

# Post-Marxism and the ethics of modernity

**ST:** I'd like to begin by asking you about your first encounter with philosophy. What made you decide to do philosophy and what were the practical ramifications of such a choice in the 1940s?

**Heller:** When I started university I wanted to be a scientist and I began by attending classes on the theory of relativity. My boyfriend, who was a philosophy student, asked me to accompany him to philosophy classes which were being given by Lukács on the development of philosophical culture from Kant to Hegel, and I sat there listening to Lukács and I understood hardly a single sentence. But I did understand one thing: that this was the most important thing I had ever heard in my life and so I must understand it. Later on when I read Collingwood's autobiography I learned that he had a similar experience after reading Kant's ethics. It was 1947. I was eighteen years old. By October I had decided to study philosophy and Lukács was my teacher. Lukács was an official philosopher of the Communist Party, but only until 1949. He was attacked by the Party as a right-wing deviationist and his freedom became endangered. These were the Stalinist years. Before then, Lukács was immensely popular and literally hundreds of students used to go to his classes, but after 1949 only five people were left, including me. That was an important moment for me. It was a choice – more instinctual than intellectual – because I'd read Zhdanov and I realized they could not both be right. I understood one had to make a choice. Lukács was a wonderful man, Zhdanov wasn't, so the choice wasn't that difficult.

**ST:** Wasn't that effectively a political choice, given the situation in Hungary at that time?

**Heller:** My life was political from the beginning. I was a Jew brought up at a time of discrimination and, of course, holocaust. My father was an important person politically; a member of the Hungarian *Burger* Party, though this had no bearing on my choice of career. I learned a great deal from him and he ensured that we knew what was going on. But I wanted to be a scientist – a good scientist – to show that women are as good as men. I had read the biography of Marie Curie and I was inspired to follow in her footsteps. That was also a political choice. But my interests were in philosophy. It offered some kind of redemption. I needed some absolutes at that time. That was also why I joined the Party in 1947, though I lost my membership in 1949. I was a member for only two years, but these two years were significant.

**ST:** Had you read much Marx by the time you joined the Communist Party?

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**Heller:** Not at that time. I considered Marx to be an economist, not a philosopher, offering a description of capitalist society. I had read *Capital*, for instance, but I didn't consider this to be a work of philosophy. However, I saw that things were not in order around me, the situation with the Party, and so on, so I began to be curious about what Marx said. The appearance was there, but not the essence.

**ST: What happened in 1949? Why did you leave the Party?**

**Heller:** No one 'left' the Party. We were expelled from the Party. People who left were immediately imprisoned at that time. In 1948 the new Communist regime was established. When I joined in 1947 the Party seemed to be a democratic party. It was one party among many. I voted for the Party in 1947. I could have voted for other parties. I only learned later that it was not at all democratic, but rather Stalinist. If there had been a more radical party I would have voted for that one; the more radical the better. Young people were radical at that time. You could be a socialist without being a communist. Later, in 1953 Imre Nagy became prime minister. He spoke a different language and during his prime ministership people were let out of prisons and no one was imprisoned. People could speak more freely. You could become a 'reform communist'. I became sympathetic with reform communism of the sort which was later to appear in Czechoslovakia in 1968, a form of democratic communism, not the sort of communism found in the USSR. I rejoined the Party in 1954 and was expelled again in 1958. That was the end of the Party for me, though this didn't stop them trying to expel me twice more after that.

**ST: Some of the things you have written about the Hungarian uprising of 1956 sound like Arendt – that it was more than a mere political event, that it represented something about modern aspirations, about what it means to be politically free. What does the '56 uprising mean to you?**

**Heller:** 1956 is still the most important political event in my life because it was the only really socialist revolution in history. It was a revolution that meant liberation in the sense of the American Revolution – that is, independence on the one hand and political liberation on the other. It was a 'war of independence', but also a matter of establishing democracy and the constitution of liberties. This was a very 'American' revolution. My difference with Arendt is that I was never against representation in politics. The members of the workers councils and movements for self-management were never against it. They were for general elections and co-operation. They wanted dual political power: representation and participation. They wanted a freely elected parliament and a multi-party system. Arendt argued that you must abandon representation in favour of direct democracy. Unlike Arendt, people in Hungary realized that direct democracy is terroristic. Pure democracy without safeguards is pure terror. They wanted to establish human rights as a counterweight against substantive democracy.

