

**Ferdinando G. Menga, *L'appuntamento mancato. Il giovane Heidegger e i sentieri interrotti della democrazia*, Quodlibet, 2010, pp. 218, €22, ISBN 9788874623440**

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The contribution by Ferdinando Menga investigates the issue of Heidegger's political thinking from a not yet considered point of view, that is, it looks for the implicit presence of this issue among the first lectures given in Freiburg by the German philosopher.

The work discloses an implicit path toward a thinking of representative democracy which is then described as an *Holzweg ante litteram*, an interrupted way, which makes Heidegger 'miss his appointment' with this political possibility of his thought. This is due to the explicitly anti-political twist that Heidegger gives his phenomenology. Moreover, such an immanent reading is widened by a problematic confrontation with Hannah Arendt's issue of direct democracy.

Through an investigation on Heidegger's first phenomenology the author points out the trace of an ontological foundation of representative democracy. The main feature of such a phenomenology, as it is described in the first chapter, is to be found in the concept of "expression" as the possibility of experience itself.

Heidegger's meditation tries to seize experience in its first givenness before every possible theoretical objectification, that is, in its originality. The very first givenness of experience is not a naked manifestation, but happens in a horizon of meaning, which Heidegger calls "significance" (*Bedeutsamkeit*). This is the main feature of the world as it is, the world in which one lives, the world around us, the *Umwelt*.

A meaning can appear only in a particular context since every meaning refers to another one and entails a reference to its own alterity. Here what comes to the fore is the centrality of the notion of expression as it is the only possible manifestation of a meaning: a meaning can only express itself and appear in the framework of the "as-structure". One never sees the "naked something" but sees always "something as something", that is, one meets in the world objects with a function and people in a context, as relatives, acquaintances, strangers and so on.

A meaning expresses itself in a determined way as something: this is the symbolic character of the manifestation, which is its necessary relation with something else. This leads to the second character of the manifestation which consists in its worldly feature and the necessary manifestation of every meaning in a determined horizon.

Therefore there is a double reference to alterity in the dynamic of expression: the first concerns the manifestation of a meaning as such, the second concerns the relation among different meanings and the horizon of their institution.

The author describes the first aspect of the inherence of alterity in expression as such, in the wake of the responsive phenomenology developed by Bernard Waldenfels.

Every meaning expresses its identity with itself so far as it is understood as something, but this identity is not derived from an original pattern as a copy is derived from a model: significance is the main feature of experience and experience never begins by itself. It is always hit by a strangeness which sets it in a motion that is not contained in itself.

This “something” which sets experience in motion is experienced as a phenomenon because the “something” enters into manifestation. Once it enters into manifestation, it is experienced and it receives a meaning, but this meaning is given only in the paradoxical feature of an “original repetition”. The meaning consists in the identity of something as something, but experience does not dispose of this identity as a model to which it could refer. Its identity must therefore be constituted in the manifestation itself because something, in order to appear, must repeat itself “as something”.

Identity is not given, it is rather the product of the process of experience. Such a process gives something a meaning by making its identity as this meaning come to the fore. As Menga underlines, such a repetition has an original feature, since it does not repeat an identity given before but it constitutes this identity. The lack of a given identity from which significance should derive manifests the open and contingent aspect of every expression: since there is no adequation to a given model, the process of significance can never come to an end. This is also entailed by the symbolic character of every meaning, as every manifestation can never claim to exhaust a totality and a fullness. One can never experience the world as such but only a determined world.

Experience is constitutively partial and a meaning can be given only referring to a determined context, as the second chapter shows. Here comes to the fore the second aspect of the role of alterity in the dynamic of expression, which is the necessary givenness of meaning in a determined context. The expressed significance does not derive from an original model but at the same time it is not created *ex nihilo*.

The world as *Umwelt* is the transcendental of experience itself since experience can appear only in a partial horizon of meaning. This transcendental is however constitutively given in its relation to the self which experiences it, and this self is, first and foremost, not alone in the world.

The structure of the world as *Umwelt* entails therefore a world of the self (*Selbstwelt*) and a world of the others (*Mitwelt*): their correlative implication is not to be understood as a sum of extrinsic elements which could anyway exist as atoms, in reciprocal isolation. They are rather to be conceived as a singular flow of significance which articulates with different horizon of meanings in a relation of reciprocal participation.

