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AN INTERVIEW WITH AGNES HELLER

*Agnes Heller and Stefan Auer*¹

INTRODUCTION

Agnes Heller was born in Budapest in 1929 and was both a student and co-worker with György Lukács in Hungary in the 1950s. Severely harassed in Hungary after her objections to the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, she arrived in Australia in 1977, along with other prominent members of the 'Budapest School', including her husband Ferenc Feher and György Markus. Together these three published in 1983 a definitive critical work on the nature of Soviet socialism, *Dictatorship Over Needs*. A profound thinker on modernity and post-modernity, Agnes Heller's other works include *Everyday Life* (1970; trans. 1984); *The Theory of Need in Marx* (1974); *Philosophy of Left Radicalism* (1978; trans. as *Radical Philosophy*, 1984); *Beyond Justice* (1987); *Can Modernity Survive?* (1990); *A Philosophy of History in Fragments* (1993); and *A Theory of Modernity* (1999). She also published a series of important essays, *Eastern Left, Western Left*, with Feher in 1987. Since 1988 Agnes Heller has been Hannah Arendt Professor of Philosophy in the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research, New York.

Heller's political concerns have often sprung from, and responded to, issues arising from totalitarianism – fascist and Soviet – with both the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the 'Velvet' revolutions of 1989 looming large as touchstones. This interview, conducted with her in Melbourne in August 2006, ranges around the problem of revolution in theory and practice in late modernity. It canvasses her views in the context of Arendt's perspective on the same problems.

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The interview begins with Heller being asked about the relationship between revolution and violence and whether the two are always co-joined.

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AH: It is a very complex question. The problem of violence as a theoretical question was raised by Sorel, and since he formulated his idea, that it is only through violence you can have a real radical transformation of the world, it has been constantly on the agenda. Hannah Arendt belonged to those who said that this is not the case. Now she particularly had in mind not Sorel but Jean Paul Sartre, who at that time had written the Preface to [Fanon's] *The Wretched of the Earth*, and in which he emphasized that only violence can liberate us. But I think all these general statements [about violence and revolution] are foolish, because everything depends on the context.

Normally a revolution goes on without violence. There are so many kinds of revolutions. We speak about the sexual revolution, we speak about revolutions of forms of life, we speak about the industrial revolution. Revolution means simply the radical sudden transformation of something. It does not need to be violent and mostly it excludes violence. It is in the case of political revolution that we think in terms of violence, precisely because the political revolutions in the 18th century were very violent. [Even] earlier than that, in the English Revolution, Charles the second was executed, and in the French Revolution the king and many aristocrats were executed.

At that time it was thought that if you have a revolution you need violence, [therefore that] violence belongs to the revolution itself. But this was, I think, a very special historical moment. A moment when the *ancien regime* could not transform itself via reforms, and that's why some kind of violence was needed to break through its resistance. The English [had] learned a bit from their own bloody history in the so-called Glorious Revolution, glorious because it went on without violence. It has turned out that political revolutions are not necessarily violent but that only in one historical moment, in a special context, were violence and political revolution associated together.

For example the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 was a real revolution, a political transformation, and it was not violent at all. Rather, young people gathered in a cafe and they went on the street and proclaimed the revolution and the youth embraced one another and a new revolutionary government was formed and there was not a single drop of blood spilt, it was not necessary. [It turns out that] whether a revolution and violence are related to each other, go together or not, depends very much on the context of circumstances.

SA: It is intriguing that in the events you describe you do not mention the American Revolution. For Arendt one of the tragedies of Western history was that Western intellectuals were so infatuated with the heritage of the French Revolution that they largely ignored the American Revolution. A revolution that in Arendt's view was much more successful.

AH: Similar to the American Revolution was the Hungarian Revolution, that's why I mentioned it. A revolution that was not violent but that immediately led to a war of independence. The American War of Independence

was successful, the Hungarian one was not. In both cases the revolution was caught in a situation where the country was unfree, under an alien power: the United Colonies of Great Britain, and Hungary as a quasi-colony of Austria. Under these circumstances, when the revolution itself is the starting point of liberation of the country, the revolution [itself] is not violent, what comes later is a war of liberation and that is violent. It must be violent because the revolution is attacked from outside. You must defend yourself. War always consists of acts of violence. The question is whether a revolution is necessarily a civil war. Because if it is enacted in violence it is a civil war, if not it is not, but it can still be related to a war as I have indicated.

SA: So it very much depends on the historical circumstances. But if we were to design a normative model – would you say that violence is essential to revolution or is it the other way around as Arendt seems to suggest, especially in her later writings? That the decisive moments are the non-violent ones – violence is accidental, not essential.

