

# The Politics of Truth, Power, and Dwelling

by Graham Harman

Our subject is the politics of dwelling. Though for politics we could begin almost anywhere, when it comes to the concept of “dwelling” one specific philosopher comes immediately to mind: Martin Heidegger. His essays “Building Dwelling Thinking” (a meditation on architecture) and “Poetically Man Dwells” (an interpretation of a poem by Hölderlin) have been available in English for more than forty years in the collection *Poetry, Language, Thought*.<sup>1</sup> Let’s begin by determining what “dwelling” means for Heidegger in these two essays. Once that is done, we will be in position to move to a discussion of the politics of dwelling.

## 1. Heidegger on Dwelling

One of Heidegger’s most picturesque discussions of dwelling is also one of his least convincing. We read as follows:

Not every building is a dwelling. Bridges and hangars, stadiums and power stations are buildings but not dwellings; railway stations and highways, dams and market halls are built, but they are not dwelling places. Even so, these buildings are in the domain of our dwelling... residential buildings do indeed provide shelter; today's houses may even be well planned, easy to keep, attractively cheap, open to air, light, and sun, but—do the houses in themselves hold any guarantee that *dwelling* occurs in them?<sup>2</sup>

A bit later we find the following passage:

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter. (New York: HarperCollins, 1971.)

<sup>2</sup> Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” pp. 143-144.

Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, [gods] and mortals enter in simple oneness into things, ordered the house. It placed the farm on the wind-sheltered mountain slope looking south, among the meadows close to the spring. It gave it the wide overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow, and which, reaching deep down, shields the chambers against the storms of the long winter nights.<sup>3</sup>

Heidegger first gives us a list of modern buildings that are not dwellings: bridges, hangars, stadiums, power stations, railway stations, highways, dams, and market halls. While it is obvious that no one actually *lives* in such structures, that is not Heidegger's point, as can be seen from his added insinuation that even today's residential houses are not dwellings. Apparently we only find true dwelling when asked to imagine "a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants." This prejudice in favor of Black Forest peasants and their handicraft over modern city dwellers and their mass-produced goods has long been familiar to readers of Heidegger. What makes it so intellectually weak is that it offers a taxonomy in which certain *types* of buildings are dwellings and others are not. What this taxonomy ignores is that there is considerable difference between aesthetic masterpieces and mediocre junk when examining bridges, railway stations, and market halls, and also a big difference between thoughtful Black Forest peasants and low-grade nationalist peasants whose cottages are stuffed with *Kitsch* Black Forest souvenirs. The point is that no specific *type* of entity can be relied upon to provide consistent examples of dwelling or non-dwelling.

Let's introduce the term "Taxonomic Fallacy" to refer to this mistaken way of trying to access being itself through the exemplary features of some privileged genus of thing. The case just cited is not the only one where Heidegger lapses into the Taxonomic

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<sup>3</sup> Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," p. 157.

Fallacy. Throughout his work we find that certain categories sometimes define reality as a whole and other times valorize specific instances of reality. For example, we sometimes read that all human Dasein is thrown into nothingness, and other times that the ancient Greeks and recent Germans are thrown into nothingness to an especial degree, making them cases of Dasein *par excellence*. In Heidegger's ugliest words on the Jewish people, found in the recently published and aptly named *Black Notebooks*, we find Jews depicted in hackneyed fashion as rootless cosmopolitans who presumably do not "dwell" in the exceptional manner of Black Forest peasants.<sup>4</sup> This is disappointing theoretically no less than politically. For it was Heidegger above all who should have known better, given his persistent assault on onto-theology: the notion, supposedly dominant in the entire history of Western metaphysics, that one particular being can serve the role of Being as a whole. What I have called the Taxonomic Fallacy is a variant of onto-theology, since it tries to distribute various features of Being among "good" and "bad" entities. Black Forest peasant huts are granted a close relationship to Being itself, while hangars, stadiums, railways stations, and modern housing are tacitly assigned to a nihilistic distance from Being. In such moments Heidegger does not live up to the demands of his own philosophy, though perhaps we can find such relapses in every philosopher.

