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Rethinking the *Polis* Implications of Heidegger's questioning the political

Stuart Elden

Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick, Warwick, UK

Abstract

Heidegger's thought has, in recent years, been relentlessly examined for glimpses of the political. This paper approaches that debate by looking at one of themes of Heidegger's lectures during the Nazi years: one which explicitly questions the notion of the political itself. This questioning, through a rethinking of the Greek word *πόλις* [*polis*], is a result of Heidegger's retreat from his own political involvement. Heidegger's active political career was theoretically underpinned by his interpretation of Plato's call for philosopher-kings: his rethinking is important in understanding his turn away from Nazism. In his rethinking Heidegger suggests that looking at the *polis* with our modern, *political*, eyes does not give us fundamental insights into the meaning of this word. Heidegger looks to the choral ode in Sophocles' *Antigone*, and focuses on a line which begins "*hypsipolis apolis*". Through a detailed reading, Heidegger suggests that *polis* should be understood not as "city" or "state" but as "site", the historical site of being. We cannot use our modern understanding of politics to understand the *polis*, but we can use our understanding of *polis* to rethink the notion of the political. The political, means relating to the site of abode of human history, and is therefore primarily spatial, or better, *patial*. Such an understanding allows us to understand Heidegger's work on technology from a better position; to distance ourselves from the modern, Schmittian notion of the political; and to rethink the principle concepts of politics with due attendance to the role of space, or place. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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E-mail address: stuart.elden@clara.co.uk (S. Elden).

Introduction

Martin Heidegger's career has, in recent years, been relentlessly examined for glimpses of the political: to make sense of his decision to join the Nazi party, to serve as Rector of Freiburg University between 1933 and 1934, and to lie, evade and remain silent after this involvement had ended (see, for example, Ott, 1993; Wolin, 1993; de Beistegui, 1998). Much of the debate has been about the accuracy of certain key facts, and about the position this leaves Heidegger as a thinker. The bulk of the recent work has taken one of two paths — either to suggest that his political involvement bankrupts his thought, or that the man and his thought are separable. Both of these strike me as intellectually impoverished. Rather than get caught up in the biographical details, this paper seeks to engage with the debate from a more theoretical angle, looking at one of the themes of Heidegger's lectures during the Nazi years: one which explicitly questions the notion of the political itself.¹ This is Heidegger's rethinking of the Greek word *πόλις*, which we transliterate as “*polis*”.

Throughout his career, Heidegger repeatedly stressed that looking at the fundamental concepts of Greek thought with our modern eyes was dangerous in terms of the resultant misunderstandings. He argues that a fundamental change had been made in the transition from the Greek to the Latin language (Heidegger, 1983c, pp. 15–16; 1959a, p. 13; 1982, pp. 63–64; see Derrida, 1972; Sallis 1990, 1993). For example, using our modern understanding of logic could not shed light on the Greek concept of *λόγος* [*logos*]; that of ethics could not describe the realm of *ἦθος* [*ethos*]; and physics was no use in understanding *φύσις* [*physis*] (see, for example, Heidegger 1992, 1976, 1978b, 1998). And, perhaps especially, Heidegger made us think of the original meaning of *μεταφυσικά*—*τα μετα τα φυσικά* [*metaphysica — ta meta ta physika*] — and used this to point out the problems of the accepted sense of metaphysics (see Heidegger, 1992, 55ff; 1976, p. 15; 1983c; 1959a). It comes as no surprise then that Heidegger also challenges our understanding of politics by rethinking the notion of *πόλις*. Indeed, Heidegger suggests the *πόλις* was for the Greeks that which was absolutely worthy of question, and yet for the modern mind — this is written in 1941 — the “political” is unquestioned: not in terms of its content, but in terms of its essence (Heidegger, 1984, pp. 117–118). To question the political then, through a rethinking of the *πόλις*, is to send us nearer the Greeks.

This article provides a detailed reading of Heidegger's remarks on the *πόλις* and the nature of the political. It begins with analysing the lecture Heidegger gave at Freiburg University when he took over the Rectorship, along with a course on Plato from the previous year. It is argued that his reading of Plato is central to understanding his political involvement, with Heidegger seeing himself as a modern philosopher-king. After his resignation, I suggest that he rethinks the notion of *πόλις*, both for the own intrinsic merit of such an analysis, but also as a potential way of chal-

¹ This approach of seeking out the political in the thought—which seems to me the most sensible response to Heidegger's Nazism—is greatly shaped by Janicaud (1990).

lenging the prevailing attitude of the time. In this his work can profitably be compared to that of Carl Schmitt and, because Schmitt is so central to much recent work on the political, to contemporary debates. Unlike these debates however, Heidegger's emphasis on the spatial aspects of the political give the potential for rethinking the essence of the phrase "political geography". Then, in a discussion of one of Heidegger's most provocative references to the Nazi period, I suggest that contemporary commentators have largely missed the point of his analysis. Research into the question of technology, which for Heidegger is one of the most *political* of concerns, can profitably learn from Heidegger's rethinking of the political.

