

can say how philosophy will develop in the future, although I do think what has been happening is that Analytic philosophy has, if anything, become rather narrower than in the past, and, at least in Australasia, is generally not faring well institutionally (although there are some exceptions). Much as I would like to see a more open, engaged, and vibrant form of philosophy developing that is not bound by ideology, such a hope seems overly optimistic, and it is certainly not helped by current developments in higher education in the UK or Australasia.

Interview with Stuart Elden

Paul John Ennis: You navigate an unusual academic path that traverses disciplines such as geography, politics, and philosophy. In many ways they seem to complement each other quite well. Why do you think it has taken so long for philosophy to expand into areas such as geography once again? Further, what do you think philosophy has to learn from your own discipline of geography?

Stuart Elden: My first degree was in Politics and Modern History, and in studying that I became interested in political theory. I had two remarkable teachers of theory in my final year as an undergraduate – Barbara Goodwin and Mark Neocleous – and they were an inspiration. They both made me feel that I could follow ideas where they led, which would often take me to other disciplines or other parts of the library. My final year dissertation led to an offer of a PhD place, and I began work with Barbara and David Wootton, who was a historian of ideas. David taught me a great deal about how to approach texts, how to read them in contexts and made it very clear I had a long way to go. After about a year, because of the direction my research was taking, I transferred to Mark as supervisor, which continued until I completed. Mark was excellent in toughening me up by challenging most of what I wrote, and giving me other things to read. So my advisors were pushing me in different directions, outside of the politics background I had, and into reading philosophy and work in the history of ideas.

The interest in geography came about because I was interested in questions of spatiality – and, particularly in the PhD thesis, the relation of spatiality to history. This meant I began reading some of the geographers who had engaged with theory, particularly Heidegger, Foucault and Lefebvre who I was reading at the time. This led me to read people like David Harvey, Nigel Thrift, Ed Soja and Derek Gregory. While still in a

politics department – my first job post-PhD was teaching politics at Warwick University – I started publishing in geography journals like *Antipode* and *Political Geography*. When *Mapping the Present* (the book based on the thesis) came out, it was being reviewed and discussed by geographers more than other disciplines. So in that sense a move into a geography department, in retrospect, feels natural. At the time I wasn't at all sure, but the department seemed willing to take a risk with me. Durham Geography has been an intellectually very stimulating place to be, where I feel able to work on politics and theory as much as more traditionally "geographical" topics.

My current work – which has actually been "the next book" for almost a decade – is an attempt to write a history of the concept of territory, a kind of genealogy that tries to trace the pre-history of the term well before it took on its modern sense. It's a very political book; it reads philosophers from Plato and Aristotle on; and is concerned with an obviously geographical theme. So yes, I'd certainly agree that these interests complement each other well. And yes, philosophers traditionally did work on all these issues. In the "Continental" tradition, I'm not sure that has ever really changed. There is a strong spatial sense in Nietzsche, for instance, as well as the twentieth century thinkers that I've worked on or who are popular in geography today. Husserl lectured on space; Merleau-Ponty provided some intriguing analyses, especially around the body; Deleuze and Guattari of course, Derrida etc. And political philosophy, or at least philosophers talking about politics, has continued. Marxism, for instance, and there have been some very interesting Marxist philosophers with an interest in space. So it's perhaps only certain ways of thinking about philosophy that has neglected questions of spatiality.

In geography as a discipline there has been a real interest in contemporary philosophy or social theory more generally for several years, developing in all sorts of interesting ways. Political

geography as a subfield has perhaps been a bit slower in doing this than cultural or urban geography, for instance, but it happens across human geography. For a while in the 1970s and early 1980s Marxism was the key element, and while to an extent that continues, a whole range of other thinkers have been discussed and appropriated. Recently I've been interested in bringing out these engagements more explicitly – the *Foucault and Geography* book I co-edited with Jeremy Crampton or the *Reading Kant's Geography* book Eduardo Mendieta and I have coming out, which tries to create a conversation between geographers, philosophers and others around this neglected text. The work I've done on Henri Lefebvre has been at the intersection of these interests in politics, philosophy and geography.