**ST: Do you think that Arendt romanticized Hungary?**

**Heller:** Yes, she was romanticizing. The problem stems from her wanting to derive absolute theoretical conclusions from the history of ten days. The councils would have shrunk. She was right though about the 'Machiavellian moment'; that you need beginnings, and you need moments when the margin becomes the centre. The margin can become the centre for ten days, as in Paris in 1968, but then it returns to the margin. It is important for the historical memory to see that the margin was able to get to the centre. So Arendt had a point, but she drew a very negative consequence from it. She said that there should not be general elections at all, but rather that people should always be 'participants'. This is dangerous.

**ST: Were you still studying with Lukács in 1958? What of the Budapest School?**

**Heller:** The Budapest School didn't exist at that time under that name. That was later. From 1947 I had been studying with Lukács at the university, but by 1958 Lukács was not teaching

any more. In 1956 Lukács was a member of the Revolutionary Cabinet as the Minister for Culture and afterwards he was deported to Romania. After coming back he was no longer a Party member and could not teach any more. He could not even accept guests. Only a few people remained true to him and visited him, discussing with him; and he became a totally private person.

**ST: And still no Marx?**

**Heller:** No, never in our university. To teach Marx was the most dangerous thing you can imagine because you had to teach Marx according to the official version of Marxism given by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism. There was also a department of Marxism-Leninism in every university, and it was their job to teach Marx, not the philosophers. Marxism-Leninism was a 'special department'. They had three classes: 'scientific socialism', Marxist economics and Marxist philosophy. So they taught Marx but only according to the latest brochure sent out from the Soviet Union. This was a form of religious practice. Lukács and all the other thinkers whose classes I attended never wanted to teach Marx. Lukács wrote about Marx, but never taught him. I started to read Marx only after 1953, particularly the German edition of the young Marx. Before then Marx was not available. You couldn't go into a library and get it because it was all in closed sections. But between 1953 and 1956 there was a relative liberalization and so I went to the library and I started to read Marx. But I still did not understand Marx as a philosopher. I became interested in him whilst writing a paper on the ethics of the Second International. I also read some Bauer and Kautsky, but that was it.

**ST: Would it be accurate to say that you were a reform communist at this time, but not a 'Marxist'?**

**Heller:** No, I don't think so. I was not a Marxist because I had no idea about what Marxism is; but if you had asked me if I was a Marxist I would have said 'yes, I am a Marxist'. The interesting thing is that the Party never believed I was a Marxist. They always said I was neither a communist nor a Marxist, and I realized later that in a way they were right and I was wrong. I was never really a Marxist in an orthodox sense.

## **A revolution of life**

**ST: The two major works of your Budapest School period are *Renaissance Man* and *Everyday Life*. They are radically different works.**

**Heller:** That's right. I wasn't really interested in developing the analysis in *Renaissance Man*, but I became so in *Everyday Life*, which though 'New Leftist' in tone was written before the New Left emerged. I was a New Leftist before the New Left. In '68 I found that all my ideas were confirmed; in particular, that we do not need a political revolution. What we need is a revolution of life, of 'everyday life'. Life itself needs to be transcended, that was the important thing. We don't need to 'seize power' or have a proletarian revolution. We have to change our lives. That was the New Left agenda in *Everyday Life* and that's why the New Left loved, and still loves, this book. It showed that I had become a different kind of Marxist, that I took seriously the idea of the renaissance of Marxism. I was interested in the young Marx, how Marx could be used to develop these new ideas.

