

“Heidegger, Cassirer and Political Theology”

Professor Peter E. Gordon
Department of History,
Harvard University

<http://history.fas.harvard.edu/people/faculty/pgordon.php>

Peter Gordon (PhD, University of California at Berkeley, 1997) is Professor of History at Harvard University, where he specializes in modern European Intellectual History from the late eighteenth to the late twentieth century. He works chiefly on themes in Continental philosophy and social thought in Germany and France in the modern period. He has written extensively about the philosopher Martin Heidegger and various strains of phenomenology in modern German and French thought.

Selected Publications

Books

- [*Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*](#) (Harvard University Press, 2010).
- *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy*. Co-Editor (Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- *The Modernist Imagination: Essays in Intellectual History and Critical Theory in Honor of Martin Jay*. Co-Editor, with Breckman, et al. (Berghahn Books, 2007).

Articles

- “The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*” *Journal of the History of Ideas* Volume 69, Number 4 (October, 2008).
- “The Artwork Beyond Itself: Adorno, Beethoven, and Late Style” In *The Modernist Imagination: Essays in Intellectual History and Critical Theory in Honor of Martin Jay*. (Berghahn Books, 2008).
- “Neo-Kantianism and the Politics of Enlightenment” *Philosophical Forum* (Spring, 2008).
- “The Concept of the Unpolitical: German Jewish Thought and Weimar Political Theology” *Social Research*. Special Issue on Hannah Arendt’s Centenary Volume 74, Number 3 (Fall 2007).
- “Hammer without a Master: French Phenomenology and the Origins of Deconstruction (or, How Derrida read Heidegger)” in *Historicizing Postmodernism*, Mark Bevir, et al., eds. (Routledge, 2007).

- “Science, Realism, and the Unworlding of the World” in *The Blackwell Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, Mark Wrathall and Hubert Dreyfus, Eds. (Blackwell, 2006).

Introduction to the Paper

The 1929 philosophical encounter between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger in Davos, Switzerland, remains an important touchstone in philosophical memory. But it is rarely acknowledged that the conversation between these two titans of Continental philosophy endured for many years, from their initial meeting in 1923 right up until Cassirer’s death in 1945. The political features of this story are so dramatic that historians and philosophers have been tempted to fashion it into an allegorical struggle—between liberalism and illiberalism, rationalism and irrationalism—terms that distort perhaps more than they reveal.

Professor Gordon’s paper seeks to deepen our understanding of the many complications of this conversation by looking to a much-neglected moment in Cassirer’s final work, *The Myth of the State* (published posthumously in 1946), where Cassirer condemns Heidegger’s philosophy for revitalizing political myth in modern Germany. This criticism, he suggests, might come into somewhat better focus if we recall the rich and manifold debates over political theology and secularization that preoccupied many of the most prominent intellectuals in Central Europe from the 1920s and forward into the post-war era. The debate between Cassirer and Heidegger, Gordon argues, ultimately turns on a contest between two, rival, conceptions of what it is to be a human being, and two, distinctive, notions of what it means for humanity to have emerged from the religious into the post-religious world.