Paul John Ennis: There has been some talk about a topological turn in philosophy incorporating a wide array of thinkers, but also giving rise to schools of thinking such as eco-phenomenology. What do you think of this trend and how do you see it playing out in the future?

Stuart Elden: Yes, there has been some remarkable work. Jeff Malpas and Ed Casey, for instance. Ed's *The Fate of Place* book was really important for me, and was an inspiration for what I hope to accomplish with the history of the concept of territory book. There are some disagreements, perhaps particularly around the term "topological", but I'd like to think some of my work has contributed to those debates. There have been some really interesting works in environmental philosophy that have drawn on Heidegger and other writers, and of an earlier generation people like David Seamon and Yi-Fu Tuan drew on phenomenology and other philosophical traditions in their geographical work. I'm not terribly familiar with some of this work but dialogue between geographers and philosophers would certainly be worthwhile. Recently I think Peter Sloterdijk's work is worthy of attention. There have been a couple of special issues on his work, and translations of recent texts are coming

out. His three volume *Sphären, Spheres*, is supposed to be coming out too, which will be a real event. He says that one way to think of it is as the "Being and Space" to partner Heidegger's *Being and Time*. It's basically a book about being-with, about *Mitsein*.

Paul John Ennis: What is it about Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault in particular that attracted your attention? As a non-philosopher by trade can you tell us a little bit about what it was like to first encounter Heidegger and the associated challenges such as the considerable scholarly output, his unique German, and so on?

Stuart Elden: I came to Heidegger through Foucault, though I have since made the claim that it makes sense of Foucault to see him through his engagement with Heidegger. Foucault was a terrific writer – *Discipline and Punish* obviously, but *The History of Madness* and *The Birth of the Clinic* too. More recently I've been writing pieces on the Foucault lectures as they come out, with a view to a book on them some day. There are some remarkable analyses in the lectures: I was particularly struck by the ones of the mid-1970s on Psychiatric Power and The Abnormals. Back then I became really interested in the genealogical approach, and wanted to do some work on how he developed this from Nietzsche. Then the spatial angle came in – how does Foucault make his histories spatial histories? – and I felt certain that the way he worked some of these things through couldn't be straightforwardly traced through Nietzsche. I was intrigued by his comment about Heidegger being the "essential philosopher" and wanted to see what, if anything, there was to this.

In terms of the engagement with Heidegger – well it was hard work! Some time into my PhD I wished I had done an MA in Continental Philosophy, since this would undoubtedly have made things a little easier. I'd done one undergraduate course in philosophy, though Heidegger hadn't featured, but I at least had some sense of Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche. I'd also been taught and then, in the PhD, began teaching, the history of political

thought. So I suppose I had some background. The first Heidegger book I read was *Being and Time*, in the Macquarrie and Robinson translation. This was a real challenge but I can't think of any other book I've read that has had such an impact on me. It raised so many questions and opened up areas that I wanted to work on. I spent the summer that year in France and took a box of Heidegger books with me, and worked through them while I was there. The Nietzsche lectures were really important to the project. While I was there I realized that there were important texts not available in English – the Hölderlin lectures especially – but some of these were available in French. So I read them in French, and used them to help me read the German. In time, I was able to muddle through the German. I can't really read German but I could read Heidegger in German. You learn the specialized vocabulary and his particular style is actually a benefit. It's hard to read Heidegger in English without picking up something of the German – one of the reasons I prefer the Macquarrie and Robinson translation to the Stambaugh one is that it makes it clear how difficult it is to render Heidegger into English, and how important it is to get the nuances of German words.

