and Raffoul (2012, xii–xiii).

forgetfulness of our recognition and response to the mystery of Being. This onslaught everywhere manipulates and positions reality, closing off other possibilities of worlding.

While Marx is never mentioned in this essay, it is clear that Heidegger's critical position on the challenging nature of modern technology and its reduction of the world to a store house of energy aligns strongly with the same concerns he has about the Marxist conception of reality. "The Question Concerning Technology" finalised in 1953 from previous versions of his Bremen lectures written a few years earlier, is also the same year *Introduction to Metaphysics* appears in print for the first time. Those "originary questions" about the meaning of Being so central to Heidegger's thought, which "intelligence" and "measure" cannot articulate, are rendered unaskable by *Ge-stell*. Enframing is fully realised in Marx's reduction of the world to a technological materialism. This singular, dominating revealing of reality is fundamentally incompatible with Heidegger's conception of Being. Marxism can be interpreted as the ultimate encapsulation of *Ge-stell*, because it reinforces our forgetfulness of Being through its emphasis that humankind produces itself, and that this "self-production" is all that is real. Yet, for Heidegger our central role is not self-production, but the shepherding and guardianship of Being – reality is not ours to control. Instead we are summoned by and granted our disclosive potential through the call of Being itself, and it is this, our ontological openness to this call which is fundamentally threatened.

This concern with technological domination and its alignment with Marxism are themes discussed explicitly in the Le Thor and Zähringen seminars which took place between 1966 and 1973 (2012c). Heidegger's reflections here on Marxism are not particularly sustained, being spread over the course of the four seminars (though the bulk appears in 1973). He reiterates positions already established in the "Letter", but fundamentally his position regarding Marxism now is entirely negative: though it is world-historical, Marxism wholly reinforces our forgetfulness of Being in its reduction of human beings to mere agents of production. When Marx claims that "Man produces himself", Heidegger argues that this means that "Man is a factory. Man produces himself as he produces his shoes" (2012c, 32). Production, whether material or social, becomes the measure of successful human existence. Existence itself is entirely encompassed within "the production process", a practical claim which is only possible because it rests on the metaphysical assumption that the nature of reality is fundamentally material (52). Heidegger sees in this reduction of human existence to its self-production the danger and possibility of our self-destruction (73).

This self-destruction emerges because of the seemingly inescapable impulse of the "imperative of production". The "imperative of progress" is coupled to an imperative of production which, in turn, can only produce if there is an imperative of "ever new needs". There is a constant "rush" of consumption and everything "new" is immediately "obsolete and outmoded, replaced by something 'even newer'" (2012c, 73). Tradition, and with it our situated historicity (i.e. "spirit"), are usurped by the anxiety of the "even newer". What has been "can no longer be present – except in the form of the *outmoded* which... is entirely inconsequential" (73; emphasis in original). Elsewhere, Heidegger reiterates this self-destruction, writing that the "labouring animal is left to the giddy whirl of its products so that it may tear itself to pieces and annihilate itself in empty nothingness" (1973, 87).

In these seminars it is clear that Heidegger's critique of Marxism is informed by his notion of *Ge-stell*. To reiterate, this is not merely the contemplation of the theory of the orderability of reality as a possibility, but *is* our metaphysical reality, the destiny of Being unfolded into the present age. Thus to think is to think about, and within, a conception of reality which *is* orderability, calculability and consumption, values which are integral to our current conception of existence. Heidegger goes so far as to state that "there are no longer objects; only 'consumer goods' at the disposal of every consumer, who is himself situated in the market of production and consumption" (2012c, 74). This framework of production is conceptualised as enframing, which is fully realised in Marx's conception of our existence, that man produces himself and his world.

The Marxian socio-economic imperative severely constrains our ecstatic openness to Being. To be reduced to this conception of existence is a form of self-destruction, for it means to define and fix the meaning of Being within this material framework. Heidegger goes so far as to declare that Marxism is "the most extreme nihilism" for it makes man, conceived only as a labouring and consuming being, the measure of all things (2012c, 77). By defining humankind in such a way, Marxism wholly

and completely forgets Being as that which first grants us the possibility to be, and forgets that we stand in its clearing. This self-destruction is the closing and falling away of humankind from its possibilities and its futuralness. The breadth of possibilities of worldhood, “spirit” are narrowed and channelled into one complete, global ideology, a single all-encompassing metanarrative. The irony is that this elevation of man *as producer* to the highest principle is also only possible *because* of the age of nihilism, because we live in a disenchanted world finally and completely emptied of any transcendent meaning. In the Le Thor and Zähringen seminars, Heidegger turns the assessment by the “Letter” of Marxism on its head. The world-historical status of Marxism is deeply indicative of, and implicated in, the current deepening nihilism of our age.