The world of the others is encountered in part in the world of the self, so far as one has to do with them, but one's own *Selbstwelt* does not become another world: it is as such open to the difference because it takes part in an order of meaning, in an *Umwelt*, which is instituted in the dynamic of creative expression described before. Since the meanings are not derived from an original pattern, the process of their institution can never be arrested at a supposed moment of complete adequation to a model: such a process is always open to a possible alteration.

Here comes to the fore the very political aspect that Menga unearths in Heidegger's texts.

The openness of the dynamic of the creative expression of meanings is due to the partial and contingent feature of every order of significance, because this is always exposed to the possible "otherwise" which has been excluded by its very institution. In everyday life the most banal experiences, which are taken for granted, rest nevertheless on an implicit process of recognition, by which they appear as what they are. Such a process of recognition is at work even in the extreme form of the lack of recognition which happens when one finds oneself in an alien situation. Heidegger gives the disputable but efficacious example of a black man from Africa who has never experienced

a teacher's desk and suddenly appears in a class at university. He does not recognize the teacher's desk as a teacher's desk, as students do, but this lack of recognition does entail the unquestionable givenness of the horizon of significance. The man from Africa does not see a "naked being", but perceives something in a different horizon of meaning from the one of the students. These horizons have different contents, but they are in their very essence identical, so far as they are spaces for manifestation of things through the mediation of meanings. One could even say that the horizon of meanings as such, that is, the very givenness of significance, is equal for everybody despite the different features and contents that it can assume.

In other words, to conceive the world as given in an open horizon by the mediation of meanings means to underline its political feature because it concerns all men who necessary take part in it, even in the extreme form of the strangeness to an order of meanings.

The horizon of significance is constitutively public and this gives the clue for posing the question which is at the core of the book, namely the question about the political nature of this space of meaning. What kind of political space can arise from the dynamic of creative expression? In order to answer this question Menga bursts from the immanence of the framework of Heidegger's texts towards a confrontation with Hannah Arendt, this is carried out in the third chapter.

By underlining the shared character of the world as manifestation, Arendt sees in politics the transcendental of the world itself. Things are in a certain way because they appear in this way also to the others: the scope of the manifestation of the world as a horizon of shared meanings is necessarily given to a plurality of individuals. One finds therefore in Arendt's thought the same dynamic of the creative expression as it was described by Heidegger: given the coincidence of politics and public givenness of an horizon of meanings, it is easy to understand that this horizon is open to contingency and plurality. Every space of significance is disclosed in the constant interaction of the singularities, which obtain power by gathering in a group.

Since the world is manifestation as significance and this is shared by everybody, democracy seems to be the correspondent form of politics. One has to understand what kind of democracy would be more apt at corresponding to the feature of this manifestation that is ruled by expression.

Given the partiality and contingency of every expression of meanings, Menga finds this feature in representative democracy. Every representation must be understood as a creative expression, because it manifests a meaning which is recognized by a community. Such a community, however, does not exist before this recognition itself: it is only by gathering in a shared horizon of meaning that a group understands itself as such and comes to manifestation, that is, to Being.

Nonetheless this conception of representative democracy is missed by both thinkers, from a political point of view by Arendt and from an ontological point of view by Heidegger.

Menga stresses Arendt's plea for direct democracy, conceived of as an antidote for the always possible degeneration of representation in oligarchy. On the other hand – and to my mind this is the best contribution given by the book – the author shows in the last chapter how Heidegger's ontology of expression tends progressively to a pre-expressive givenness of the phenomenon.

After having described the expressive horizon of significance as mediated, partial and contingent, the German philosopher looks for the possibility of an integral access to an experience without excesses. The relational feature of the *Umwelt* is gradually lost in favour of an always more private world of the self, conceived as a world tout court, without prefixes. This twist on the direction of Heidegger's phenomenology makes his encounter with politics a “missed appointment”, as the subtitle of the book says.

Menga points out that both thinkers remain in the boundaries of modernity, since they acknowledge the contingent and precarious character of the world and look for a dispositive which could allow for stability. This is found by Arendt in direct democracy, conceived as based on the original cohesion of the will of the people in an horizon of harmony. Heidegger, on the other hand, tries to bypass the mediate and contingent feature of the expression by looking for an absolute givenness of the phenomenon.

Summing up, the research by Menga turns out to be fruitful and efficacious by clarifying the rise of an aporia with its unexpressed implication at the core of Heidegger's thinking.