Recent work on the theoretical foundations of geography has traded upon Heidegger's work in either a direct way, or through the use of other thinkers influenced by him — such as Foucault or Lefebvre (see, for example, Soja, 1989; Gregory, 1994; Harvey, 1996). Unfortunately, partly because of the difficulty of crossing disciplinary boundaries, and partly because of simply poor scholarship, Heidegger had been badly treated by geographers. It is to be hoped that geographers generally can benefit from a more detailed and nuanced reading of Heidegger's work, and that those with political concerns particularly will see that his work has much to offer here too. More broadly the area of "political geography" can potentially, because of Heidegger's implicit link between the two terms, more explicitly ground itself within the discipline of political studies. This is not to say that geographers should be more attentive to the political aspects of their work — this seems to be clearly already done — but that political theorists and scientists should be more attentive to the importance of geography.

The Rectorship

One of the reasons that Heidegger wants to rethink the *πόλις*, and through it, the notion of the political, is to explicitly distance himself both from the attitude of the time, and from his own political involvement. It is notable that *Being and Time* — Heidegger's principal work from 1927 — does not discuss the *πόλις*, the state, or politics: indeed, there are only a couple of passing references to the state and to politics in the entire work. However, the Address Heidegger gave in 1933 when he became Rector was a politicising of the earlier philosophy; the first lecture course on Hölderlin a philosophising of these politics (Heidegger, 1980). In bringing his thought to the political arena, Heidegger is greatly influenced by Plato's—*Πολιτεία* [*Politeia*], with its call for philosopher-kings or rulers. This dialogue is known in English as *Republic*, and in German as *Der Staat* [The State] — translations Heidegger will take issue with later in his career. This will be discussed later in this paper. Heidegger's first important treatment of this text is found in the Winter Semester course of 1931–32, *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit: Zu Platons Höhlengleichnis und Theätet*, as well as in the Rectoral Address itself.

In the lecture course Heidegger makes the following remark:

Concerning the "state" [*Staat*] (in this way we translate *πόλις*, not quite adequately), and the question of its inner possibility, according to Plato what

prevails as the highest principle is that the proper guardians [*eigentlichen Wächter*] of the being-with-another of humans, in the oneness of the πόλις, must be philosophical humans. This does not mean that Professors of philosophy should become chancellors of the Reich [*Reichkanzler*], but that philosophers must become φύλακες [*phylakes*], guardians. The domination of the state and its ordering must be guided through by philosophical humans who, on the basis of the deepest and widest, freely questioning knowledge, bring the measure and rule, and open the routes of decision (Heidegger, 1988, p. 100).

Philosophers are seen here as guardians, guides to the conduct of the state, those who can lead the leader, *den Führer zu führen*. Although Heidegger hints at its inadequacy, he translates πόλις as *Staat*, and uses a word that cannot fail to have nationalistic overtones: *Reichkanzler*. This attitude — here suggested as an interpretation of Plato — is given concrete expression when Heidegger takes over the Rectorship. It is notable that throughout the Rectoral Address Heidegger uses the word “state”, never explicitly linking it to the word πόλις, but never denying this is the reference intended. The first line of the Address suggests that “assuming the Rectorship means committing oneself to leading this university *spiritually and intellectually*” (Heidegger, 1983b, p. 9; Wolin, 1993, p. 29).

This leading calls for a new kind of questioning, one which will “ground knowledge [*Wissenschaft*] once again directly in the fruitfulness and blessing of all the world-shaping forces of man’s historical essence, such as: nature, history, language; the *Volk*, custom, the state; poetry, thought, belief; sickness, madness, death; law economy, technology” (Heidegger, 1983b, pp. 13–14; Wolin, 1993, p. 33). Heidegger appropriates Ernst Jünger’s concepts of “military service” and “labour service”, and sets up the idea of “knowledge service”. In his key work *Der Arbeiter* [*The Worker*] Jünger likens the worker to the soldier, and opposes them to the security-seeking bourgeoisie (Jünger, 1960, vol. 6). Indeed, Wolin suggests that Heidegger’s “option” for National Socialism was based on the supposition that it was the way toward the society of workers proposed by Jünger (Wolin, 1993, p. 121). Heidegger sees the role of the university as “knowledge service”, part designed to prepare men for the other two services: “Because the statesman and the teacher, the doctor and the judge, the pastor and the master builder lead the *Volk* in its existence as a *Volk* and a state and watch over this existence in its essential relations to the world-shaping forces of human being and keep it focused, these professions and the education for them are entrusted to the knowledge service” (Heidegger, 1983b, p. 16; Wolin, 1993, p. 35; see Palmier, 1968).

