

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-51837-6 - Heidegger in America
Martin Woessner
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Heidegger in America

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was one of the most influential and controversial thinkers of the twentieth century. Offering a novel account of Heidegger's place in the recent history of ideas, *Heidegger in America* explores the surprising legacy of his life and thought in the United States of America. As a critic of modern life, Heidegger often lamented the growing global influence of all things American. But it was precisely in America where his thought inspired the work of generations of thinkers – not only philosophers but also theologians, architects, novelists, and even pundits. As a result, the reception and dissemination of Heidegger's philosophical writings transformed the intellectual and cultural history of the United States at a time when American influence was itself transforming the world.

A case study in the complex and sometimes contradictory process of transnational exchange, *Heidegger in America* recasts the scope and methods of contemporary intellectual and cultural history in the age of globalization, while simultaneously challenging what we think we know about Heidegger and American ideas.

Martin Woessner is Assistant Professor of History and Society at The City College of New York (CUNY), Center for Worker Education.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-51837-6 - Heidegger in America
Martin Woessner
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Heidegger in America

MARTIN WOESSNER

The City College of New York, CUNY



Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-51837-6 - Heidegger in America
Martin Woessner
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA
www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521518376

© Martin Woessner 2011

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2011

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data
Woessner, Martin V., 1977–
Heidegger in America / Martin V. Woessner.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-51837-6

1. Heidegger, Martin, 1889–1976. 2. Philosophy, American—20th century.
I. Title.

B3279.H49W54 2010
193—dc22 2010030601

ISBN 978-0-521-51837-6 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or
accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in
this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is,
or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-51837-6 - Heidegger in America
Martin Woessner
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

*For Sarah,
My Star*

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-51837-6 - Heidegger in America
Martin Woessner
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

It's clear that we won't be able to write the intellectual history of this
century without reading Heidegger.

Richard Rorty (1995)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page ix</i>
Introduction: Being Here	I
1 Freiburg Bound: The Early Years of American Heidegger Scholarship	15
2 Exiles and Emissaries: Heidegger’s Stepchildren in the United States	40
3 Nihilism, Nothingness, and God: Heidegger and American Theology	92
4 An Officer and a Philosopher: J. Glenn Gray and the Postwar Introduction of Heidegger into American Thought	132
5 <i>Dasein</i> and <i>das Man</i> : Heidegger and American Popular Culture	160
6 The Continental Divide: Heidegger between the Analytic and Continental Traditions in American Philosophy	181
7 Richard Rorty and the Riddle of the Book that Never Was	211
8 Ethics, Technology, and Memory: Heidegger and American Architecture	230
9 Culture Wars: Heidegger and the Politics of Postmodernism	263
Conclusion: Being There	280
<i>Index</i>	283

Preface

Now Heidegger was a very strange old gentleman, whose eccentricity had become the nucleus for a thousand fantastic stories. Some of these fables, to my shame be it spoken, might possibly be traced back to my own veracious self; and if any passages of the present tale should startle the reader's faith, I must be content to bear the stigma of a fiction-monger.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment"

The American philosopher Richard Rorty had a knack for making summary pronouncements. He was equally adept at playfully puncturing intellectual pretensions. He could build up – lumping seemingly irreconcilable philosophers and ideas into a common cause – but he could also tear down, and with devastating wit. I figured I had a fifty-fifty chance when I dared to run my interpretation of his confrontation with Heidegger by him at a post-lecture reception at SUNY Stony Brook in April 2003. A Rortyan demolition ensued. Undeterred (thanks, perhaps, to a second glass of wine), I proffered the one-minute summary of my larger project for his consideration. The response it received, though polite, was even less enthusiastic.