Another thing that's worth noting is that a lot of the areas of philosophy Heidegger wrote about were ones I had little or no knowledge of. So I'd try to read Aristotle before I read Heidegger on Aristotle, and so on. Obviously that can't completely fill in the gaps, but it gave me a bit of a sense of what was interesting or distinctive about what Heidegger was doing. It meant I read a lot of the tradition, but that I have some odd gaps – Spinoza, for instance – since Heidegger didn't really write on him. I've tried to fill in some of those absences since. Most recently, for the territory book, I've been reading medieval political theology extensively. Speaking of Spinoza it is interesting how much he is invoked today, when it is often Deleuze's Spinoza... I do put quite a lot of emphasis on the importance of reading the primary

texts, and of at least carefully comparing the translations to the original language.

Paul John Ennis: *Speaking Against Number* is a book that confidently encompasses the entire span of Heidegger's thinking. Did you feel, when you decided to tackle Heidegger that complacency had begun to set into the Heidegger scholarship? Where should the topologically inclined among us go to examine Heidegger on the question of topology?

Stuart Elden: Well, this wasn't my first attempt to tackle Heidegger. More of *Mapping the Present* is on Heidegger than Foucault, and the Heidegger work had continued in some shorter pieces, especially on the *Beiträge*. I was interested in the question of calculation and didn't feel I'd done that justice in the previous book. There were some issues around politics I wanted to explore, and I had a couple of conference papers on Heidegger's early engagement with Aristotle on the *logos* and rhetoric. It took me a while to see how I could pull the concerns with language, politics and calculation together into a single coherent book, but that's what *Speaking Against Number* tries to do. The title is to be read as a phrase and as three separate ways of thinking politics—rhetorically, polemically and calculatively.

In doing the book I did read the whole *Gesamtausgabe*, as it existed then, in chronological order. That threw up a whole load of interesting themes. So, yes, instead of the 1950s work on technology I looked more at the 1930s work on machination, etc. I suppose it was an attempt to look at some less explored parts of his work. The 1920s Heidegger has been treated magnificently by people like Theodore Kisiel and John van Buren, but there is less good work on the 1930s, which is really a crucial decade for Heidegger in all sorts of reasons. I also focused less on texts I'd discussed in detail in *Mapping the Present*—the Nietzsche lectures, for instance. While I still get new volumes of the *Gesamtausgabe* as they come out, I've not read Heidegger since finishing that book

and a couple of articles that were outtakes from that analysis. Maybe one day I will go back to him, but for now I feel I've said all I have to say about him.

Heidegger on spatiality and topology comes up in all sorts of places. The *What is a Thing?* and the Hölderlin lectures in the 1930s, later essays like "Building Dwelling Thinking", "The Thing", and "Art and Space" would be good places to start. Jeff Malpas's *Heidegger's Topology* would be an excellent place to go for a commentary, which would also lead you to the right primary texts.

Paul John Ennis: You make a number of bold claims in *Speaking Against Number* such as the claim that *Being and Time* is not an apolitical work or that there is a "rhetorical excess" inscribed into the early work of Heidegger. In many ways this is a direct challenge to the idea that one can separate Heidegger's politics from his philosophy (especially for those who draw a line between *Being and Time* and the later work on this basis). What do you think the implications of this are for Heideggerians or do you think, as you seem to argue in the last part of the book, Heidegger finally comes to see National Socialism as nothing more than another manifestation of the *Gestell*? Do you think this is enough or do you find an ethical lack in this realization i.e. it ought to have been evident on a basis other than technology?

Stuart Elden: Yes, I'd see it as a challenge in those terms. The real revelation for me was reading the early lecture courses, especially those on Aristotle. The Plato's *Sophist* course and the one that preceded it on the *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy* are remarkable. In reading those it became clear that certain lines or passages of *Being and Time* rested on a much wider foundation that he'd developed in dialogue with Aristotle and others, particularly the *Ethics* and the *Rhetoric*. And in those texts—sometimes explicitly, sometimes less directly—there was an engagement with political philosophy, at least, but sometimes political events. I find it hard to see how you could read *Being*

and *Time* neutrally after all that. So what I tried to do is show how *Being and Time* was, in the terms Heidegger had established at that time in his thought, political. It was not an attempt to read back into the text ideas or actions from the 1930s. I think that Heidegger was predisposed to make the kinds of errors he did because of some key failings in his philosophy. I do think the discussion of *Mitsein* and *Miteinandersein* are key to this—how do you think being-with-others, particularly because ideas of society and community are so crucial to how you think politics. Obviously people like Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy have discussed this too.