Yet this does not mean that the concept of dwelling is unsalvageable. Heidegger provides help through his linking of dwelling with *building* and *language*. Part of his case is made with etymological reflections that need not be reviewed here. Instead, the following passage should suffice:

For building is not merely a means and a way toward dwelling—to build is in itself already to dwell. Who tells us this? Who gives us a standard at all by which we can take the measure of the nature of dwelling and building? It is language that tells us

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<sup>4</sup> See Volumes 95-97 of the Heidegger *Gesamtausgabe*, all published in 2014 by Vittorio Klostermann in Frankfurt.

about the nature of a thing, provided that we respect language's own nature. In the meantime, to be sure, there rages round the earth an unbridled yet clever talking, writing, and broadcasting of spoken words. Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man. Perhaps it is before all else man's subversion of this relation of dominance that drives his nature into alienation. That we retain a concern for care in speaking is all to the good, but it is of no help to us as long as language still serves us even then only as a means of expression.<sup>5</sup>

Everything is already here for the taking. "Man" is alienated through not respecting the nature of things, which means not respecting the nature of language as our master rather than as what we ourselves master. Language is not just a means of expression or a "clever talking, writing, and broadcasting of spoken words," but should tell us about the nature of a thing. And this nature of things is itself our master, rather than the reverse. These sorts of reflections lead Heidegger to his philosophically most *realist* moments, in which reality is that which withdraws its secrets from our direct access. As he tells us about language: "for with the essential words of language, their true meaning easily falls into oblivion in favor of foreground meanings. Man has hardly yet pondered the mystery of this process. Language withdraws from man its simple and high speech."<sup>6</sup> And as he tells us about things: "Now in a high arch, now in a low, the bridge vaults over glen and stream— whether mortals keep in mind this vaulting of the bridge's course or [not]..."<sup>7</sup> These passages culminate in Heidegger's discussion of the fourfold: "The bridge gathers to itself in its own way earth and sky, [gods] and mortals. Gathering or assembly, by an ancient word of our language, is called 'thing.'"<sup>8</sup> The fourfold, or *das Geviert*, is a crucial and often puzzling feature of Heidegger's philosophy that I have

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<sup>5</sup> Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," p. 144.

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," p. 146.

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," p. 150.

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," p. 151.

often discussed in some detail.<sup>9</sup> All that is relevant to us here is that the fourfold contains two terms in particular –earth and gods– that withdraw from all direct grasp and communicate solely in terms of hints, with artworks serving as Heidegger’s favorite case study of how this happens. As he puts it here: “human being consists in dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth.”<sup>10</sup> And further: “Mortals dwell in that they await the [gods] as [gods]... They wait for intimations of their coming and do not mistake the signs of their absence. They do not make their gods for themselves and do not worship idols.”<sup>11</sup> We must avoid the Taxonomical Fallacy by not getting hung up on the literal meaning of the word “gods.” Heidegger’s fourfold is not a classification of four *types* of entities, but a quadruple structure at work everywhere, even if sometimes suppressed by idol-worship and clever communication, which mistake the hidden reality for the visibly translated form it always takes on in any given case.

Nonetheless, Heidegger does not hold that any access to the hidden things is hopeless: “If all of us now think, from where we are right here, of the old bridge in Heidelberg, this thinking toward that location is not a mere experience inside the persons present here; rather, it belongs to the nature of our thinking *of* that bridge that *in itself* thinking gets through, persists through, the distance to that location.”<sup>12</sup> Unlike his teacher Edmund Husserl, Heidegger does not hold that we can follow some exact cognitive method and eventually reach direct insight into the essences of things. Famously, it is through the poetic aspect of language that Heidegger hopes to approach things, as in his reflections on Hölderlin, which for all their cloying romanticism still contain a decisive

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<sup>9</sup> See for example Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. (Chicago: Open Court, 2002.)

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” p. 147.

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” p. 148.

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” p. 154.

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When Holderlin speaks of dwelling, he has before his eyes the basic character of human existence. He sees the “poetic,” moreover, by way of its relation to this dwelling, thus understood essentially. This does not mean, though, that the poetic is merely an ornament and bonus added to dwelling... Rather, the phrase “poetically man dwells” says: poetry first causes dwelling to be dwelling. Poetry is what really lets us dwell.<sup>13</sup>

Dwelling is poetic because dwelling does not reduce the earth to a set of present-at-hand or manipulable materials to be mastered for human purposes; instead, the human is mastered by the earth, as that which signals itself by hints, attuning us to the inherent mystery of things. But this mystery is not just a useless unknowable X:

