
IN MEMORIAM

Agnes Heller, 1929-2019

The world lost one of its most significant social and political philosophers of the late 20th and early 21st century in July of this year. Agnes Heller was one of the last of a great line of European thinkers who emerged in the “cold war” period and remained an anti-authoritarian thinker until her death while swimming at the age of ninety. She was one of the leaders of the Budapest circle alongside her second husband Ferenc Fehér which gathered around the seminal Marxist philosopher, György Lukács. From the beginning of her intellectual praxis, Heller demonstrated a bird’s eye view of Historical consciousness, a term she refined in her philosophy of history and used cogently throughout her prolific career as author of over forty books engaged in the most topical issues in aesthetics, moral and ethical philosophy, modernity, poetics, and literary production. She possessed one of the more subtle and creative dialectical minds, one that upheld the concept of totality in all forms of inquiry. One could say she was one of the leading lights of the antagonistic Historical dialectic that confronted historical relativism and banal and lightweight revisionism.

Her *Renaissance Man*, which first appeared in Hungary in 1967 was a seminal contribution to Marxism as well as to Renaissance scholarship. Heller thought of the Renaissance as a period of “unequal development,” which was interrupted by Luther’s Protestantism, the defeat of the Spanish Armada and was a period in which the concept of freedom becomes a universal category which often seemed detached from the social and economic context in some countries. She effectively contrasts the division of town and country in 14th century Italy and demonstrates the movement of different forms of capital in the arts of Venice and Florence. Venice developed a mercantile form of capitalism in which conservatism reigned and class warfare remained hidden. Florence generated a major textile industry which morphed into industrial capital which created the first modern proletariat, the wool workers (Ciompi). On the cultural level, Florence was a more sophisticated city in terms of its painters, its architects. This distinction she brought to bear in 14th century Italy in the two cities, anticipates some of today’s issues around cultural capital and finance capital, working class consciousness and neo-feudalist nominalism so prevalent today.

This seminal work also engages the new concept of man from Campanella, Pico and even Shakespeare's Lear (to whom she devoted a later book), the changes in attitude towards family, authority, value and power and in a stunning chapter on Machiavelli, which shows the cunning power of Florence against the more conservative power of banking interests in Venice. Concentrating on everyday life in the Renaissance, Heller describes the emergence of the bourgeoisie and its gradual "civilizing" intentions alongside the eternal and universal human nature of a new dynamic concept of man and the power of liberation. *Renaissance Man* stands alongside Ernst Cassirer's classic Renaissance studies on individual and cosmos as one of the twin pillars of 20th century Renaissance studies and of course is prefigured by Burkhardt's work on culture and the state.

Heller relentlessly fought against reductionist thinking and especially that type which led to identity politics. She was a firm advocate of radical universalism in the face of these contemporary forms of identity politics, black and white perspectivism, the incessant attack on historical materialism and consciousness. She was a firm believer in the famous saying of Santayana's that "those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Among her forty or so published books, I will point to a few that would generate much discussion for leftists today: *The Theory of Need in Marx*, in which the dialectical tension between necessity and freedom is engaged, the *Philosophy of History*, in which she elaborates her concept of historical consciousness, and the group of books around Ethical and Moral Philosophy. Her immense corpus is worth pursuing and our hope is that future generations will take up her work in the light of a much needed anti-authoritarian thinking, one with force, élan with great subtlety and intelligence. She will be sorely missed as a scholar, as an activist, thinker and provocateur, but for me in a stronger sense, for her consistent defiance of anything that smacked of coercion, false consciousness, fallacious reasoning and Hope without praxis. Heller relentlessly fought every modicum of fascistic thinking in our everyday lives. Our hope is that her example and praxis will remain current and encountered substantively and will help our sorely needed direction in a time of outer directed conformity and blindness. I, for one, was fortunate enough to have known her as a person as well as a teacher and what I remember best was her great reciprocity and generosity in dialogue. We will miss you and your great contribution, Agnes.

— *Michael Pelias, for the Editorial Collective of Situations*