Agnes Heller: Socialism, Autonomy and the Postmodern

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There is no doubt that Agnes Heller is one of the most prolific and versatile philosophers of the second half of the 20th century. How can we account then for the fact that despite her numerous books, her exciting philosophical trajectory, her astonishing personal history and her global appeal, there is not even a single study of the evolution of her work available in book form, not even one introductory volume? It seems to me that two main reasons can explain this lack of secondary material. First, anyone committed to write an introduction to the work of Agnes Heller is faced with an almost impossible task: the sheer bulk and complexity of her work is enough to dissuade even the most ambitious scholars. Second, following the trajectory of Heller brings the student of her work face to face with the ups and downs, the disillusion, the cul-de-sacs and re-articulations of radical thought as it attempts to respond to the proliferating social and theoretical challenges of our age. However instructive such an encounter may be, many would just prefer to forget all about it and opt for easier solutions: either the safety of a post-political consensual imaginary or the nostalgic return to a politics of raw (un-reflexive) anti-capitalism. Simon Tormey is obviously not content with any of these two options. He is not afraid of the complexity of Heller's work, and discerns in its (often non-linear) evolution a refreshing willingness to rethink radical political theory: to give up obsolete positions, to embrace the new and sincerely deal with questions of immense importance for any future progressive politics. What can be the future of left radical politics after the crisis of the utopian imaginary? Can a politics willing to register the contingency of our post-modern condition remain a radical politics? These are some of the central questions posed by Heller's work and explored in this important new publication.

Agnes Heller: Socialism, Autonomy and the Postmodern is the first introductory book on the work of Agnes Heller. It focuses, in particular, on the political aspect of her voluminous production as it develops between the publication of *Everyday Life* (1968) and up to her *Theory of Modernity* (1999). In other words, it follows the development of Heller's political thought from the moment she 'achieved prominence as a humanist Marxist thinker outside Hungary, through her critical or neo-Marxist phase, to "Post-Marxism" and,

finally, to a “post-modern” understanding of the political as exhibited in her most recent work’ (3). Accordingly, the first two chapters offer an overview of her work within the Budapest school and follow her troubled relation with the Hungarian Communist Party. In the third chapter, Tormey examines Heller’s work in the 1970s and, in particular, her development of a ‘rational utopia’ and a project of ‘radical democracy’, both conceptual products of her attempt to accommodate the radical tone of a Marxist critique of capitalism without sacrificing the autonomy of the individual and the plurality of values to which it can legitimately adhere.

Chapter 4 follows Heller’s critique of the meta-narratives characteristic of philosophy of history (and of any utopianism premised on the notion of abundance) and introduces her account of modernity. Here Tormey highlights the place she assigns to democracy within the modern universe; a democracy that, even in its liberal mutation, Heller considers compatible with a radical socialist society. In the next chapter, Tormey recounts the arguments Heller puts forward in *Beyond Justice*, what he considers her most important contribution to political philosophy — a book written during her stay in Australia and published in 1987, after she became a Professor at the New School for Social Research in New York. It is here that Heller advances in her attempt to register the awareness of contingency and historicity characteristic of post-modernism and post-structuralism without surrendering to the *alleged* political nihilism, relativism or even ‘neo-conservatism’ of these trends: ‘The adoption of a sceptical, incomplete stance, of an ironic knowingness about the historicity of theory ... should not equate to passivity, but rather to an openness to the possibilities afforded by discourse on the nature of the true and the good which might encompass the necessity for a radical transformation of the liberal-democratic given itself’ (135). Democracy clearly emerges here as the modern political system *par excellence*, as the ‘foundation that does not found’ (148).

Chapter 6 is devoted to a detailed analysis of Heller’s conception of the post-modern — which does not entail an anti-modern stance — and of its implications for political theory and ethics, as well as for radical politics. The title of the last section of this chapter is indicative of Tormey’s sympathetic but critical interrogation of Heller’s position: ‘Can a “postmodern” politics be a radical politics?’ (181). Not interested in offering a hagiography of Heller — and rightly so — Tormey concludes the book by respectfully exposing some of the unresolved ambiguities and tensions marking her continuous theoretical preoccupation with the political, notably the one between utopianism and realism and the one surrounding her understanding of the potential and limitations of modern democracy. This is a balanced and well-written book, which succeeds in both fronts: articulated in a clear and systematic style, it slowly and safely guides the uninitiated reader into Heller’s political thought.

At the same time it exposes aspects of Heller's conceptual and theoretical apparatus to a criticism informed by the challenges contemporary political theory and radical politics are facing as we enter the 21st century. A useful companion to anyone interested in the work of Agnes Heller, this book deserves to be read and discussed widely. The same, of course, applies to Heller's work itself.

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