AH: Of course violence is not essential. Because what is a political revolution? It is a change of sovereignty – one kind is replaced with another. The change of sovereignty is the [definition] of political revolution itself. It can change without, or accompanied with, violent acts, but violence is not essential to it. But many times the problem is not the revolution itself, but what happens after it. This is also very important in light of what Arendt said about revolution, when it is followed by the constitution of liberties. Because if you ask my opinion, the so-called October Revolution, which was not a revolution at all, was basically non-violent. The terror came afterwards because instead of the constitution of liberties they [the Bolsheviks] constituted a quasi-totalitarian government immediately and then civil war broke out. The violence came afterwards. So it is not necessarily in the moment [of revolution] that violence occurs but after a revolution the question opens: what will follow?

SA: But one might argue that Russian revolutionaries in 1917 were inspired by the French Revolution and that is why they were almost disappointed by the fact that it was so easy for them to take over without violence and then they used violent methods later on when putting that regime in place.

AH: The so-called Russian Revolution was not a revolution but a putsch. It didn't resemble the French Revolution.

SA: But the actions that followed the revolution were still inspired by the ideology of . . .

AH: . . . by Jacobinism.

SA: . . . violent revolution.

AH: But Jacobinism was not identical with the French Revolution may I say . . .

SA: But to that extent I take your point – that it is difficult to talk about models because one should look at the particular events and examine them in their historical context. But don't you agree that at the same time even the revolutionaries themselves thought in relation to different models and that is the point of Arendt's book on revolutions, that the French Revolution became such an important inspiration for many revolutionaries in the 20th century? . . .

AH: It became a source of inspiration for many revolutionaries in the 20th century, unfortunately, because of the relationship between virtue and terror. But [this was] not the French Revolution, which destroyed the Bastille and liberated the prisoners there. [The revolution was] not the Jacobin dictatorship, the escalation of violence after the French Revolution. And this dictatorship became the model for dissatisfied intellectuals who wanted to seize power. They could gain power only through radical change, not through the revolution itself but the so-called continuation of revolution. As long as they could not be at the centre of the power themselves they had permanent revolution in mind. Not the revolution itself but the permanence of the revolution is what was in their minds. That is the way in which the Jacobin dictatorship was a model for Lenin and for Trotsky.

SA: I read a short interview with Castoriadis where he argued that Arendt was simply wrong to stress the importance of the American Revolution, because it was an exception that could not serve as a model. Castoriadis was adamant that we still need to look back at the French Revolution as the model. Would you side with Castoriadis on this or Arendt?

AH: If I had to choose, I would rather choose Arendt than Castoriadis. But I don't think that anyone needs a model. The need for a model, the need for repetition, serves as a crutch, [this] need to rely on a precedent. That is, a precedent has to justify your acts. I think that's wrong thinking. Very, very frequently in modernity we have justified an act with a precedent. And of course in this respect Marx was right. Even after the French Revolution, the Jacobin dictatorship followed a precedent. They believed they were repeating the story of the Roman republic. [Yet] you do not need to have a model, because you need to take into consideration the context in which you are acting.

SA: So it is probably better to consider the circumstances in the country in question. But then one still needs to look at what we could call national traditions. Now you talk about the importance of the democratic traditions in the context of Central Europe. In an article published in 1990, co-authored

with Feher, you seemed to be sceptical about the prospects for democracy in those countries because of the lack of democratic traditions. Would you say now that there was more useable past there than many people previously imagined? Or how else would you explain the relative success of these countries in institutionalizing the conditions for liberty?

AH: It is an important question about a democratic tradition. There is only one single state with a democratic tradition, and that is the United States. No other state has democratic traditions. Among the European continental states maybe only France can say that it has maybe some democratic tradition, because they had a kind of democracy in the third republic, or a very vague one, and a very short time of social democracy with Leon Blum in the 1930s. But that was all. No other country in Europe had a democratic tradition. So there was nothing to be proud about.

Hungary had the wonderful revolution of 1848 which, however, was not followed by a continuation of democratic tradition. Hungary had a liberal tradition from the end of the 19th century, which is important, but not a democratic tradition. But Germany had very little liberal tradition and the fate of the Weimar democracy showed clearly how weak this tradition was. And even in France, where as I mentioned, there was some kind of democratic tradition, there was also a tradition of Bonapartism, which competed with the democratic tradition. Europeans were not good at establishing democracy on the grounds of their traditions. The possibility to establish a kind of democracy came only after the Second World War.

