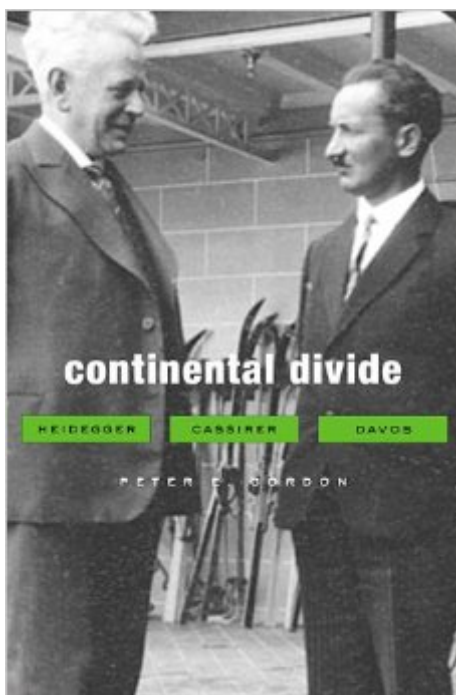


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Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos



Synopsis

In the spring of 1929, Martin Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer met for a public conversation in Davos, Switzerland. They were arguably the most important thinkers in Europe, and their exchange touched upon the most urgent questions in the history of philosophy: What is human finitude? What is objectivity? What is culture? What is truth? Over the last eighty years the Davos encounter has acquired an allegorical significance, as if it marked an ultimate and irreparable rupture in twentieth-century Continental thought. Here, in a reconstruction at once historical and philosophical, Peter Gordon reexamines the conversation, its origins and its aftermath, resuscitating an event that has become entombed in its own mythology. Through a close and painstaking analysis, Gordon dissects the exchange itself to reveal that it was at core a philosophical disagreement over what it means to be human. But Gordon also shows how the life and work of these two philosophers remained closely intertwined. Their disagreement can be understood only if we appreciate their common point of departure as thinkers of the German interwar crisis, an era of rebellion that touched all of the major philosophical movements of the day—life-philosophy, philosophical anthropology, neo-Kantianism, phenomenology, and existentialism. As Gordon explains, the Davos debate would continue to both inspire and provoke well after the two men had gone their separate ways. It remains, even today, a touchstone of philosophical memory. This clear, riveting book will be of great interest not only to philosophers and to historians of philosophy but also to anyone interested in the great intellectual ferment of Europe's interwar years.

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Customer Reviews

Continental Divide is a fine book both as intellectual history and as philosophy. It centers around the famous debate between Martin Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer at Davos in 1928. (Davos has come down a bit in intellectualism since then. Cassirer, Heidegger, et al have been replaced by bond brokers and Bono.) The topic of the debate was about the interpretation of Kant's First Critique, but it had implications concerning philosophical method in general, enlightenment rationalism versus irrationalism, and parliamentary liberalism versus anti-democratic nationalism in Germany. The time of the debate was that of the late Weimar Republic in Germany, when the democratic experiment of the twenties was beginning to unravel, soon to completely collapse and be replaced by Hitler's Nazism in the depression. Heidegger would not actually join the Nazis until five years later, but in retrospect the debate was seen as a prelude to the collapse of liberal rationalism into the maelstrom of Nazism. It also is seen, on the level of pure philosophy as the triumph of philosophy of life and existentialism in Europe over more conceptual logical approaches to method. (In fact the emigration of the Vienna Circle logical positivists after the murder of their leader Schlick, the death of many Polish logicians in the holocaust, and the death of the minority of French logicians in the resistance while Sartre avoided risk but later portrayed himself as a warrior of the resistance, also contributed to the decline of logical and linguistic approaches on the continent.) Many on the next generation of European philosophers were interested spectators at the debate. (Others falsely claimed or misremembered that they were present. Gordon unfortunately does not attempt a complete list.

In March 1929, philosophers Martin Heidegger (1889 -- 1976) and Ernst Cassirer (1874 -- 1945) met in Davos, Switzerland for a public series of individual lectures and for a discussion and debate. The Davos meeting has assumed an important, near legendary, stature in the history of Continental philosophy. In his book "Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos" (2010) Peter Gordon gives an account of the two philosophical protagonists, their Davos meeting, and of what proceeded and followed the Davos meeting. Most importantly, Gordon discusses what was and what was not at stake in the discussion between Cassirer and Heidegger. The book displays a rare combination of historical and philosophical insight. Gordon is Amabel B. James Professor of History and Harvard College Professor, Harvard University. Recently issued in paperback, his book won the Jacques Barzun Prize of the American Philosophical Society. At the time of their Davos meeting, Cassirer and Heidegger were renowned. The older philosopher, Cassirer, was an urbane German-Jewish philosopher and a neo-Kantian who had written extensively on the history of philosophy, including a three-volume statement of his own philosophical approach, "The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms".

Heidegger was born in rural Germany to a family of modest means and saw himself as an outsider. Before the Davos debate, Heidegger published only one book, but it was extraordinary and made him famous. The book, "Being and Time" (1927) has become a classic of philosophical literature. In their Davos debate, Cassirer and Heidegger explored the issues that divided them and also tried to see the extent to which they shared common ground.

My two-star rating reflects the usefulness of the book's subject for myself, but of course as a rule one should never trust any secondary literature on Heidegger. All of the liberals from the Academy with any interest in philosophy routinely go out of their way to spit and trample on the grave of Heidegger, and what else should be expected? If they are able to control themselves then Heidegger is simply fitted into the postmodernist fabric as being nothing more than the inauguration of Derrida. Gordon isn't as bad as, say, William D. Blattner's two books. Those books, especially the B&T guide, remain the worst secondary literature on Heidegger I've ever read. Farias's great historiographical book was even-handed but collapsed when trying to convey MH's thinking after 1930. Gordon is able to both moderate that peculiar, liberal humanitarian moralizing while conveying B&T in the now superficial, traditional terminology that secondary-literature has adopted in its attempt to explain it. I can't believe people still call Heidegger an existentialist. I could see someone that hasn't read any of Heidegger's books after the 1930's enjoying this book, or someone who has just studied or taken a course on Being and Time. Its for that level of understanding, the very beginning. I came to this book as a veteran and I admit it was boring for me. I bought it because I had read Geoff Waite's awesome essay on Heidegger, Cassirer and 'Esotericism' and wanted to know the details of Davos. There really wasn't much to learn outside of an appreciation of Leo Strauss's comments regarding the emptiness and lostness of Cassirer and all of academic philosophy in the face of Heidegger. Gordon provides the context for this despite himself.

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