This critique continues in the 1969 seminar, held on 7 September of that year, when he discusses Marx’s eleventh thesis of Feuerbach: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it” ([1888] 1972, 145; emphasis in original). Heidegger wonders whether there is a “genuine opposition between an *interpretation* and a *transformation* of the world? Is not every interpretation already a transformation of the world – assuming that this interpretation is the work of genuine thinking?” (2012c, 52; emphasis in original). He develops the point in a television interview recorded two weeks later, on 24 September 1969.²¹ The moment is somewhat staged as he, prompted by a question, reaches for an already opened book on a nearby bookshelf and reads out Marx’s eleventh thesis, which he then critiques more strongly, suggesting that this thesis overlooks “that a world change presuppose[s] a change of *world idea* and that a world idea is only to be obtained by a sufficient *interpretation* of the world” (1977, 39; emphasis in original). Thus any change must be premised on an already existing interpretation of what the nature of reality should look like, in order for it to be realised. Heidegger suggests that the first part of Marx’s thesis speaks “against philosophy”, but in the second part it is tacitly endorsed (40). In the TV interview, therefore, Heidegger completes the thought he first suggested in the seminar two weeks before: Marx’s thesis had elided the fundamentally necessary relationship between genuine interpretation and transformation – the latter unable to exist without the former. The close proximity of the seminar and the interview, in which Heidegger ponders the same aphorism, seems to support Marcuse’s accusation that Heidegger never read Marx thoroughly. Rather he seems content to use Marx selectively, as a point of difference to make whatever argument Heidegger himself is interested in at that moment. One commentator states that Heidegger’s approach to Marx hinges mostly on “prevailing reductionist interpretations”, a description which succinctly captures what this paper is illustrating (Stahl 1975, 25). Even Hemming admits that Heidegger’s engagement with Marx was rare and never systematic (2013, 17–18).

Finally, Heidegger’s reflexively hostile reaction to Marx’s thought even extends to his seemingly disparaging remarks directed at Marcuse and his project (2012c, 52). Heidegger’s 1969 Le Thor seminar, noting that Marx requires that Being (understood as materialism) “be given precedence over consciousness”, continues:

Since there is no consciousness in *Being and Time*, one could believe that there is something Heideggerian to be read here! At least Marcuse had understood *Being and Time* in this way (2012c, 52).

What to make of this oblique, puzzling statement is unclear. Andrew Feenberg, attentive to the derisive nature of this comment, suggests that what is fundamental about reality for Marx is *praxis* (2005, xiv). Marx writes explicitly that it is the social existence of human beings which determines their conscious ([1859] 1904, 11–12). Similarly, this concern with *praxis* and social existence are central themes in *Being and Time*. In this comment during the Le Thor seminars, Heidegger seems to acknowledge that Marcuse is justified in noticing this parallel between his work and that of Marx (2005, xiv). However, there is evident flippancy in Heidegger’s tone. Arguably, the simplistic and reductive way he aligns his own philosophy with Marx’s is meant to disparage the work of Marcuse, to suggest that Marcuse’s appropriation of the two thinkers is irksome to Heidegger.

21 The interview was conducted with Richard Wisser and broadcast on the German television channel ZDF on 24 September 1969. An English translation of the interview is available in *Martin Heidegger in Conversation*, (Heidegger 1977).