We should not forget the problem of emancipation. There [were] three levels of emancipation. Emancipation belongs to modern *liberal democracy* not just democracy. The first stage was the emancipation of the Jews – this happened in Europe basically at the end of the 19th century. There was the emancipation of the working class – this happened later than the emancipation of the Jews. There had been no universal suffrage, there was qualified suffrage. Industrial workers who had no property and who could not show an amount of income and village or estate where they had been for maybe 30 years had no right to vote. It was only in the United States that universal suffrage was established very early. But even in America blacks had no right to vote, especially in the Southern states. Even when they could vote they had to prove they could read and write. So there was no general suffrage for a long time, even in America, and it came very much later in Europe.

The third emancipation was women's emancipation. Women didn't have the right to vote in many countries prior to the end of the Second World War. In Switzerland, even later. So for Europe and democracy, as far as universal suffrage is concerned, this was established as a so-called tradition very late in the 20th century. So you can't speak about that tradition [of democracy]. The United States has the tradition but [note] there was a bloody civil war to defend this tradition, the most cruel civil war since the war between Marius and Sulla in Rome.

SA: If we cannot talk about tradition we can still talk about stories that people talk about. Their own history is a source of these stories. The Hungarian case of the 1956 uprising, this became crucially important in 1989. Would you not say that there the public memory, suppressed for such a long time, played an instrumental role?

AH: 1956 was really a great revolution. And if I can apply the definition of political revolution it was a radical change of sovereignty. There was a party sovereignty and it was replaced by popular sovereignty. That is what political revolution is all about. It was typical. There was violence but not much violence. There was some violence, however, that was the attack against the Budapest Party Hall, which was a very ugly violent act. But there was little violence during this revolution and it could have been expected that there would be no violence after it, because what would have followed from the revolution would have been the constitution of liberties, the establishment of a liberal democratic legal state and a totally different kind of institutional framework.

But the ideology of the revolutionaries was a combination of liberal ideas, democratic ideas and socialist ideas. There was the ideal of establishing workers' control, self-management not just in factories but also as far as politics was concerned, combined with a multi-party system, combined with competitive elections, and with the establishment of a parliamentary democracy including the liberal aspect of establishing human rights. So a combination of ideas that were very critical to realize together. And in the moment of revolution, and in the moment of the great enthusiasm for this revolution, they were really combined.

SA: Would you say today that some of these ideas were far too idealistic, including this concept of workers' councils that Hannah Arendt was so interested in?

AH: She didn't understand the Hungarian workers' councils, she believed they were just like the Soviet workers' councils or the communes in the French Revolution, but this was not the case. The Hungarian workers' councils were basically an organization of self-management rather than real political organizations. But if there were no political organizations at this point then obviously the self-governing bodies also took over political roles. But they were not conceived first and foremost as political institutions. The idea was the following: you must have a market society, the market is critical, without it the whole economy collapses. But the players in the market should not be individual owners but self-managed factories. That was the tradition in 1947, '48, in the Hungarian factories. Three different types of institutions made the decisions: the owner, self-governance and the trade unions. These three parties negotiated a decision concerning production, commerce, etc., so the idea was almost already there. I think it would have faded away because under the

conditions of a market society very few self-managed factories can survive, [but] this is not to exclude the possibility.

SA: Could this market socialism survive? I detect this passion for democratic socialism in your writing even up to *Dictatorship Over Needs* (1983) but then, after the collapse of communism, in an article published 10 years after the collapse, you stated that none of these developments came as a surprise to you and that you endorsed what happened.

AH: If you read attentively the second part of *Dictatorship Over Needs*, which I wrote, there is not a single word about democratic socialism.

SA: So you don't identify with the preface?

AH: This book was one of compromise.

SA: We don't need to go into the specifics but I would be curious to know when did you move away from these ideas, or have I misunderstood you?

AH: I did not move away, I [made] a reinterpretation. If you cease to think of socialism as a state of affairs, as a social arrangement but [instead] think of socialism as a tendency in modernity, then you have a different perspective. And I never abandoned the conception that in modernity, modern market society, there is a combination of capitalism and socialism, from the beginning on. There are two tendencies: one is the self-governing market system, the self-regulating market. And on the other hand there is always the intervention – society/state intervenes in the market in order to reinstitute social values. And so there is no modernity without socialism, and no modernity without capitalism.

SA: Just a tension, and with a balance needed?

AH: That is right, there is a balance. [There] is neither democratic capitalism nor democratic socialism because democracy is a political form which can go together with pure capitalism, but then it will collapse very soon, because capitalism is very revolutionary, capitalism destroys all traditional ties among humans, so you have to control it. Socialism is a conservative factor in modernity conserving ways of life, as trade unions do, conserving security, forms of life, against capitalism's attempts to turn everything upside down. Both are needed and both are present.

Note

1. We are grateful to Tony Philips, who transcribed and edited this interview.