I do think that Heidegger's analysis of the *Gestell* and his critique of the politics of calculation more generally, is the key to his answer to the question of how to understand National Socialism. I think it's a very powerful account, and can (and has) been taken forward in many ways, although of course it is missing the ethical dimension. While it's right to criticize Heidegger for that, it's probably a bit too easy. And of course moral critiques of National Socialism are easier than ontological ones. I do think he tried hard to explain, even if perhaps only to himself, what he thought went wrong. The "Letter on Humanism" is a good place to look.

Paul John Ennis: How do you manage to remain so prolific and can you provide us with some advice on the writing process? Do you think that as someone who is not plugged directly into the world of academic philosophy it is easier for you to talk about philosophy in a clear style?

Stuart Elden: I'm really interested in how academics write, in that it's clear that we work in very different ways. I've done a couple of sessions on writing and publishing (from my experience as a journal editor) when I've been a visiting academic in other departments. The key thing is that there is no correct way to write, but ways that work for individuals. The problem is that many people seem to try to write in ways that are not right for

them, that are just not working. Personally I try to write every day, even if it is just typing up some notes or work on references. I try not to get too hung up over particular words or formulations; because I go over things so many times that I never think anything I write initially is the final version. For me that's helpful in not getting blocked. I write a lot of "stage directions" into the text – "this link doesn't work"; "need better examples"; "develop" etc. – and I move on. I type all my notes into the computer these days, which helps massively with finding things.

I write a lot, which is partly because most things I read make me want to write about them. So I write comments around the quotes, and build things up. In that sense, a lot of texts emerge – I don't tend to start with word one, and often don't set out to write an article or a book. The book I have coming out later this year, *Terror and Territory*, came about because I wanted to write a piece on the contemporary state of territory to show why I thought the historical study I was doing was worthwhile. What could I say about the "war on terror" from the perspective of territory? That one piece led to another, and soon I had a few articles, some lectures and ideas, which I realized would make a book.

I suppose if there is one piece of advice, it is not to put the writing off too long. I write in part to make sense of what I'm thinking, or what I'm reading. You can always throw it away later. But leaving the writing until you've done all the reading or preparation seems to me to be a problem. That said, I do know people who claim to work that way, and they can "turn on" the writing at that late point. It just doesn't work for me – writing is more of a slow accumulation. I've written some shorter pieces quite quickly, but most pieces are built up very slowly, accretion over a long period of time. The other thing to note is that I work on several things – not quite at once – but in parallel. So the history of territory book has been ongoing for nearly a decade; *Speaking Against Number* has some aspects that are a proper

answer to a question Mick Dillon asked me in my PhD viva; I started work on Lefebvre during my PhD but it didn't make the submitted version, and so on. The other thing that is crucial is not to let conference papers sit after you've delivered them. I know of lots of people with "orphaned" papers – ones that they did some work on, maybe presented and received feedback, but never finished. I finish pretty much everything, and tend to tailor speaking invitations to what I want to be writing on. Especially while on a research fellowship, and thus not teaching, I've found it important to keep giving papers at regular intervals, but these days I tend to accept invitations only with conditions: I will speak but this is what I am working on at the moment. If that doesn't fit the event, fine – neither I nor the person inviting me tends to be put out. But it means that I use presentations as means towards the end of writing.

In terms of clarity, I don't know. It's kind of you to say this, though I suspect a lot of people think that I either miss the complexity or needlessly obfuscate! I suppose trying to talk about these ideas in different disciplines, to students, conferences etc. means that you have to work on how you explain things. I remember someone saying to me that if you simplify Hegel too much he's no longer Hegel and I think there is some truth in that. Some of the Anglo-American readings of Heidegger have perhaps been guilty in that sense. But on the other hand, I have a problem with the kinds of philosophers who think you write about a philosopher best by adopting their style. Some of the literature on Derrida for instance...