**ST: *Renaissance Man* by contrast is scholarly, calm, reflective. It doesn't seem to have a critical point to it. Would that be fair?**

**Heller:** You need to reread it. There's a new Hungarian edition with a new preface. It's about the renaissance of Marxism. The idea is the parallel with Christianity. The point is that there were few atheists during the Renaissance period, but everyone's Christianity was a different kind of Christianity. There is a great plurality in Marxism. There were few atheists among us. Very few people wanted to say that Hell made no sense or that it doesn't exist.

But our God was very personal and changing and we needed different kinds of ceremonies, practices and so on. It had some of these qualities.

**ST:** Did you also recognize in the Renaissance the same kind of commitment to the idea of universalism and to the Promethean idea of a multi-sided individual that you do in Marxism? Was that part of the inspiration for taking the Renaissance as a subject of study?

**Heller:** There were two reasons. First, a lot of the beautiful things of the modern world were already there, but the modern world as such had not fully developed. On the other hand, there was a simpler reason, which was that in 1960 for the first time in my life I got a passport for Western Europe and my first husband's sister, who lived in America, gave us \$100 to go abroad. So we went to Italy for three weeks with \$100. It was an unbelievable experience and I wanted to keep this experience alive in a period when I had not the slightest hope of seeing Italy again. Not the slightest hope. This was the time when the police were coming round continuously and when I was breastfeeding my son. I started to write *Renaissance Man* in the same period. I wanted to keep this memory which would, like the memory of first love, never be repeated alive. I wanted to re-imagine it. I wanted to be there. This book was the expression of the desire to be somewhere where I could never be.

**ST:** One of the motifs of *Everyday Life* is an individualistic view of emancipation, a view which regards the reception of art and philosophy as crucial to the development of individual consciousness and action. There is not much discussion of the collective agent or the role of the party or the role of a political movement. Emancipation begins with yourself and with interaction with art and philosophy. Can you expand on that? It seems an important theme in your work more generally.

**Heller:** I make a distinction between liberation and emancipation. Liberation is never a singular issue, an issue for the individual. If you want to be liberated from a colonial situation then you cannot do it on your own. There is a collective gesture and collective action here. But I think emancipation is a different issue. I don't believe that the philosophical message of emancipation has relevance for class action and collective action. India could be liberated from colonialism, but it was not emancipated through this action. These are two different things. For example, I don't think that American feminists today are emancipated. Absolutely not, because I think the introduction of women's studies in universities is not emancipation. 'Identity politics' is far from being emancipation. I don't think the reversal of violence is your emancipation. I think emancipation is very difficult, very complicated; but it is not individualistic either, in so far as you don't do it on your own. It has to be an interpersonal thing.

**ST:** In the sixties, was your view that revolution was liberation or emancipation?

**Heller:** There are different kinds of revolution. I distinguish between economic revolutions, political revolutions and revolutions of everyday life. Revolution of everyday life is emancipation and political revolution is liberation. That was the slogan of *Everyday Life*: emancipation is always self-emancipation. Don't attach emancipation to a class or agent and pretend that they will produce it for you. I had a kind of philosophy of *Existenz* in mind. I wrote the preface to the Hungarian translation of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* at that time, and the piece finishes with the sentence 'either Kierkegaard or Marx'. 'Either/Or', that was the thing. Either you believe that everything is emancipation or you have the Kierkegaardian solution, which is to think in terms of the categories of existence. That had a deep influence on me.

## History and contingency

**ST:** *A Theory of History* (1982) is the foundation for the work you've been doing since, as it is here that you start to develop your understanding of contingency, thrownness, and the historical process. What were the main influences on that?

**Heller:** Collingwood and Heidegger. The vocabulary is patterned on Heidegger. From Collingwood I got basically one sentence, 'there can be no progress where there are losses'. That sentence was very illuminating.

**ST:** One of the things that struck me about *A Theory of History* is the strong connection to the sceptical wing of the liberal tradition – people like Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, even Leszek Kolakowski, for example, all of whom make a distinction between the philosophy of history and the theory of history, which is one of the key points that you are making in the book. Do you see yourself as having any affinity with, say, J.S. Mill, Berlin or Popper, or with British liberalism more generally?

