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## Book review: dangerous minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the return of the far right by Ronald Beiner

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**Book Review: Ronald Beiner, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018.176 pp., £18.99 (hbk).**

Much ink has been spilled over the rise of the far-right in recent years. In the focus has long been the socio-economic and cultural drivers of far-right support. Common to many of these approaches, be they on far-right radicalism, extremism or populism, is the depiction of the far-right as a delusional project for the economically or culturally left-behind. Due to this dominant framing little attention has been paid to the philosophical ideas that provide the fertile ground for far-right ideology – ideas that might also appeal to a more intellectually inclined public.

With his book *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right*, Ronald Beiner makes an important contribution to this still under-researched aspect of the rise of the far-right. Focusing on Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, Ronald Beiner powerfully demonstrates how two of the greatest philosophers of the 19th and 20th century could become masterminds of today's far-right. Unlike some Heidegger and Nietzsche critics who would like to intellectually ban both thinkers due to the problematic elements in their thought, Beiner does not put their intellectual power in doubt. Rather, he calls for a more thorough engagement, especially with those ideas that easily lend themselves to an appropriation by the far-right today. By doing so, Beiner equally debunks the myth of Nietzsche and Heidegger as leftist or apolitical thinkers and shows that both are essentially anti-egalitarian, anti-liberal and opposed to the basic tenets of modernity. In part one, Beiner looks for the roots and the "essence" of Nietzsche's philosophy as well as the influence he exerted on important 20th century thinkers on the left and on the right. According to Beiner, Nietzsche and the contemporary far-right are part of an anti-modern trope that is driven by two essential aspects. First: a critique of modernity's lack of "robust cultural horizons" which, according to Nietzsche, are necessary to provide the "definite boundaries" for a "life-affirming" and meaningful existence (pp.25–6). Instead, the modern emphasis on objective truth, rationality and its utopian strive for equal human dignity lead to "the reduction of culture in its sacredness and holiness into something utterly profane" (p.31). The second pillar is Nietzsche's proposed solution for this perceived cultural decline, namely a return to a pre-modern, self-asserting culture of hierarchies based on "rank order, slavery and oppression" (Nietzsche quoted on p. 45). A culture led by a "nobility" that overcomes modernity's privileging of morality to face the realities of self-assertive power (p.43).

In part two, Beiner focuses on Heidegger's pre- and post-war philosophy and shows how, just as Nietzschean thought, it is consistently driven by the anti-modernism that also drives many far-right thinkers today. For Heidegger, being a true and meaningful human being is only possible by overcoming the shallowness and nihilism in rationalistic modernity. Modern liberal democracy leads to a spiritual homelessness and an oblivion of authentic being (p.94) that, in turn, results in a banalization and weakening of genuine being. For Heidegger, meaningful being is rooted in the spiritual, not racial entity of the Volk which he sees as the ground for a "new beginning" overcoming the "Angst concerning the groundlessness" of modern life (Heidegger quoted on p.98). Beiner argues that this is nothing other than a spiritualised version of blood and soil thinking directed against the "open-horized universalism of modernity" (p.93–4).

Linking his analysis of Nietzsche and Heidegger to contemporary figures of the far-right (such as Richard Spencer, leader of the US' alt-right or Alain de Benoist, theorist of the French Nouvelle Droite), Beiner manages to convincingly make three arguments. First, he shows how Nietzsche and Heidegger have been read and appropriated uncritically by the left. The Nietzsche and Heidegger hype that characterized much of the Left's intellectual debates in the post-war decades, has veiled the "dangerous ideas" that built the fundament of both philosophers' projects. Secondly, Beiner debunks the myth that the far-right is a project of the left-behind and shows that its ideology is just

as much an elite project as it is built on a well-developed philosophical trope that can be traced back to Plato. Last but not least, in a time where much of liberal political theory and philosophy represents not much more than “variations on end-of-history philosophical complacency” (p. 127), Beiner shows the unbroken power of ideas in politics and history-making – an ideological vacuum that far-right thinkers have been taking advantage of over the past years.

Beiner’s contribution is accessible and timely as it dismantles much of the far-right’s nimbus as innovators of politics. It equally shows that they can refer to central figures of philosophy to legitimize their ideology. At parts, however, *Dangerous Minds* focuses too much on the philosophers and too little on the contemporary far-right. Beiner’s tracing of Nietzschean and Heideggerian thought in the contemporary far-right remains limited and sketchy. A more thorough analysis of how today’s far-right appropriates philosophers, a stronger rooting in the far-right literature, as well as a more in-depth assessment of potential overlapping between leftist and rightist thought would have allowed *Dangerous Minds* to enter into a dialogue with other disciplines.