Rorty could not fathom why anybody would be interested in linking abstract philosophical debates to the dynamic landscape of postwar American history. Philosophy department politicking had nothing to do with – should have nothing to do with – real politics. It was fine to talk about ideas, but why try to embed them in a broader historical or cultural context? Thankfully, I was kept from the brink of dissertation despair by Louis Menand, whose interdisciplinary seminar in thesis writing, co-taught with Nancy K. Miller, I was then attending. "Don't worry," Menand reassured me after I had relayed the gist of my exchange with Rorty, "I told Rorty years ago that I was thinking of writing a book on the Metaphysical Club. His response was that he had already looked

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-51837-6 - Heidegger in America
 Martin Woessner
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

into it, and that there was nothing there.” Menand’s *The Metaphysical Club*, published in 2001, won the Pulitzer Prize.¹

Rorty was referring to the twentieth century when he said in an interview some fifteen years ago that “we won’t be able to write the intellectual history of this century without reading Heidegger.”² Only time will tell, of course, if this assessment is applicable to the twenty-first century, but there can be no doubt that Heidegger’s work was an inescapable point of reference in the century past. Proving that this has been the case in the United States – and trying to explain why – has not been an easy task. Conceived and executed at the boundary of so many different intellectual disciplines, and in the face of so much entrenched opinion, this book requires perhaps more than the usual patience and perseverance on the part of its readers. For Heideggerians, there is probably too much history here and too little Heidegger. For historians, there is probably too much Heidegger and too little history. For proponents of cultural studies, there is probably too much of an emphasis on “high ideas,” whereas intellectual historians may find the analyses of popular culture scattered throughout the following pages distracting at best and downright wrongheaded at worst. For architects, for theologians, for poets – the list could go on. My hope is that by bracketing our common assumptions about philosophy, history, and even Heidegger, we might come to see each of these topics in a new light.

Interdisciplinary books need interdisciplinary readers. That so many people from so many places have had the patience to tarry with me and this project is something for which I will be thankful for a long time to come. It would have been downright impossible to write this book were it not for the copious amounts of guidance, help, and encouragement that I received from so many wonderful people, organizations, and institutions over the course of the past nine or so years. I am honored to properly thank all those who have supported me and this project – financially, intellectually, and emotionally.

Although I have tried very hard to scrub off any remaining residues of its prior existence as a dissertation, I am happy to say that this book would not have been possible without the CUNY Graduate Center – its first home, as it were. A generous Robert E. Gillece Fellowship, coupled with a University Fellowship, made my graduate education at CUNY possible. For travel and research assistance, I would like to acknowledge support from the Sue Rosenberg Zalk Student Travel and Research Fund, as well as generous funding from the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, which awarded me a Library Research Grant in 2003 to research its extensive collection of Daniel

¹ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

² Rorty interview with Michael O’Shea, “Towards a Post-Metaphysical Culture,” *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*, edited with an introduction by Eduardo Mendieta (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 51. The interview originally appeared in the *Harvard Review of Philosophy* (Spring 1995): 58–66.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-51837-6 - Heidegger in America
 Martin Woessner
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

xi

Libeskind's early writings and notes. A fellowship at the CUNY Graduate Center's Center for Place, Culture, and Politics provided not only monetary but – more importantly – also intellectual sustenance. My thanks go to Omar Dahbour and Neil Smith for their hospitality. A Charlotte W. Newcombe Dissertation Fellowship gave me the wonderful opportunity to write without distraction, and a Mellon Dissertation Year Fellowship – administered by the Center for Humanities, another one of the Graduate Center's interdisciplinary havens, wonderfully overseen by Aoibheann Sweeney and Michael Washburn – allowed me to put the finishing touches on the very first versions of the manuscript that would eventually become this book.

A Frances S. Patai Postdoctoral Fellowship, followed by a faculty position at another great CUNY institution, allowed me to begin the process of revision. Teaching at The City College of New York's Center for Worker Education has expanded my intellectual horizons beyond measure, and I am grateful for the many ways in which the experience has influenced my work. The Center for Worker Education is a shining example of higher education in the service of the public good. Like The City College of New York itself and the wider CUNY system, it remains a beacon for public dialogue and learning. I am proud to be associated with it. My students, co-workers, and colleagues have proven to be indispensable sounding boards, critics, and friends. I thank everybody at CWE for making it such a wonderful environment in which to teach and to learn. I would particularly like to thank Carlos Aguasaco, Harriet Alonso, Marlene Clark, David Eastzer, Kathy McDonald, Séamus Ó'Scanláin, and Lotti Silber for their encouragement as this project neared its completion.