**Heller:** I have the greatest affinity with the British tradition – British, not English – and in particular with Hume. He opened my eyes with the idea that we have justice only in times of relative scarcity. You do not have justice in times of abundance. This forms a central part of my *Beyond Justice*, which is a very Humean book. Among the British I admire Hume and Adam Smith, but in aesthetics not in economics. Smith was the man who did the most beautiful things before Kant on aesthetics. Burke also on aesthetics.

**ST:** Not on revolutions?

**Heller:** Not revolutions, no; aesthetics. J.S. Mill, I find decent but boring. Isaiah Berlin is a great essayist and of course everyone takes over the 'negative' and 'positive' views of liberty. That was an interesting contribution; but except for this I find little of serious interest in his work.

**ST:** Recently, you have had two main interests: the philosophy of morals and a theory of modernity. The core element of the work from the early eighties is the idea of the three 'logics' of modernity: capitalism, industrialization and democracy or civil society. What do you mean by the term 'logic' here?

**Heller:** By 'logic' I mean a relatively independent tendency to develop. It is not a theory of progression. It means that if you are born a child you have the natural tendency to develop, to grow and become an adult. If a category is born in a Hegelian sense, it somehow works out its own possibilities. For example, music starts to enter a period of tonality and all the possibilities are studied and then you try to break out of tonality. There is an in-built tendency for a category to develop and that was what I meant by a logic. There is no necessity; there is only the fact that if it develops it develops in this direction.

**ST:** Which is to assume that if you allow, say, industrialization to develop you'll have particular results which are universal in that sense.

**Heller:** Yes. Nowadays I do not use the term 'industrialization'; I use 'the development of technology' because technology is broader than industrialization. It's better fitted to the present experience, and of course I include science.

**ST:** Are you trying to separate the development of capitalism from the development of industrialization? Because the two are still very much bound up with each other in most regions of the world, as they were in the eighteenth century.

**Heller:** All three are related to each other – democratization, capitalism and technological development – but none is directly dependent on the others. I wanted to produce a theory which allows the opportunity to think contingently; a model where there is no base or superstructure,

where none of these logics determines the other two, but there is an interplay among them; and where in one period one logic becomes overreaching, and in another period one of the others does so; and so you cannot foretell which one will determine the other two. I wanted to open up the understanding of modernity, to loosen the way of predicting the future development of modern societies.

As my work has developed I have changed the three logics. I redefined them, not because I have changed my mind, but because I heard people say so many times that Soviet societies aren't modern, but belong to an Asiatic mode of production. In my mind, they are all modern societies, so I needed to develop the theory of modernity to encompass Soviet-type societies. I do not speak any more about 'capitalism' but about the 'functional division of labour', and I do not speak any more about 'democracy' but instead about 'the logic of statecraft' – that is, the constitution of the state as a separate logic of modernity in which democracy is a very important and decisive way of developing, but not the only way. I wanted to have a broader concept in which you can include all types of states, including dictatorships.

**ST: Wouldn't it be more useful to stick with Weber and say bureaucratization is the basis or tendency of modernity, rather than democracy?**

**Heller:** No, certainly not, because we have great bureaucracies in Oriental societies. To repeat: democracy is not the only political form of modernity. Democracy describes the main institutions of political domination, but it is not the only political invention of modernity. There are others not captured by the term 'democracy'.

**ST: In recent works you have said that probably the most important facet of modernity is the transition from static to dynamic systems of justice. Is this related to the idea of logics? Or is it a separate characterization of modernity?**

**Heller:** I don't want to link everything to everything else. I don't want a closed philosophical system. I don't think that everything clicks. I think there are heterogenous elements here. The dynamics of modernity are related to the structure of modernity and to modern social arrangements, but there was a dynamics of society prior to modern social arrangements, otherwise they could not have developed, so in the end you have different versions of how the dynamics of modern society operate. The Soviet Union also changed and invented everything anew and they wanted to transform the form of life, just like capitalism does. The difference is that these changes were dictated by a few, with a bureaucratic machine to implement it. In Western society it happens in a different way, but very similar things happened.