Thinking about it, *Speaking Against Number* is the book I've written that engages least with issues in geography, although it was the first book I wrote while based in a geography department. It's in a political theory series, some of the work in it was given as lectures in philosophy departments, and I've published on Heidegger in philosophy or political theory journals. There have been some generous reviews from within

philosophy. I'd like to think it works on those terms, even though by institutional position I've been outside of philosophy as a discipline.

Paul John Ennis: If you had the chance to give your younger self advice on graduate school what would it be?

Stuart Elden: I guess it's more a piece of information, rather than advice. But it's to say that it can be easy to see established academics as somehow having all the answers, and getting it right all the time. But I don't think that's the case. From my own experience, and as a journal editor, I know that getting referee reports you don't like; being asked to make changes you don't want; and being rejected really does happen to everyone. I know very few people who have never been rejected; and I think sometimes that never being rejected means your work is not challenging established orthodoxies or practices enough. In other words it's safe, mundane, competent but sometimes boring work. Innovative, challenging work often gets a rough ride from established referees. Everyone gets reports they don't like. I can think of maybe one paper to *Society and Space* in my time as editor that has only needed very minor revisions. Most need work, some obviously more than others. It's tough and like all of us you will get down about this. The best way to deal with it is to talk to friends and colleagues. If they are being honest all will have had similar experiences.

Paul John Ennis: What, in your opinion, is the future of post-Continental philosophy?

Stuart Elden: I'm not well qualified to comment on this in general terms. I've been impressed by some recent work. Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude* was one of the most remarkable books I've read in a long time, and although I've ventured into print on it, I am still thinking about its implications and challenges. Graham Harman's *Tool Being* was the most

challenging and original book on Heidegger in ages. So there are encouraging signs of new voices emerging, rather than just more work from the established people. I do appreciate the work being done to bring into circulation the lecture courses of Heidegger, Foucault and now Derrida, and translations of works are always welcome, but most of the "new" thinkers of the past decade have been already "old". That said, I do think that there are some criminally underrated thinkers, who, largely because they have been poorly served by translation, are almost unknown in the Anglophone world. Eugen Fink, for instance, who served as Husserl's assistant and then worked with Heidegger, wrote a terrific book entitled *Spiel als Weltsymbol—Play as a Symbol of World*—which was slated for translation in 1971, but it never appeared. His work has only really been translated in terms of his relation to better known figures, which is a real shame. Similarly with Kostas Axelos, who like Fink, seems to me to offer much to a philosophy of the world, which would help some of the conceptually weak thinking that runs through globalization. Personally I think it is much more worthwhile that what Jean-Luc Nancy has written on the subject. Sloterdijk, who I mentioned before, is another thinker whose translation is overdue. Fortunately, in his case at least, this is fast being remedied.

I would however venture a few words on the relation between contemporary philosophy and geography. For some time, geography has been engaging with philosophy or theory more broadly. Some very interesting work has been done. But geography's engagement with thinkers has tended to lag behind other disciplines, and to be parasitic on the work of translation, edition and introduction done by others. The exception is Lefebvre, from the initial work of people like David Harvey in getting *The Production of Space* translated, to the work of Elizabeth Lebas and Eleonore Kofman on the *Writings on Cities* collection. More recently Neil Brenner and I have been trying to make other texts available. But this has tended to be unusual. It would be

good if geographers took on the work of making available works by thinkers whose work is profoundly relevant to contemporary debates in geography, but also geographical thinkers like Claude Raffestin who work is little known in English. People like Marc Augé and Giorgio Agamben are used by geographers, but thus far it has largely been people in other disciplines who have done the "academic service" work. One of the things I've tried to do as editor of the journal *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* has been to commission translations. We've had pieces by Balibar, Sloterdijk and Badiou in recent issues, but it is a lot of work. In general terms, I'd like to see geography's engagement with theory aspire to the standards of rigor set by two other areas: work on theory in other disciplines, on the one hand; and geography's own empirical work, on the other.