An introduction to metaphysics

Heidegger’s first rethinking of the πόλις appears in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* two years later, after he had resigned the Rectorship. It would seem that the most obvious route to understand the concept of the πόλις would be to return to the central texts of Ancient Greek philosophy on politics — Plato’s Πολιτεία and Aris-

totle's *Επιστήμη Πολιτική* [*Episteme Politike—The Politics*] — or to political texts, histories or documents. Instead, Heidegger looks at Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*, and particularly at the second chorus. The discussion of πόλις forms part of an analysis of the nature of man as revealed in this choral ode. There are three remarkable lines for Heidegger. The first (line 333–4) describes man as “το δεινότατον [*to deinotaton*]” — the strangest, uncanniest [*das Unheimlichste*] of all beings,² and the second (line 360) sees man as “παντοπόρος απορος [*pantoporos aporos*]” — “underway in all directions, on the way to nothing”. Heidegger explains that πόρος [*poros*] means “passage through ..., transition to ..., route [*Bahn*]”. Man is everywhere a path for being, but is therefore flung out of all paths, essentially homeless, unfamiliar. As Heidegger notes, the παντοπόρος απορος clearly contains an interpretation of δεινότατον (Heidegger, 1983c, pp. 157–161; 1959a, pp. 148–152). We might also note that the notion of a path was very important for Heidegger — he called two of his most important collections *Wegmarken* [*Pathmarks*] and *Holzwege* [*Woodpaths* — the type of paths that lead, but not necessarily anywhere in particular]³ and just before his death asked for his collected writings to be known as “Paths — not Works [*Wege, nicht Werke*]” (Heidegger, 1978a; Kisiel, 1993, p. 3).

Heidegger then focuses on line 370, which begins ὑψίπολις ἀπολις [*hypsipolis apolis*]” — translated in a standard English version as “he and his city rise high — but the city casts out” (Sophocles, 1994, p. 77).⁴ The line has a similar construction to παντοπόρος απορος, but instead of speaking of the path it speaks of the place where these paths meet, the πόλις, from which “political” is derived, and which is usually translated as “city” [*Stadt*] or “city-state” [*Stadtstaat*]. Heidegger suggests that this does not capture the full meaning: πόλις is so familiar to us through the words “politics” and “political” that we no longer see it as worthy of question. Heidegger offers a suggestion: “πόλις means, rather, the site [*die Stätte*], the there [*Da*], wherein and as which historical *Da-sein* is. The πόλις is the historical site [*Geschichtsstätte*], the there *in* which, *out of* which, and *for which* history happens [*Geschichte geschieht*]” (Heidegger, 1983c, p. 161; 1959a, pp. 151–152). To this site and scene of history belong the gods, the temples, the priests, the festivals, the games, the poets, the thinkers, the ruler [*Herrscher*], the council of elders, the assembly of the people, the army and the fleet. All of these do not first belong to the πόλις, or are political through a relationship with a statesman, but through their being constitute the πόλις. This is why man is both ὑψίπολις — rising high above the site — and ἀπολις — without site. The historical site is the result of man's

² Haar notes in passing that the Greek does not contain δεινόν or δεινότατον, but the plural δεινά and the comparative δεινότερον. See Haar (1990). This remark is found in Haar's useful, if brief, discussion of Heidegger's reading of this choral ode.

³ See the untitled forward to Heidegger (1977b): “Wood is an old name for forest. In the wood are paths, most of which suddenly become impassable and end in an overgrown copse. They are called woodpaths. They all lead their own way but in the same forest. It often appears that one is the same as the other. Yet it only appears so. Woodmen and forest rangers know the paths. They know what it means to be on a woodpath”.

⁴ Heidegger's own translation of the full choral ode is found as “Chorlied aus der Antigone des Sophokles” (Heidegger, 1983a).

creation: without them it is nothing, without it they are nothing (Heidegger, 1983c, pp. 161–162; 1959a, pp. 152–153). In the first instance then, *πόλις* means the historical site of Dasein, of human existence. The *πόλις* is the site or place where history happens: the *πόλις* is essentially situated, spatial, or indeed rather, *patial*.⁵ Only afterwards does *πόλις* take on its *political* meaning.

The Ister hymn lectures

These remarks have, however, remained unclear and incomplete, that is until the publication of the lectures in the *Gesamtausgabe* (Heidegger's collected writings) on Hölderlin, and pre-Socratic thinkers such as Heraclitus and Parmenides. The lecture course on Hölderlin's hymn "The Ister", delivered in 1942, is the next interpretation. Once again the source is the choral ode from *Antigone*, and Heidegger again picks the same three lines for analysis, along with one which speaks of the *εστία* [hearth]. In his discussion of *το δεινόν* as *das Unheimliche* Heidegger accepts that in "philological" terms, the translation is "wrong". It can only be seen as justified, even necessary, on the basis of an interpretation. The points concerning this particular translation need not concern us here, but the general remarks are worth bearing in mind. Heidegger reminds us that we get our knowledge of words in a foreign language from a dictionary, which is based on a preceding interpretation of linguistic concepts. A dictionary can give us pointers as to how to understand a word, but it is never an absolute authority to which we are bound. All translating must be an interpreting. Heidegger closes: "this interim remark about the essence of translating is meant to recall that the difficulty of a translation is never merely a technical issue but concerns the relation of humans to the essence of the word and to the worthiness of language. Tell me what you think of translation, and I will tell you who you are" (Heidegger, 1984, pp. 74–75).