Overall, it seems clear that in spite of his suggestion in “Letter on Humanism”, Heidegger never intended or sought any kind of “productive dialogue”. It is obvious that Heidegger’s corpus shows a general distaste for and disengaged neglect of Marx. The “Letter” was a calculated statement, made in a very turbulent post-war Germany. The two other significant mentions of Marx, in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* and the Le Thor and Zähringen seminars (with the TV interview), were similarly made in less threatening political circumstances. Heidegger’s openly hostile comments in *Introduction to Metaphysics* appeared in 1935; although he had resigned his Rectorship at Freiburg in 1934 and broken off active participation with the Nazis, he was still working in a Nazi Germany, where such anti-Soviet opinions would be approved of. It is in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* that Heidegger talks of the “inner truth and greatness” of “National Socialism” which he seems to perceive as a genuine alternative to the twin “pincers” of capitalism and Marxism, the “darkening of the world” ([1953] 2000, 213). Similarly, the Le Thor and Zähringen seminars in which Heidegger is again openly hostile to Marxism take place between 1966 and 1973, years in which Heidegger was living in a divided Germany during the Cold War, when prevailing anti-Soviet feeling again makes expressing such ideas safe, and even personally advantageous.

In conclusion, this review has set out to more fully contextualise the “Letter on Humanism” and its seemingly positive endorsement of Marxism, which Hemming neglects to do in his book. Drawing out both the historical circumstances which surround the writing of “Letter on Humanism”, and examining Heidegger’s other engagements with Marx show a deeply hostile attitude which is entirely at odds with the claim to a “productive dialogue”.²²

References

- Bernasconi, R. 2013. “Heidegger and Sartre: Historicity, Destiny, and Politics.” In: *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, edited by François Raffoul and Eric Nelson, 369–376. London: Bloomsbury.
- Derrida, J. 1989. *Of Spirit. Heidegger and the Question*. Trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Derrida, J. 1995. *Points...Interviews, 1974–1994*. Edited by E. Weber. Trans. P. Kamuf. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Feenberg, A. 2005. *Heidegger and Marcuse. The Catastrophe and Redemption of History*. New York: Routledge.
- Fuchs, C. 2015. “Anti-Semitism, Anti-Marxism, and Technophobia: The Fourth Volume of Martin Heidegger’s Black Notebooks (1942–1948).” *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 13(1): 93–100.
- Heidegger, M. 1968. *What is Called Thinking?* Trans. J. G. Gray. New York: Harper & Row.
- Heidegger, M. 1973. *The End of Philosophy*. Trans. J. Stambaugh. New York: Harper & Row.
- Heidegger, M. (1954) 1977. “The Question Concerning Technology.” In: *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, by M. Heidegger, trans. W. Lovitt, 3–35. New York: Garland.
- Heidegger, M. 1977. “Martin Heidegger in Conversation.” In: *Martin Heidegger in Conversation*, by M. Heidegger, edited by R. Wisser, trans. B. Srinivasa Murthy, 38–47. New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann.
- Heidegger, M. (1933) 1993. “The Self-Assertion of the German University.” In: *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, edited by R. Wolin, trans. W. S. Lewis, 29–39. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1947) 1993. “Letter on Humanism.” In: *Basic Writings*, by M. Heidegger, edited by D. F. Krell, 213–265. New York: HarperCollins.
- Heidegger, M. (1954) 1993. “The Question Concerning Technology.” In: *Basic Writings*, by M. Heidegger, edited by D. F. Krell, trans. D. F. Krell, 311–341. New York: HarperCollins.

22 I would like to acknowledge the Philosophy Department at the University of Johannesburg for the postdoctoral fellowship which enabled the writing of this article. Special thanks to Catherine Botha, Rafael Winkler and Maria Prozesky for their advice and assistance. I would particularly like to thank Thaddeus Metz for his advice on improving this piece.