[Hölderlin’s] question begins in line 29 with the words: “Is God unknown?” Manifestly not. For if he were unknown, how could he, being unknown, ever be the measure? Yet—and this is what we must now listen to and keep in mind—for Hölderlin God, as the one who he is, is unknown and it is just as this Unknown One that he is the measure for the poet. This is also why Holderlin is perplexed by the exciting question: how can that which by its very nature remains unknown ever become a measure?<sup>14</sup>

Poetry provides *images*, which Heidegger defines not just as a visible figure, but as a translation of the unknown into palpable terms:

The nature of the image is to let something be seen. By contrast, copies and imitations are already mere variations on the genuine image which, as a sight or spectacle, lets the invisible be seen and so imagines the invisible in something alien to it. Because poetry takes that mysterious measure, to wit, in the face of the sky, therefore it speaks in “images.” This is why poetic images are imaginings in a distinctive sense: not mere fancies and illusions but imaginings that are visible inclusions of the alien in the sight of the familiar.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Heidegger, “Poetically Man Dwells...,” p. 213.

<sup>14</sup> Heidegger, “Poetically Man Dwells...,” p. 220.

<sup>15</sup> Heidegger, “Poetically Man Dwells...,” p. 223.

Heidegger also makes clear in this second essay that not only poetry proceeds in the manner of providing images for the unknown, since thinking does so as well. Indeed, poetry and thinking are said to be the same without being identical. “Holderlin does not speak of poetic dwelling as our own thinking does. Despite all this, we are thinking the same thing that Holderlin is saying poetically.”<sup>16</sup> Both poetry and thinking have as their subject matter that which withdraws, that which is our master even when we wrongly think we have mastered it.

## **2. Against Truth Politics and Power Politics**

We must now ask whether Heideggerian dwelling provides any resources for political thought. Surely there is no chance of finding such resources in Heidegger’s own explicit political pronouncements, which are undoubtedly the least sanitary to be found in the history of Western philosophy. For this reason, an indirect approach is needed. If dwelling is what remains attuned to that which never becomes directly present, a politics of dwelling would have to work under a Heideggerian slogan running somewhat as follows: “politics is our master, we are not the master of politics.” It would be a politics accessible only as image, not as communiqué.

In the context of ontology, I have often written about attempts throughout the history of Western philosophy to eliminate objects by reducing them in one of two opposite directions.<sup>17</sup> The first method tells us that tables, jugs, or temples can be explained in terms of their component pieces, and ultimately in terms of some rock-

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<sup>16</sup> Heidegger, “Poetically Man Dwells...’,” p. 216.

<sup>17</sup> See for instance Graham Harman, “On the Undermining of Objects: Grant, Bruno, and Radical Philosophy,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, Levi Bryant et al. (Eds.) (Melbourne: re.press, 2011.)

bottom foundation of the universe: atoms, quarks and electrons, strings, or a pre-individual blob-like mass. We can call this the *undermining* of objects. The second takes the opposite approach. Rather than saying that objects are too shallow and must be replaced by their more basic component pieces, this position says that objects are too deep. They are needless hypostases wrongly held to exist behind a more palpable realm of actions, relations, effects, events, or images in consciousness. This more modern approach can be called the *overmining* of objects, by analogy with undermining. In practice, the two methods are parasitical off one another, relying on each other as alibis so as to moderate their own extremity. For instance, the undermining methods of mainstream scientific materialism would seem too remote from human experience, if not that such materialism simultaneously *overmines* the world by insisting that it is fully expressible in mathematical terms, thereby placing it directly at the fingertips of the rational human subject. For this usual double strategy of eliminating the middle ground of objects by replacing them simultaneously with their pieces *and* their effects, we can use the term *duomining*. In all such cases, an attempt is made to translate individual things into a *knowledge* about them, which is precisely the opposite of what Socrates meant by *philosophia*: a *love of wisdom* rather than the full-blown *wisdom* that was claimed by the Sophists among others.

Thus, if we are in search of a philosophical politics, then it cannot be an undermining, overmining, or duomining politics. Instead, it must be a “political dwelling” in Heidegger’s sense. Can we find good examples of undermining, overmining, and duomining politics? Yes we can. As argued in my recently published book *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political*, modern political theory is thoroughly duomining in character.<sup>18</sup> The endless modern dispute between the political Left and Right, which dates

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<sup>18</sup> Graham Harman, *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political*. (London: Pluto Press, 2014.)



to the time of the French Revolution, is actually less important here than the more basic split between what we might call “Truth Politics” and “Power Politics,” both of them available in Left and Right flavors.