**ST: So when you think about modernity, you think about it in different ways in different contexts? When you're thinking philosophically you want to categorize modernity in a different way to when you're thinking in terms of developing a social theory? You have a heterogenous approach to questions about modernity?**

**Heller:** Yes, a very heterogenous approach. For example, I distinguish between two basic kinds of imagination in modernity: the 'technological imagination' and the 'historical imagination'. The first I identify with the rationalistic Enlightenment, the second with the romantic Enlightenment, but not entirely. Now you may ask me which logic of modernity is bound to the technological imagination; which is bound to the historical imagination. I can tell you, for example, that the logic of technology is mainly bound up with the technological imagination. There are two other logics: sometimes it is bound up with one, sometimes with the other. If you wage wars, for example, other possibilities are raised. Wars are now fought with means which are born from technological imagination, so a total change in the technology of war is obvious. On the other hand, wars are more ideologically underpinned nowadays than ever before, and all these ideologies are related to the historical imagination, so both are operational.

**ST: Can you say something more about the concept of imaginations?**



**Heller:** I developed it in response to Heidegger. In *Gestell* Heidegger basically identifies the modern imagination entirely with the technological imagination. You cannot do that, not even as the grounds of *Verstehen*, as Heidegger puts it, because the historical imagination and the technological imagination operate simultaneously, and both are of equal importance in the imagination of the modern world.

**ST: What would happen if the technological imagination came to dominate in a particular modern society? What would the ramifications of that be?**

**Heller:** I don't think it ever happens. It would mean that the society would be without tradition. It would be without ideology. It would be without any kind of ideological imagination. It would be able to function only with great difficulty.

**ST: How does post-modernity fit into this picture?**

**Heller:** I never speak about the 'post-modern period'. I don't think there is such a thing as a post-modern period. In my mind, post-modern is a new way to think and understand modernity. There is a modernist and also a post-modernist modernity. That is, modernism and post-modernism – if these are 'isms', which I doubt – are basically two kinds of historical imagination.

**ST: You have called yourself a 'post-modernist'. What does this mean in the light of what you have just said.**

**Heller:** I would not call myself a 'post-modernist', because postmodernism is an 'ism'; but I agree that I look at modernity from a post-modern perspective, because the modernist perspective regards modernity as a transitory period, thinking in terms of decadence, of progression, or the end of alienation and constant reform. It was always believed that the present is either better or worse than previous historical periods and that the future will be a great improvement in contrast to the present or that it will be Doomsday. I think that this attitude to modernity is gone, or rather it is an exception. It is not an overreaching element of our imagination. In what I call the post-modern perspective, modernity is now no longer seen as a transitory period, but as a world in which we are born, in which we are going to die, in which we are going to live. 1968 was the period in which there was a switch, not from the modern to the post-modern, but from the modernist perspective of modernity to the post-modern perspective of modernity. Modernity is seen in a different light, because in '68 for the first time people involved in the revolts did not want to transcend the existing social order but to establish a better life *within* the existing social order. I would add that as well as being the first capitalist state and the first democracy, the imagination we find in the United States was always very close to what I call 'post-modern'.

**ST: Since 1776?**

**Heller:** Yes. They've never had a grand narrative in the United States. When you read Lincoln's speeches he never promised progression; what he promises is a better standard of living for the next generation. It's a totally different kind of promise. They were never thinking about overcoming the existing order. Even the far Left never thought about destroying the constitution or starting a proletarian revolution. The Americans did think in revolutionary terms, but about a traditional revolution to establish their country. That was always a post-modern position in the historical imagination, and in taking over this imagination we have become in this respect Americanized. The Western kind of modernity settles in and with it comes this kind of imagination. Although things look quite different from a European perspective, because Europeans understand how to make an intellectually interesting thing out of a new perspective.

