

A political Marxist

Ellen Meiksins Wood, 1942–2016

I have a vivid memory – too vivid to be an accident – of the first time I read something written by Ellen Meiksins Wood. It was an article in *New Left Review* on the separation of the economic from the political; it was, of course, polemical. I didn't know the context of the polemic or understand the significance of Ellen's robust defence of 'political Marxism'. But I knew this was something distinctive: a sophisticated argument, laid out in language that was lucid and direct and in a tone to which the term 'uncompromising' does faint justice. It was a vibrant but careful, ambitious yet historically nuanced kind of Marxism.

When, a few years later, I met the author behind the fierce words I was, like many others, surprised and delighted. Could the extraordinarily charming, warm and chatty woman across from me on the Chesterfield-to-London train be reconciled with the take-no-prisoners author of such fierce polemic? This was the paradox of Ellen Meiksins Wood, or, rather, her achievement: a loving person who flourished in concert with others, and could do so even as she articulated, in person or in print, the sharpest of arguments. It was a blend that won her the loyal, adoring friendship of many people over a long and successful life. In her final years she boasted of the political double act she took on the road, in which she argued the cause of Marxism head-to-head against a leading social democrat: her loving and beloved husband Ed Broadbent.

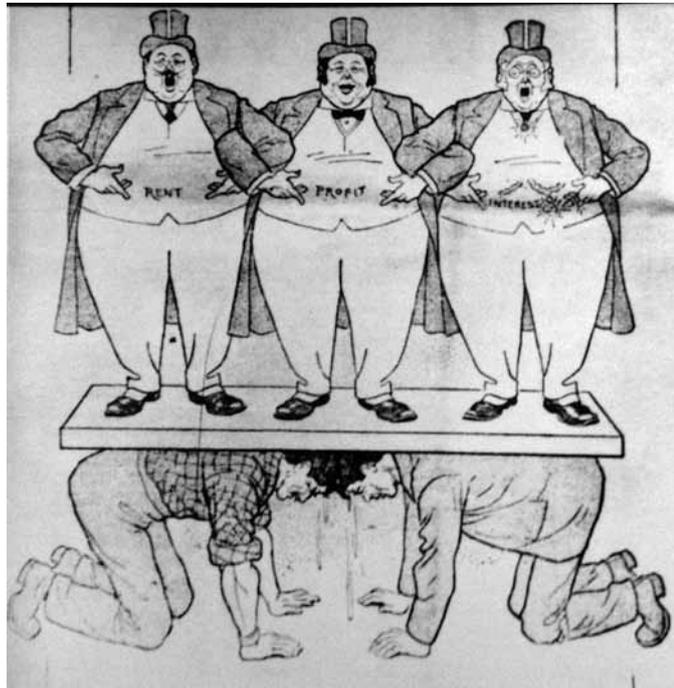
Ellen was born in New York City in 1942. Her parents were Latvian Jews and active Bundists, who had left their home in dramatic circumstances in the late 1930s. After her parents' divorce and the end of the war, she went to Germany with her mother, who, on assignment from the Jewish Labor Committee in New York, was working with displaced persons. Her earliest experiences were thus coloured by both the leftist commitments of her family and the Left's response to the tragedies wrought by fascism and the war.

The young Ellen Meiksins then became, of all things, a Californian teenager. When her mother's work was completed, they moved to Los Angeles, where Ellen attended Beverley Hills High School, returning occasionally to New York to visit her father and stepbrothers, Peter and Robert. Her first degree, in Slavic languages and literature, was taken at Berkeley and it was followed by postgraduate work in political theory at UCLA, where she met her first husband, Neal Wood. Her doctoral dissertation, 'The Epistemological Foundations of Individualism', was published in revised form as a book in 1972.

In 1967 Ellen and Neal moved to Toronto to take up posts at York University, a relatively new institution, which, like its Robbins-inspired kin in the UK, was self-consciously modern in its structure and its commitments. It would be Ellen's institutional home for her entire career, becoming, in her own words, 'the most Marxist department in North America'. Her commitment to what she would later call 'the social history of political thought' would find an ideal home in the graduate program in Social and Political Thought that she and Neal helped found in 1973. There she would educate and inspire a generation of political theorists and critics.

What being ‘a Marxist’ meant in this period was, however, a matter of intense dispute: the breakdown of Stalinism, the rise of Eurocommunism, the re-emergence of Trotskyist and Maoist parties and the gradual strengthening of the new social movements led to intense debate within Marxism over both core principles and political strategy. In this climate, Ellen seemed to feel the greatest affinity with the generation for whom the war and the struggle with fascism were political crucibles, the ‘Old New Left’, as it was latter dubbed, which had broken with Stalinism but still regarded the working class as the irreplaceable agent of revolutionary change. They had first organized around the *New Reasoner* – now they wrote for the *Socialist Register*, to which Ellen became a steady contributor.