Heidegger sees *πόρος* as "the passage or the passage through to something" and *πόλις* as a particular realm of *πόρος*: "one field in which the latter emphatically comes to pass". Heidegger suggests that the contemporary interpretation is that everything in Greek thought is politically determined. This, he suggests, is a mistake,

⁵ This stress on place rather than space does not mean that I adhere to the reading of de Beistegui (1998). Although generally a very useful discussion of Heidegger's reading of the *πόλις*, de Beistegui suggests that the difference between space and place is that between the ontic and the ontological, that "the difference between space and place lies in the fact that the place refers to the very possibility from out of which anything like a constituted social, economic and political space might arise" (143). Rather, as is clear throughout Heidegger's career, place is that which is a more originary, lived, understanding; space (founded on extension) an abstraction. In late works, Heidegger suggests that "space" can be rethought (in a non-Cartesian way) from this understanding of "place". Drawing on the discussion of Plato's *Timaeus*, we might suggest that *χώρα* [*khora*]—which Heidegger suggests might mean "that which abstracts itself from every particular, that which withdraws, and in such a way precisely admits and 'makes place' [*Platz macht*] for something else" (Heidegger, 1983c, p. 71; 1959a, p. 66)—is the ontological foundation. See also "Der Kunst und der Raum", in Heidegger (1983a). Another useful general reading of Heidegger's discussion of the *πόλις* is found in Ward (1995).

but one which is being put to the cause of National Socialism. Heidegger argues that it is evident that “the ‘political’ is that which belongs to the πόλις and can therefore be determined only in terms of the πόλις. Yet the converse is precisely not the case”. If the political derives from the πόλις, then we cannot use our understanding of the political to explain the πόλις: “*The πόλις cannot be determined ‘politically’*. The πόλις, and precisely it, is therefore not a ‘political’ concept” (Heidegger, 1984, pp. 98–99).

Alternatives to seeing it as political would include seeing the πόλις as “state”, or as “city”, but Heidegger argues that the first leads us to relate it to modern state formations; the second is distinguished from village only because it is “stately”, again leading to confusion. Instead, “perhaps the πόλις is that realm and place around which everything question-worthy and uncanny [*Unheimliche*] turns in an exceptional sense. The πόλις is πόλος [*polos*], that is, the pole, the swirl or vortex [*Wirbel*] in which and around which everything turns” (Heidegger, 1984, p. 100). The πόλις is therefore “neither merely state [*Staat*], nor merely city [*Stadt*], rather in the first instance it is properly ‘the stead’ [*die Statt*]: the site [*die Stätte*] of the abode of human history”. The essential thing about the πόλις therefore is this site of abode: which means that the political “in the originary and in the derivative sense, lies in its being the open site of that fitting destining [*Schickung* — related to *Geschichte*, history] from out of which all human relations toward beings ... are determined” (Heidegger, 1984, pp. 101–102). To be political means to be at the site of history.

Heidegger takes this forward by asking us to question two of the most famous pronouncements in Greek thought. The first is Aristotle’s formulation of the human being as “ζῷον πολιτικόν [*zoon politikon*]” (Aristotle, 1981, 1253a), which is usually “translated in a superficial way” as political animal, entity, or being.⁶ But as Heidegger has argued, the πόλις is determined through its relationship to human beings, and therefore man is that being capable of belonging to the πόλις (Heidegger, 1984, pp. 102–103). The second is the suggestion in Plato’s *Republic* that either philosophers should become rulers, or the rulers philosophers, or there will be no end of trouble for the πόλις (Plato, 1993, 473c). Heidegger argues that Plato does not mean that philosophers should assume the business of the state, because the πόλις is not the “state”; nor should rulers “‘busy themselves’ with ‘philosophy’, as though it were something like collecting beetles”. Instead, Heidegger argues, Plato’s statement means that the πόλις — as the site of abode of human history — is best served by philosophers, who stand in the radiance and light of being. This does not mean that everything is determined in terms of the political, or that the political has priority. “The doctrine of the unconditional priority of the political on the one hand, and on the other hand the conception of the πόλις as the ground that is worthy of question and as the site of beings, are separated from one another by an abyss”. Neither Greek nor contemporary political thought (by which Heidegger means National Socialism, whose historical singularity is stressed) are served by their con-