- Heidegger, M. (1947) 1998. "Letter on Humanism." In: *Pathmarks*, by M. Heidegger, edited by W. McNeill, trans. F. A. Capuzzi, 239–276. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heidegger, M. 1998a. "Kant's Thesis about Being." In: *Pathmarks*, by M. Heidegger, edited by W. McNeill, trans. T. Klein Jr. and W. Pohl, 337–364. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heidegger, M. 1998b. "Only a god can save us." *Der Spiegel's* interview with Martin Heidegger. In: *The Heidegger Controversy. A Critical Reader*, edited by R. Wolin, trans. M. P. Alter and J. D. Caputo, 91–116. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1953) 2000. *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Trans. G. Fried and R. Polt. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Heidegger, M. 2001. *Zollikon Seminars. Protocols-Conversations-Letters*. Edited by M. Boss, trans. F. Mayr and R. Askay. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Heidegger, M. 2003. "Preface." In: *Heidegger. Through Phenomenology to Thought*, edited by W. Richardson, viii–xxiii. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Heidegger, M. 2010. *Being and Truth*. Trans. G. Fried and R. Polt. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Heidegger, M. 2012a. *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures. Insight Into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking*. Trans. A. Mitchell. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Heidegger, M. 2012b. *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*. Trans. R. Rojcewicz and D. Vellega-Neu. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Heidegger, M. 2012c. *Four Seminars. Le Thor 1966, 1968, 1969, Zähringen 1973*. Trans. A. Mitchell and F. Raffoul. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Heidegger, M. 2015a. *Gesamtausgabe, Band 97. Anmerkungen I-V (Schwarze Hefte 1942–1948)*. Edited by P. Trawny. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann.
- Heidegger, M. 2015b. *The History of Beyng*. Trans. J. Powell and W. McNeill. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hemming, L. P. 2011. "Introduction." In: *The Movement of Nihilism. Heidegger's Thinking After Nietzsche*, edited by L. P. Hemming, B. Costea and K. Amiridis, 1–7. London: Continuum.
- Hemming, L. P. 2013. *Heidegger and Marx: A Productive Dialogue over the Language of Humanism*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Hemming, L. P. 2014. "Heidegger's 'Productive Dialogue' with Marxism." *Philosophy Today* 58(2): 179–195.
- Kleinberg, E. 2012. "The 'Letter on Humanism'. Reading Heidegger in France." In: *Situating Existentialism. Key Texts in Context*, edited by J. Judaken and R. Bernasconi, 386–413. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kockelmans, J. 1984. *On the Truth of Being. Reflections on Heidegger's Later Philosophy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ledwith, S. 2014. *Review of Heidegger and Marx. A Productive Dialogue over the Language of Humanism, by Laurence Paul Hemming*. <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2014/961>.
- Marcuse, H. 1987. *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*. Trans. S. Benhabib. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Marcuse, H. 2005. *Heideggerian Marxism*. Edited by R. Wolin and J. Abromeit. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Marcuse, H. 2007. "Heidegger's Politics (1977). An Interview with Herbert Marcuse." In: *The Essential Marcuse: Selected Writings of Philosopher and Social Critic Herbert Marcuse*, by H. Marcuse, edited by A. Feenberg and W. Leiss, 115–127. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Marx, K. (1859) 1904. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. N. I. Stone. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr.
- Marx, K. and F. Engels. (1888) 1972. "Theses on Feuerbach." In: *The Marx-Engels Reader*, by K. Marx and F. Engels, edited by R. C. Tucker, 143–145. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Mitchell, A. 2012. "Translator's Foreword." In: *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures. Insight Into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking*, by M. Heidegger, vii–xvi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Mitchell, A. 2013. "The 'Letter on Humanism': Ek-sistence, Being, and Language." In: *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, edited by F. Raffoul and E. Nelson, 237–242. London: Bloomsbury.
- Mitchell, A. and F. Raffoul. 2012. "Translators' Foreword." In: *Four Seminars. Le Thor 1966, 1968, 1969, Zähringen 1973*, by M. Heidegger, vii–xvii. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Polt, R. 1999. *Heidegger: An Introduction*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Powell, J. and W. McNeill. 2015. "Translators' Introduction." In: *The History of Beyng*, by M. Heidegger, translated by J. Powell and W. McNeill, xiii–xvi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Rabinbach, A. 1997. *In the Shadow of Catastrophe. German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rockmore, T. 1995. *Heidegger and French Philosophy. Humanism, Antihumanism and Being*. London: Routledge.
- Sartre, J-P. (1960) 2004. *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Edited by J. Ree. Trans. A. Sheridan-Smith. Verso: London.
- Sartre, J-P. 2007. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Trans. C. Macomber. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sheehan, T. 2015. *Making Sense of Heidegger. A Paradigm Shift*. London: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Stahl, G. 1975. *Marxian Hermeneutics and Heideggerian Social Theory: Interpreting and Transforming Our World*. PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.
- Wolin, R. 1998. "An Exchange of Letters. Herbert Marcuse and Martin Heidegger. Introduction." In: *The Heidegger Controversy. A Critical Reader*, edited by R. Wolin, 152–164. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.