The prominence of historians within this group (Edward Thompson and John Saville among others) was probably decisive. Ellen’s version of historical materialism would consistently tilt against those who interpreted Marxism as either a theoretical science (the Althusserians, with their talk of levels and structures) or *Kulturphilosophie*. For her it was first and foremost a historical account of the emergence and working of capitalism, articulating not immutable laws of historical development but the particular and in some sense contingent circumstances and processes that brought capitalism into being. In a revealing aside, she once claimed that there was no explicit theoretical account of her kind of Marxism available, but that ‘something like it is implicit in the works of certain Marxist historians’. These affinities and the personal friendships they fostered would eventually draw her into the orbit of the British New Left. In 1983 she joined the editorial board of *New Left Review*, on which she would serve until 1993, and in the 1980s she and Neal began spending roughly half their time in London, eventually settling in Primrose Hill a few doors down from their friends Ralph Miliband and Marion Kozak.



While dividing her time between Canada and England, Ellen waged an intellectual campaign on two fronts. The first, which took shape in articles for *The Socialist Register* and *New Left Review*, and in a series of increasingly ambitious and influential books, was an argument for the centrality of Marxism in general and for her understanding of it in particular, polemically aimed at those who wanted to dissolve its analysis in the warm bath of post-Marxism and the new social movements. In books like *The Retreat from Class* (which won her an international following and the Isaac Deutscher Prize) and *Democracy Against Capitalism* Ellen insisted that the analysis of capitalism remained the central task of socialist intellectuals and that this analysis had to attend, above all, to the political struggles around property and the control of production that were central to the labour movement. Marxism lost its way when it split the political off from the economic, for then the economy became a system with an internal logic (which might, or might not, lead to crises) and political action assumed a culturalist and voluntarist character. The labour movement was the key to the revolutionary enterprise – if it couldn’t make the running, no one could.

Compared to most of the left political theory of the time, this looked fairly orthodox. But Ellen had done more than make a fresh case for an established position.

By insisting that political relationships, embodied in forms of property, were the central fact of capitalism, she illuminated the interdependence between the capitalist state and the market relations it had to enforce. More importantly, Ellen's work broke the spell that captivated so much of the Left: the association of capitalism with 'modernity', with cities, with their bourgeois denizens and with industry. Capitalism was not originally the creature of cities, of expanding trade, or even wage-labour, she argued. It had depended first and foremost on the destruction of customary practices in peasant life, on the conversion of agricultural land into wholly private property, and on the forceful establishment of market dependency throughout the countryside of England. England, not France. And England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, not the England of the satanic mills.

The second front of Ellen's work was an ambitious 'social history' of European political thought, on which she worked at first with Neal and then continued solo after his death. With Neal she published *A Trumpet of Seditious*, which examined political theory in Britain in those two decisive centuries; later *Citizens to Lords* and *Liberty and Property* would cover, in one grand sweep, political thought from Greek antiquity to the Enlightenment. The narrative sweep was meant to highlight the moments of decisive transformation, when 'parcellized sovereignty' was replaced by the total, coercive power of the modern state and the web of feudal obligation was twisted into the tight, focused bond of private property. It was no accident that John Locke was the key figure for Ellen or that she thought of early modern political theory as her intellectual centre. For it was there that the decisive relationship between state power and capitalist property had been forged.

When the socialist Left lost sight of this relationship, or even abandoned it, the result was an unwitting naturalization of capitalism, which appeared as the simple, perhaps inevitable, outgrowth of modern urban life, or the expansion of trade, or technological advance. It was, Ellen insisted, none of these things. Focusing on that exceptional moment in the history of English society – the moment of peasant dispossession, enclosure and agricultural 'improvement' – would ensure we understood capitalism as the product of particular historical circumstances, a configuration of land, people and power that had violently remade England, and would violently remake other lands, European and colonial, in the centuries that followed. Its violent, catastrophic origins, summarized in her 2002 book *The Origin of Capitalism*, would be echoed in the political violence of world war and fascism in the twentieth century. At both moments, political Marxism stressed the historical specificity of capitalism and thus the possibility of its overcoming.

This illuminating vision and the lucid, engaging style in which it was articulated made Ellen an important figure internationally. Although her sympathies with, and similarities to, other intellectuals of the Left – Robert Brenner, Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff in America; Edward Thompson and Ralph Miliband in England – were marked and important, in many ways she always seemed a one-off, a unique voice. That she was a woman in this male-dominated world was obviously a major factor. After Neal's death in 2003 she continued to write. Her book *Empire of Capital* set contemporary imperialism in the kind of comparative historical context that had done so much to sharpen her account of political theory and capitalism's origins.

Six years before her death Ellen became close to Ed Broadbent, an iconic figure of the Canadian Left and the leader of the New Democratic Party in the 1970s and 1980s. They married in 2014. In January of this year Ellen succumbed to the cancer which she had fought against, with impressive calm, many years before. The Left has lost one of its most distinctive voices. Distinctive not just in what Ellen had to say, but in its impassioned calm, a seriousness that lacked all pretention and any trace of meanness.

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