⁶ See Heidegger (1982, pp. 100–101) for a discussion of why “animal” is a poor translation of ζῷον. For the wider context, see Heidegger (1992) and Krell (1992).

flation (Heidegger, 1984, pp. 105–107). There would therefore seem to be a distancing from the attitude of the Rectoral Address when Heidegger offered his services to National Socialism and the state as a philosopher, to complement the *Führer's* role as ruler.⁷

The lines “παντοπόρος απορος” — underway in all directions, on the way to nothing — and “ύψίπολις άπολις” — towering high above the site, forfeiting the site — show, Heidegger suggests, what is so “το δεινόν [*to deinson*]”, *Unheimliche*, uncanny, in human beings. And yet *das Unheimliche*, the uncanny, is not to be understood in terms of an impression of fear or terror which humans instil in others, but to be conceived in terms of *das Un-heimische*, the un-homely, “namely that unhomely that is the fundamental trait of human abode in the midst of beings” (Heidegger, 1984, pp. 113–114). The “un” of un-homely is not merely a negative — the duality of παντοπόρος απορος and ύψίπολις άπολις show this. Heidegger explicitly links man's being unhomely to the πόλις, which is not some isolated realm — the so-called “political” — within a wider realm of πόρος, but “the site within whose expansive realm every πόρος moves” (Heidegger, 1984, pp. 110–111). This is a reversal of the earlier definition, and a progression from that of *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, but Heidegger is quick to counter that it allows the belief that everything is political. Rather, all human activity that is historical has “the πόλις as its site, as the place to which it belongs” (Heidegger, 1984, p. 117). Everything that is historical, is therefore explicitly situated, *patial*.

Heidegger suggests that for modern eyes, the “political” is the way in which history is accomplished, and as such is itself unquestioned. The failure to question the “political” belongs with its totality. The totality of the political is not simply based on the arbitrary wilfulness of dictators, but in the metaphysical essence of modern actuality in general. This metaphysical essence is, of course, fundamentally different from the way in which the Greek world was historical. The “political” is unquestioned, yet the πόλις was for the Greeks that which was altogether worthy of question (Heidegger, 1984, pp. 117–118). Rethinking the πόλις therefore leads us explicitly to question the “political”, to historicise it, to situate it.

In the following semester, in a course on Parmenides, Heidegger returns again to a discussion of the πόλις (see Frings, 1988). Again Heidegger suggests that we think the Greek πόλις and the “political” in a totally un-Greek fashion. Much of the discussion replicates that from “The Ister” course, something we might expect given their proximity. In this course however, he suggests explicitly that we think the “political” as Romans, as since the time of the *Imperium*, the word “political” [πολιτικόν-*politikon*] has been thought imperially. The only thing left of Greek in the word political is its sound (Heidegger, 1982, pp. 63–67). Plato's dialogue on the essence [*Wesen*] of the πόλις (Heidegger, 1976, p. 109) is called the Πολιτεία,

⁷ That said, Taminiaux (1991, pp. 134–135) sees things somewhat differently. He suggests that there is no indication that Heidegger abandoned the Platonism of the Rectoral Address. See also Lacoue-Labarthe (1987). In distinction I would suggest that the Platonism may remain, but Heidegger's interpretation of it changes, as does his use of the word πόλις, leading to his retreat from the political, at least in its modern sense.

which is rendered as *res publica* [public business] by the Romans, *Der Staat* in modern German, *Republic* in modern English (Plato, 1993; Platon, 1958). Earlier in the course Heidegger had distinguished between the Greek ἀλήθεια [*aletheia*], the Roman *rectitudo*, and the modern notion of truth. Αλήθεια should not be thought of as “truth” [*Wahrheit*] but as “non-concealment” [*Unverborgenheit*] (see also Heidegger 1976, 1982). He suggests that there is a similar distinction to be drawn between the πόλις, the *res publica* and the state. This is no surprise, he suggests, given that the essence of the Greek πόλις is grounded in the essence of ἀλήθεια. The πόλις, as the πόλος, the pole, is the site of the non-concealment of beings in general (Heidegger, 1982, pp. 132–133).

This detailed reading of Heidegger’s remarks on the πόλις is important both in terms of his overall development and the implications it might have. In the Hölderlin lectures Heidegger rethinks the notions of space and time through the notions of placing and journeying (Heidegger 1980, 1984; see Elden, 1999); in these discussions he rethinks them through the notions of site and history. In terms of Heidegger’s larger project this allows a reversal of the attitude in *Being and Time*, which privileged time over space. In his later works Heidegger attempts to see the two in an equal relationship. Given the renewal of interest in space within social theory generally in recent years this is of considerable interest.⁸

In much of Heidegger’s work there is an element of rural nostalgia, particularly in the discussions on Hölderlin and the later pieces which develop the notion of poetic dwelling and introduce the concept of the fourfold [*das Geviert*] of earth, sky, gods and mortals (see Heidegger, 1978b). Heidegger’s own predilection for the rural was well known — see for example his refusal to move to Berlin for a teaching post in the 1930s, and his eulogising of his Black Forest existence (Heidegger, 1983a; Sheehan, 1981). It is worth noting, in distinction to this emphasis, that the discussion of the πόλις is much wider than simply the rural, even if we bear in mind Heidegger’s admonition not to translate πόλις as city.