**ST:** A review of *Grandeur and Twilight* made the point that you still posit problems which you expect to submit to some sort of resolution. In other words, there is still an Enlightenment preoccupation with finding answers, if only of a provisional nature, in your work. On the other hand, I associate post-modernism with the avoidance of resolution and a deep scepticism towards the 'Enlightenment project', however defined.

**Heller:** So do I. The world and life, particularly modern life, are not 'problems' which can be solved. We're sitting on a paradox and it's a paradox of freedom. This freedom founds modernity, but freedom is a foundation which does not found. That's why modernity remains totally open; and from this fundamental paradox many other paradoxes are born, so we have no solid ground whatsoever.

**ST:** It's as if your post-modernism is a political statement above all else. What you are saying is that you oppose the grand narrative, you oppose ideological thinking, redemptive thinking, teleological thinking, because of the ramifications of fetishizing theory as a guide to practice. Your post-modernism seems to have a particular political subtext.

**Heller:** I think in other terms. I do not speak about anti-ideological thinking because I believe that in modernity, precisely because there are no traditions, but only ideologies, if you speak even about the technological imagination then you are speaking about ideologies as well. The belief in science is a kind of ideology and of course the historical imagination contains several different kinds of ideologies. So I would not say it's the 'end of ideology', absolutely not. I mean only that the belief and trust in science as the method that can give you absolute truth or knowledge is gone. The technological imagination still regards the present and the world as a machine which can be set right. I am critical of this. I'm also critical of the historical imagination. Look at the modern world: the overarching imagination is the technological imagination, but you can regard the ecologist movement as a Domsday scenario which is entirely romantic. On the other hand, there are those who understand progression and happiness as the satisfaction of all our needs. This is also an entirely romantic position given that the needs structure of everyone in the present is similar. The poor peasant in Brazil and the rich man in the United States want the same kind of thing. The children want to be doctors and actors, etc.

## **Autonomy and rights**

**ST:** There are certain motifs associated with your political philosophy, such as 'symmetric reciprocity', 'radical tolerance', 'autonomy'. What's your view of autonomy now? Is Kant still the major presence in your thinking on autonomy?

**Heller:** I have never used the term in a fully Kantian sense. Rather, since I wrote my first book on ethics, which was based on my lectures in Hungary in 1958, I have always spoken about 'relative autonomy'. I have always said that there is no absolute autonomy. Absolute



autonomy even in Kant is an *idea*, an idea of acting absolutely under the guidance of the moral law – but Kant adds that we can never know whether there was anyone, any time who ever acted only exclusively under the moral law. So absolute autonomy is the centre, but we approximate the centre. We never arrive at the centre, which means that our autonomy is always relative.

**ST:** I suppose the subtext of the question is that fifteen years ago your ideas about ‘symmetric reciprocity’ led you to political radicalism and I’m wondering how you see the relationship between autonomy and modernity now. What changes would have to happen to the basic structure of capitalist society to enhance autonomy? Or are you saying that it is possible to be an autonomous being within a capitalist social structure?

**Heller:** It is possible to be a relatively autonomous being in every structure, since morality is something which developed over 2,500 years ago. Since the development of morality there is always the opportunity to act, to say in terms of relative autonomy that you are able to decide what to do, how to choose. In this respect we choose ourselves.

**ST:** But are there forms of society which are better able to bring about a position in which the individual is genuinely an end in him- or herself?

**Heller:** I don’t think that any society was more able to do this than modern society. Different societies do it in different ways. In modernity you are thrown into the world as a totally contingent being; nothing is written on your cradle and you are an empty possibility. You suffer and you experience joy. You are thrown into freedom, which basically means open possibility and also nothingness, and then you can really choose your self. My ethics is based on the Kierkegaardian position that it is possible to choose yourself, and the possibility is always there in the modern world. One of the more fundamental issues in *The Philosophy of Morals* is that in order to talk about ethics you cannot turn any more to a specific social structure or social class to talk about ‘possibility’. You need to talk to people assuming that they are not members of a class, and hence that they are contingent people.