The intellectual origins of this book go back many years – and many miles – to my undergraduate education at the University of San Francisco. It was at USF that I was first introduced to the history of ideas and to Heidegger. Elizabeth Gleason convinced me that, with some hard work, I too could be a scholar. Elliot Neaman showed me what intellectual history was all about, and with a sense of humor, too. The late Robert Makus guided me through my first encounters with Heidegger. I am sorry that I cannot share this book with him.

As I slowly made my way east from California to New York, I was lucky enough to have the constant support of Eduardo Mendieta, who rescued this project at many critical junctures. From my first days as a student in San Francisco to the final days of revision in Brooklyn, he has been there throughout to challenge and encourage me – two things every thinker needs in varying degrees. Striking the right balance between them is just one of the many things at which Eduardo excels.

At the dissertation stage, I was uncommonly fortunate to have the feedback and criticisms of a particularly distinguished group of scholars. I cannot thank enough the late John P. Diggins, Bruce Kuklick, David Nasaw, and Anson Rabinbach for agreeing to read such an unwieldy manuscript. Richard Wolin, as my adviser, had no choice, but he also deserves thanks, especially for getting

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-51837-6 - Heidegger in America
 Martin Woessner
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

me out of Houston. Even from before my days at Rice University, Richard had been an inspiring intellectual, and his example continues to remind me that ideas matter beyond the seminar room, something for which I will always be in his debt.

For their comments, their conversations, and their good company, I would also like to thank the following individuals: Michael Behrent, Martin Burke, Bob Catterall George Cotkin, Matthew Cotter, Ron Haas, Jessica Hammerman, the late Peter Hare, Dagmar Herzog, Joel Isaac, Greg Lucas, Scott Marler, Sherry Gray Martin, Samuel Moyn, Tom Ort, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, Roy Scranton, Aleksandra Wagner, and the many members of the New York Area Seminar in Intellectual and Cultural History, especially Jerrold Seigel. I also thank the members of the Patai Committee: Marshall Berman, Atina Grossmann, Marion Kaplan, Mary Nolan, and Anson Rabinbach. I owe a significant debt to all my students over the years, at the Center for Worker Education and elsewhere. It is their inquisitiveness and passion in the classroom as well as around the seminar table that keeps the lonely researcher going in the all-too-quiet corridors of the university library. And speaking of libraries, my hat goes off to the staff at both the CUNY Graduate Center Library and the New York Public Library, two peaceful refuges amid the hustle and bustle of midtown Manhattan where much of this book was researched and written.

A 2009 workshop on “Ideas in Motion” at the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton provided me with crucial commentary at a most important time. Warm thanks go to all of the workshop participants, especially Daniel T. Rodgers for the generous invitation, as well as Richard H. King and Anthony Grafton for their keen criticisms and suggestions. The final manuscript also benefited tremendously from the incisive and constructive readings of three anonymous reviewers, whose scholarly precision and generosity I would also like to acknowledge with unreserved and unending gratitude.

In addition to providing me with three outstanding readers, Cambridge University Press provided me with outstanding editors. Andy Beck, Jason Przybylski, Emily Spangler, and Beatrice Rehl have taken excellent care of me and the book. A special thank you goes to Ronald Cohen, whose keen and judicious editing helped polish and improve the manuscript. All first-time authors should be so lucky as to enjoy such support. I would like to thank the following publications and publishers for kindly granting me permission to draw on previously published material. Chapter 4: An earlier version of this chapter appeared as Martin Woessner, “J. Glenn Gray: Philosopher, Translator (of Heidegger), and Warrior,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* (published by Indiana University Press), XL:3 (Summer 2004): 487–512. Used with the permission of Indiana University Press. Chapter 8: This chapter draws on material from (1) Martin Woessner, “Ethics, Architecture and Heidegger: ‘Building

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-51837-6 - Heidegger in America
 Martin Woessner
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

xiii

Dwelling Thinking' in an American Context," *CITY: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action* 7:1 (April 2003): 23–44, published by Taylor & Francis and used with permission; and (2) Martin Woessner, "Daniel Libeskind: From the End of Architecture to the Space of Memory," in Gary Backhaus and John Murungi, eds., *Lived Topographies and Their Mediatonal Forces* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2005), 145–160. Used with the permission of Lexington Books, a member of the Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group.