In addition, and perhaps most interestingly — but certainly most speculatively — is the potential for rethinking the political that this discussion provides. We will recall that Heidegger suggested that “the ‘political’ is that which belongs to the πόλις and can therefore be determined only in terms of the πόλις. Yet the converse is precisely not the case” (Heidegger, 1984, pp. 98–99). We could not use our understanding of the political to explain the πόλις, but, as the political derives from the πόλις, we can use our understanding of πόλις to rethink the political. As Heidegger notes in a discussion of Plato’s Πολιτεία, “we can call Plato’s inquiry into art political to the extent that it arises in connection with πολιτεία; but we have to know, and then say, what ‘political’ is supposed to mean. If we are to grasp Plato’s teaching concerning art as ‘political’, we should understand that word solely in accordance with the concept of the essence of the πόλις that emerges from the dialogue itself” (Heidegger, 1996, I, p. 168; 1991, I, p. 165)

This would enable an explicit distancing from the modern — in Heidegger’s time,

⁸ This is a point developed in much greater length in Elden (2001).

as well as perhaps in our own — Schmittian, notion of the political. Carl Schmitt, the Nazi jurist we know Heidegger to have read, develops an understanding of the political predicated on the friend/enemy distinction. In Schmitt's understanding, "the concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political" (Schmitt, 1996, pp. 19, 27–37). Such an understanding risks confusing the political with the polemical, πόλις with πόλεμος [*polemos*], a word that links closely to πολέμιος [*polemios*], the enemy.⁹ Indeed in a 1933 letter to Schmitt, thanking him for a copy of *The Concept of the Political*, Heidegger suggested that he was "in the middle of πόλεμος and all literary projects must take second place" (Heidegger, 1987, p. 132). It is interesting to note that much of the recent renewed interest in the concept of the political takes its cue from Schmitt. Key here is the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Mouffe particularly, in her work after the collaborative *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), clearly outlines an understanding of the political based on the Schmittian friend/enemy distinction (Mouffe, 1993, pp. 68, 85, 113).

In distinction to Schmitt and his contemporary interpreters, and with Heidegger's rethinking, we can suggest that rather than the concept of the state presupposing the concept of the political, the concept of the political presupposes the concept of the πόλις. Rethinking the notion of the political in terms of situation rather than conflict therefore distances Heidegger from his own political involvement of the Rectorship period. We might call this his retreating from/re-treating of the political.¹⁰ Such a retreat allows us to rethink Heidegger's work on technology, one of the most pressing political concerns in his work, and one sentence in particular, in a profitable way.

The question of technology

Heidegger's piece *The Question of Technology* was first delivered as a lecture on December 1st 1949, and was originally called "*Das Ge-stell*", "The Enframing". This lecture was part of a series of four, under the general title "*Einblick in das, was ist*", "Insight into that which is". These lectures aim for an understanding, a questioning, of the state of affairs in the modern world. There is a fundamental shift, a turn, in man's relations with technology, a turn that Nietzsche and Nazism were both, albeit for different reasons, unable to comprehend. As such this work of Heidegger's is profoundly political, what he called a critique of the "present" (Heidegger, 1977a, p. 397).

Heidegger's analysis of technology looks at how technological apparatus have changed over time, and, more specifically, how their attitude toward nature has altered. His examples are polarised between those belonging to a rural existence and those of a more modern age. "A radar station is of course less simple than a weather

⁹ Indeed, Schmitt recognises as much, distinguishing between the public enemy (πολέμιος) and the private one (εχθρός), a distinction he claims finds support in Plato's *Republic*. See Schmitt (1996, pp. 28–29). For an account of the role war plays in the Schmittian friend/enemy distinction, see Neocleous (1996).

¹⁰ This allusion is to the work of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1997), influenced as it is by Heidegger. For a discussion, see Critchley (1992, 200ff).

vane And certainly a sawmill in a secluded valley of the Black Forest is a primitive means compared with the hydroelectric plant on the Rhine River” (Heidegger, 1978b, p. 10; 1993, p. 312). It is suggested that modern technology unlocks the potential of nature to be a source of power that can be extracted and stored. Heidegger refutes the claim that this is what the old windmill did: “No. Its sails do indeed turn in the wind; they are left entirely to the wind’s blowing. But the windmill does not unlock energy from the air currents in order to store it” (Heidegger, 1978b, p. 18; 1993, p. 320). This change over time is one that is particularly evident when the changes in place and landscape are examined. In our modern age “a tract of land is challenged in the hauling out of coal and ore. The earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as the site of mineral deposits [*Erzlagerstätte*]” (Heidegger, 1978b, p. 18; 1993, p. 320).¹¹