**ST:** So autonomy is never a political project? You cannot bring about social structures, political structures which enhance or diminish autonomy, because autonomy is a purely personal ethical relationship to the other?

**Heller:** I would say so. I know that Castoriadis believed in an ‘autonomous society’ which enhances personal autonomy, but in this respect he was a progressivist. He believed that modern democracy is the autonomous society and that it enhances personal autonomy. Now if you apply the term ‘autonomy’ to society – which I would not do, but let’s assume we can – then Castoriadis is right: democracy is an autonomous society given the fact that the majority of the population has the right and the opportunity to elect its government and to govern itself, self-governance being the essence of modern democracy. Castoriadis, of course, believes in small groups, ‘real’, direct democracy, and that is what he calls an ‘autonomous society’. Now as to whether it enhances individual autonomy, I think that there are some respects in which it enhances it and some in which it does not. I don’t think that it’s easier to become an ‘autonomous society’ today than yesterday just because there is democracy, because there is not only democracy. What kind of society is democracy? Democracy is not a society. Democracy is a form of institution, so what is democratically decided? What kind of people decide here? What is the decision about? Only if you abstract from everything else can you talk about the autonomous society and the autonomous individual. But you cannot abstract from everything else. This is a capitalist society and a democratic society which has a very strong logic of industrialization, of technology, with two different imaginations, and so on. There are gains and there are losses and it is not a matter of indifference which gains are our gains and which losses are our losses.

Now, in our personal life we don't weigh losses and gains. I don't think we act so irrationally in our personal life. We are also emotional beings. We are psychologically fragile because we have lost the foundation of family. We are more neurotic and also more sophisticated. We are frequently in despair and there is some instability in the character of the modern person. You have to take into consideration that we are not entirely rational beings, and it's perhaps not a bad thing that we are not entirely rational things, because in my view rationality is a good thing and also a bad thing. So the answer is: I don't think it is necessarily interconnected with a concrete social situation whether the single person has greater or lesser autonomy. It is a concrete interplay between the person's psyche, the person's morality, the person's possibility to choose the social world, the concrete historical situation, time and space and lots of other things.

**ST:** You have always defended the Declaration of Independence and the idea of formal rights and liberties as being absolutely integral to freedom. Again, radical critics of liberal democracy have been wary of accommodating a conception of rights within their views on how society should be organized, arguing that the invocation of such rights has been used to block social-democratic proposals – for example, during the New Deal period. Is there any plausibility in the suggestion?

**Heller:** There is no social-democratic programme which would deny that these so-called negative rights or liberties are fundamental for the existence of the modern state. I haven't seen such a programme in my life. You are speaking about something else. No one should question the relevance of these rights. Whether a right can conflict with another right is another question, because they can conflict. In America, it is recognized that conflicts exist, and in such cases you have to give priority to one right against another right. In abortion, there is a conflict between the right to life and a right to decide, but this does not speak about rights. It speaks about the situation in which rights can conflict. And if there are no rights, rights cannot be in conflict, full stop.

This is one of the greatest merits of one of the very greatest radicals of Western socialism, Rosa Luxemburg. She too defended human rights. She was a great revolutionary radical socialist, and she defended human rights. The question is of rights for what? Rights are abstractions. You defend human rights and you define the right of citizens, which are not identical; and you defend the rights of minorities, which are identical neither with the rights of individuals nor with the rights of citizens. There are different kinds of rights and these rights can collide with each other. Your right as a citizen can collide with your right to belong to a group, an ethnic group. I prefer normally to speak about individual rights even if you speak about the right of a group to possess land, etc. But there are so-called traditional rights, acquired rights which were abolished once upon a time; for example, the land ownership of aborigines. In this case you can say that there are traditional rights; and in this particular case because certain injustices happened, you can put them right in granting special kinds of rights to special human groups. Everything is possible in this case. What should not happen is to curtail rights.