The Truth Politician is one for whom the nature of the good *polis* is already known. If it is already known but we have not yet attained it in practice, this can only be due to some oppression, violence, or alienation occurring somewhere, often through the selfish interests of some ignorant or devious class of people. Rousseau and Marx can be taken as emblematic of truth politics. If people are not now equal as they clearly ought to be, we can blame either the corruptions of society or exploitation by capital. The political truth already being known, it is simply a matter of helping it become incarnate through revolution. *Opposition* becomes the most admirable political gesture, since the status quo can generally be viewed as a bundle of damned lies and damned oppressions. But this attitude is not only found on the political Left. A right-wing version can be found, for instance, in Leo Strauss and many of his disciples. Here the political truth is also held to be already known, but this supposed truth is very different than the Left takes it to be. Rather than the innate equality of all as thinking subjects, we find the recurrent inequality of eternal human types, despite all variation in historical contexts. At the apex of the social pyramid is the philosopher, who is regarded here not just as a *lover* of wisdom, but as the actual possessor of it. Ultimately, the sole compelling political problem is how the superior philosopher, who is in fact lethally dangerous for the *polis*, can convince the *polis* that philosophers are actually harmless. Strategic acceptance of the patriotism and religion of the masses is helpful, as is the use in writing and speech of esoteric hints at the truth rather than blunt statements. What the Left and Right versions of Truth Politics share is the view that the political truth is already available for those who can and will open their eyes.

If this counts as an undermining view of politics, in which all the complexity of concrete political events is merely a superficial distraction from a truth already known, we also find an overmining view that might be called (transparently enough) Power Politics. Here there is no question of a political truth, but merely of a struggle for dominance in which “might makes right.” Machiavelli is the one most easily associated with such a view, though Hobbes is an even more instructive example. For Hobbes it is a question of avoiding civil war or any other relapse into the hideous state of nature where life is nasty, brutish, and short. To avoid this, the essential condition is that all claims to transcendence must be excluded. No one can appeal to a superior religious truth beyond the Leviathan; indeed, no one can even appeal to a superior *scientific* truth beyond the state, as seen in Hobbes’ strangely *political* worries about Robert Boyle’s vacuum pump.<sup>19</sup> If the problem with the politics of undermining can be found in its trivialization of compromise and coalition as mediocre half-measures in the face of a known political truth (as in the tendency to rate the militant truth-teller John Brown higher than the cagy but more effective Abraham Lincoln), the politics of overmining fails more obviously in its apparently arbitrary decisionism. And just as was the case with ontological duoming, both political positions eventually call on each other as alibis. Truth Politics cannot afford to be naïve about the means by which its truth will be accepted, but is quick to use hardball power-plays such as the Gulag and the guillotine. Power Politics cannot afford to look purely arbitrary, and hence it inevitably appeals to supposed truths such as the human desire to preserve oneself (Hobbes) or preserve one’s people (Schmitt).

In my recently published book, the analysis shows that Latour begins his career as an ardent Hobbesian before realizing that he needs some sort of political transcendence

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<sup>19</sup> Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.)

(i.e., truth) to prevent his theory from slipping into a duel of countless Machiavellian actors. Yet Latour's Hobbesian allergy to transcendence leaves him with the sole option of a "mini-transcendence." This takes the form of entities already active in the world but simply not yet recognized by the existing political collective; it is the role of scientists and moralists to detect these new claimants to reality, and the role of politicians to determine if they can safely be integrated.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, it seems to me that such mini-transcendence is not transcendent enough, and that Latour remains too loyal to the Power Politics from which he originated, as witnessed by his increasing fascination with Schmitt. Yet at least Latour faces the paradox squarely in the face, rather than simply appealing to truth when it suits his purposes and then power when it suits his purposes. In this way, Latour at least confronts the duoming that plagues modern political theory.

And this is where Heidegger's "dwelling" might play a useful role. Though his explicit political doctrine (Nazism) is blatantly duoming in its simultaneous appeals to racial truth and armed power, the concept of dwelling is simply incompatible with his avowed politics, and ought to have nipped it in the bud. The *object* of politics –using "object" here as the equivalent of Heidegger's term "thing"– is too real to be effaced by power and too mysterious to be penetrated by truth. And though we must not aim for a "politics of poetry" in the literal sense of the term, we have no choice but to adopt from Heidegger's Hölderlin the political image as a replacement for the political idol.

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<sup>20</sup> See especially Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences Into Democracy*, trans. C. Porter. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.)