This concept of “challenging” or “setting upon” is found again when Heidegger argues that “the work of the peasant does not challenge the soil of the field”. By this Heidegger means that the peasant works *with* the field, using it naturally. In contrast, the modern mode of agriculture “*sets upon* [stellt] nature. It sets upon it in the sense of challenging it. Agriculture is now a motorised food industry” (Heidegger, 1978b, p. 18; 1993, p. 320). The use of machines, chemical fertilisers and similar are unnatural ways of working *upon* the field, not working with it. In consequence, “nature becomes a gigantic gasoline station, an energy source for modern technology and industry” (Heidegger, 1959b, p. 18; 1966, p. 50). The opposition that Heidegger finds is made particularly clear when he makes an examination of the Rhine river. Heidegger compares the old wooden bridge over the Rhine with the new hydroelectric plant. Whereas the bridge was built into the river, now the river is dammed up into the power plant. The river has now become a “water-power supplier”, which derives its essence from the power-plant. “In order that we may even remotely consider the monstrousness that reigns here, let us ponder for a moment the contrast that is spoken by the two titles: ‘The Rhine’, as dammed up into the *power* works, and ‘The Rhine’, as uttered by the *art*-work in Hölderlin’s hymn by that name. But, it will be replied, the Rhine is still a river in the landscape, is it not? Perhaps. But how? In no other way than as an object on call for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry” (Heidegger, 1978b, pp. 19–20; 1993, p. 321).

Nature has become standing-reserve [*Bestand*], a designation that means something more than merely stock. This, argues Heidegger, is a fundamental shift from the previous attitude to nature, found, of course, in the rural setting. But even this is changing irrevocably. “The forester who measures the felled timber in the woods and who to all appearances walks the forest path in the same way his grandfather did is today ordered by the industry that produces commercial woods, whether he knows it or not”. His work is subordinate to the demand for cellulose, for paper,

¹¹ Alderman (in Murray, 1978, pp. 46–47), provides a useful example. He quotes an advertising slogan: “Nature creates ore deposits. Anaconda creates mines”, and comments “the advertisement further states that ores are not much good until someone uses them; with this use they become natural resources. Thus we have from within contemporary technology a partial recognition of its own nature”.

which is then turned into newspapers and magazines which “set public opinion to swallowing what is printed” (Heidegger, 1978b, pp. 21–22; 1993, p. 323). There is even talk of the idea of human resources, although man is never merely standing-reserve, as it is man, in part, that drives technology forward. However Heidegger cautions against simply seeing man as leading technology: “It seems time and time again as though technology were a means in the hands of man. But, in truth, it is the essence of man that is now being ordered forth to lend a hand to the essence of technology” (Heidegger, 1994, p. 68; 1977c, p. 37). The question of technology is not simply and purely technical, but is something that shapes the whole attitude of our age, “not only upon man, but also upon all beings, nature and history” (Heidegger, 1969, pp. 34/98).

Now such an understanding of technology would be one thing, but if we consult the transcript of “*Das Ge-stell*”, rather than the version published as “The Question of Technology”, we find that the text has been edited. The published version suggests that the modern mode of agriculture “sets upon nature. It sets upon it in the sense of challenging it. Agriculture is now a motorised food industry” (Heidegger, 1978b, p. 18; 1993, p. 320). In the transcript published in the *Gesamtausgabe* Heidegger continues to compare the role of technology in modern agriculture with events on a wider world stage: “Agriculture is now a motorised food industry, in its essence the same thing as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and extermination camps, the same thing as blockades and the reduction of countries to famine, the same thing as the production of hydrogen bombs” (Heidegger, 1994, p. 27).¹² Lacoue-Labarthe has described this remark as “scandalous and lamentably inadequate” (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1987, 58ff), something it clearly is, given Heidegger’s compliance with the Nazi regime in its nascent years, but it should not *merely* be the cause for accusations (Krell, 1992, 138ff; Janicaud, 1990; de Beistegui, 1998, pp. 153–157). I am aware that I am on dangerous ground here, and that a reading of this passage that does not condemn outright could be seen as a tacit acceptance, but it is worth thinking a little more about it.