**ST:** So for you rights are not 'natural' but emanate positively from constitutions. How would you stand on international rights, or rights between states or regions, say the North versus the South?

**Heller:** This is another matter. Rights are normally rights within the framework of a state. If a state has a liberal-democratic constitution, there are certain human rights, the rights of man, and the rights of citizens for the members of this society, or citizens of this state. These are granted. However, whether you can grant human rights to the members of another society is a different question. In principle, you can do it according to the principles enshrined in the United Nations. But the question is, what measures can you take if this right has been breached? To secure rights means that there will be measures taken if someone takes away this right. So if someone doesn't allow free speech in public then your right of free speech is

infringed and you have the right to remedies. The other will be sanctioned. But what can you do if someone else in another country is not allowed to do this? Do we have the opportunity to employ sanctions? That's an entirely different question because nations have the right not to be interfered with.

**ST: Do you think the welfare state provides the best balance between individual freedom and collective security?**

**Heller:** The welfare state is the best way of redistributing social goods and services among those who are underprivileged, who are the losers in the battle. However, it is not a collectivist thing. I have very rarely seen more individualistic social arrangements than the welfare state. Look at Sweden and Austria; they are absolutely individualistic countries because redistribution is always to individuals. The social worker visits you, looks around, decides whether you should get money or not. Everything goes to individuals or rather to certain individuals who are measurably 'poor'. It means that everything is quantified and that individuals are regarded according to quantified criteria. There is no collectivity and no collective decisions whatsoever. An Israeli friend once told me a story about a father and son living in Sweden which shows the nature of the welfare state very well. One day the father had a heart attack and the son took him by car to the hospital. The son then went immediately to the social security and claimed back the money he paid for the petrol. This is the welfare state. You take someone to hospital, but you claim back the money because that is your social right. He should have been carried in a public vehicle so he claimed back the money. This is the welfare state and it has nothing to do with collectivism. There is social justice so far as redistribution is concerned, but nowhere have I seen a greater amount of loneliness.

**Interviewed by Simon Tormey  
Budapest, 1–2 July 1998**

**Edited by Peter Osborne**



# CONFERENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

## **WALTER BENJAMIN AND ROMANTICISM** **April 22-23 (Thursday and Friday) 1999**

Two-day Conference

Centre for Research in Philosophy and Literature, University of Warwick

Speakers include: Andrew Benjamin (Warwick), Timothy Bhati (Michigan), Andrew Bowie (Anglia), Alexander Garcia Düttmann (Middlesex), Rebecca Comay (Toronto), Josh Cohen (Goldsmiths' College), Beatrice Hansen (Harvard), Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe (Strasbourg), Simon Sparks (Strasbourg)

Registration fee (includes tea & coffee): waged £25 unwaged £12.50  
A limited amount of residential accommodation is available at an additional cost. Early booking is advisable.

## **PHILOSOPHY AND PAINTING** **Wednesday 26 May 1999**

One-day Workshop

University of Warwick

Speakers include: Eric Alliez (Paris/Vienna), Christine Battersby (Warwick), Howard Caygill (London), Diana Coole (London), Fiona Hughes (Essex), Rachel Jones (Warwick), Diane Morgan (Nene), Judy Purdom (Warwick), James Williams (Dundee)

Registration fee (includes tea & coffee): waged £15 unwaged £7.50

## **THINKING THE EVENT** **June 16 and 17 (Wednesday and Thursday) 1999**

Two-day Conference

Centre for Research in Philosophy and Literature, University of Warwick

Speakers include: Andrew Benjamin (Warwick), Miguel Beistegui (Warwick), Simon Critchley (Essex), Françoise Dastur (Paris), Joanna Hodge (Manchester), Jay Lampert (Guelph), François Laruelle (Paris), Iain MacKenzie (Belfast).

Registration fee (includes tea & coffee): waged £25 unwaged £10

Further details of these events can be obtained from:  
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