I am also grateful to the following presses and persons who have allowed me to reprint their words as epigraphs: The editors of the *Harvard Review of Philosophy* for the quotation from Richard Rorty at the beginning of the book: Richard Rorty, interview with Michael O'Shea, "Towards a Post-Metaphysical Culture," *Harvard Review of Philosophy* (Spring 1995): 58–66; Ohio State University Press for the quotation from Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" used at the opening of this Preface: Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," *Twice-Told Tales* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974); the editors of the *Journal of Philosophy* for the quotations from Sidney Hook and J. Glenn Gray that open Chapters 1 and 4, respectively: Sidney Hook, "A Personal Impression of Contemporary German Philosophy," *Journal of Philosophy* 27:6 (March 13, 1930), 154, and J. Glenn Gray, "Heidegger's Course: From Human Existence to Nature," *Journal of Philosophy*, LIV:8 (April 11, 1957), 197; University Publishing Group for the line from Hans Loewald at the start of Chapter 2: Hans Loewald, "The Waning of the Oedipus Complex," *The Essential Hans Loewald*, introduction by Jonathan Lear (Hagerstown, Maryland: University Publishing Group, 2000), 393; the excerpt at the start of Chapter 3 from Hans-Georg Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, in conversation with Riccardo Dottori, translated by Rod Coltman with Sigrid Koepke (New York: Continuum, 2004), 122, copyright © 2004 Continuum International Publishing Group; PARS International Corp. for the *Newsweek* caption used in Chapter 5: caption below a picture of Heidegger in the article "The Weeds of Anxiety," *Newsweek*, November 5, 1956, 108–111; Richard Kearney for his line at the beginning of Chapter 6: Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 1; Mary Varney Rorty, with special thanks, for the epigraph from Richard Rorty used to set up Chapter 7: Richard Rorty, "Trosky and the Wild Orchids," *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 11, which originally appeared in Mark Edmundson, ed., *Wild Orchids and Trosky: Messages from American Universities* (New York: Viking, 1993), 29–50, courtesy of Viking/Penguin; Alex Rabe at Studio Daniel Libeskind for the words that open Chapter 8: Daniel Libeskind, *Breaking Ground: An Immigrant's Journey from Poland to the United States*, with Sarah Crichton (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), 12; and Cornell University Press for the Fredric Jameson motto used in

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-51837-6 - Heidegger in America
Martin Woessner
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Chapter 9: Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 9.

As these quotations suggest, I have benefited tremendously from the work and scholarship of others. And as is apparent in this Preface alone, I have frequently leaned on the wisdom and advice of editors, colleagues, and friends. In no way should any of them be held responsible for the shortcomings of judgment or diligence that might be found in this book. In the end, this is my story, and I must be content to bear any stigma it may bring upon me. Stigma or not, however, I know I can always count on the friends and family who have enriched my life immeasurably these many years. For their love and support, I am especially grateful to Bill and Stephanie Burns; the Woessner family in Arkansas (Joe, Beth, Tyler, Beverly, Trent, and Brooke); the Woessner family in Northern California (Jon, Gretchen, Dylan, and Zach); Marie Ignacio, Morris Ignacio, and Nanci Brewer; and lastly, Daniel Schmidt. My parents, Geraldine and Thomas Woessner, deserve recognition for just about everything they do, but here I will highlight their roles as my first and best teachers. I am thankful each and every day that they are my mom and dad.

It is to Sarah Burns, my star, that I dedicate this book. Again and again she has shown me that the mysteries of Being pale in comparison with the mysteries of Love. This is for the lifetime of wonders that awaits us, together.