¹² See also Heidegger’s letter to Herbert Marcuse, of January 20th 1948: “To the serious legitimate charges that you express ‘about a regime that murdered millions of Jews, that made terror into an everyday phenomenon, and that turned everything that pertains to the ideas of spirit, freedom, and truth into its bloody opposite’, I can merely add that if instead of ‘Jews’ you had written ‘East Germans’ [i.e. Germans of the eastern territories], then the same holds true for one of the allies, with the difference that everything that has occurred since 1945 has become public knowledge, while the bloody terror of the Nazis in point of fact had been kept a secret from the German people”. “An Exchange of Letters: Herbert Marcuse and Martin Heidegger”, in Wolin (1993, p. 163). Heidegger’s seemingly continual need to suggest comparable crimes on the part of others—here the allies’ treatment of Eastern Germans, in the key passage discussed from “*Das Ge-stell*” the hydrogen bombs of the superpowers, the blockade by the Russians—which Wolin likens to the common strategy of the Adenauer years (Wolin, 1993, pp. 158–159), betrays the fact that here, more than anywhere else, Heidegger engages in *criticism*: “serious legitimate charges ... bloody terror of the Nazis”. One can almost hear the strain to admit even this little. The other important part of this letter is Heidegger’s admission of his own *guilt*: “You are entirely correct that I failed to provide a public, readily comprehensible counter-declaration [to the Rectoral Address, after his resignation]; it would have been the end of both me and my family. On this point, Jaspers said: that we remain alive is our guilt” (p. 163).

In terms of the four examples Heidegger gives — the motorised food industry; the gas chambers and extermination camps; the blockades and the hydrogen bomb — what they, on his terms, have in common is the essence of technology. The essence of modern agriculture is something entirely apart from agriculture — it is the *Gestell* that frames agriculture, that of modern technology, the modern ethos. In Heidegger's terms this is the inevitable result of the world made picture, the Cartesian objectification of the world. What Heidegger fails to realise — and this is the scandal, the inadequacy — is that there is something essentially *different* between agriculture and the Holocaust. What many of his critics fail to realise — and this is the absence of thinking — is what that difference is. This absence of thinking is exhibited most obviously in de Beistegui's book *Heidegger and the Political*. He suggests that the thinking of the Holocaust in the same terms as the hydrogen bomb or the Berlin blockade is the problem. Does not, he suggests, the Holocaust force “thinking outside of itself” (de Beistegui, 1998, p. 154).

This absence, or indeed failure, is particularly obvious in de Beistegui's work because his is a book expressly dealing with the political, and yet what links the last three examples is a particular concept of the political. As was noted in the discussion of the *πόλις* earlier, Heidegger suggests that the failure to question the “political” belongs with its totality. He suggests that the totality of the political is not simply based on the arbitrary wilfulness of dictators, but in the metaphysical essence of modern actuality in general (Heidegger, 1984, pp. 117–118). The modern concept of the political is, like the modern attitude to technology, not merely a regionalised, historically limited event, but one that has its essence in modern ways of being. The gas chambers and extermination camps, the blockades and the hydrogen bomb all exhibit the political thinking of the friend/enemy distinction. There is clearly something in Heidegger's critique of the political that aims at Schmitt, yet notably de Beistegui's book contains no reference to Schmitt. With the potential of modern technology a friend/enemy problem can now be resolved in a way as distinct from previous solutions as modern agriculture is from the peasant in the field.

Such a reading of Heidegger's discussion of the *πόλις* enables us to better understand Heidegger's relation to the Nazi movement and his work generally — especially that on technology. As Karsten Harries notes, “Heidegger's retreat from politics is inseparable from his characterisation of the essence of technology” (in Murray, 1978, p. 323). In his rethinking of the *πόλις*, Heidegger makes a potentially major contribution to political theory, by suggesting the links implicit in the phrase “political geography”. As Henri Lefebvre suggests, “there is a politics of space because space is political” (Lefebvre, 1976, p. 33). Following Heidegger, we might suggest that “there is a politics of space because *politics is spatial*”. Now whilst geographers tend to be well aware of the political implications of their subject matter, it cannot be generally said that political theorists and scientists are so aware of the geographical — or better spatial — aspects of their work. It is notable that for all the recent work on the political, there has been little interest within politics in the question of space,¹³ and much of the recent theoretical reassertion of space has been

¹³ There is little of note to be said of the work of Laclau and Mouffe in this respect, or the essays collected in Butler and Scott (1992), and the tantalising remarks in Lefort (1988, p. 50) do little but praise the work of Arendt (1958), who was of course a pupil of Heidegger's. Equally, baring some interesting comments on his opening page, Rancière (1992, 1995) never gets to grips with the issues inherent in his title, *Aux bords du politique*, translated into English as *On the Shores of Politics*.

apolitical.¹⁴ What implications are there in seeing the “political” in terms of its situatedness or platial/spatial elements? What potential is there for rethinking the notions involved in political theory and practice — especially those relating to regional and international politics? Such questions, which cannot be addressed in such a short paper, are perhaps what Heidegger would call the signposts or pathmarks for future thought. Heidegger’s rethinking of the *πόλις*, and through it the rethinking of the political, is therefore of interest to both geographers and political theorists, and is deserving of the closest attention.

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¹⁴ The exception to this is the work of David Harvey (see, most recently, 1996), which has remained politically concerned throughout.

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