

Budapest School: Lives of “Revolutionary Tolerance”  
March 31, 2014

***“The basic intellectual attitude we shared, summed up in the term ‘revolutionary tolerance’, uncompromisingly rejects every perspective that does not seek a liberated human race or regards this ‘regulative idea’ as an obsolete illusion of this century and feels no duty towards it. Our basic intellectual attitude supports a theoretical collaboration based on critical understanding with all efforts that, as witnessed by their words and deeds, aim at the realization of these goals.”<sup>1</sup>***

These words describe the “basic intellectual attitude” that united the members of what is called the Budapest School. The Budapest School is not a school in any normal sense of that term. It has no positions, no common propositions nor even common ways of thinking. But there was a time in the mid-sixties when they – and many others – had hopes for an updated and more humane Marxism that would supplant the dogmatic form of Marxism that was imposed on them by the military forces of the Soviet Union. In the years since then, these four philosophers became known as the Budapest School.

Budapest has been an intellectual center for centuries -- and its life and culture are influenced by those who surround it and by the various occupiers of their country. The occupiers come and go, but the Hungarians live on through their language and their literature. It is out of this milieu that the Budapest School grew.

They share a common basic intellectual attitude and a devotion -- and love-- of an intellectual giant -- George Lukacs -- who served as their master. But they were sharply critical of much that Lukacs wrote and did. He was their colleague and they are, each in their own way, strong philosophers in their own right.

Lukacs and the members of the Budapest School shared a common fate -- like many in Hungary. They were forced into exile again and again, but remained true to their shared intellectual and cultural traditions.

To understand Lukacs and the school that came out of his work and life, you need to understand a little bit about Hungary and its capital, Budapest. Hungary is a small, landlocked country with ten million souls, with a language and culture all its own. It is in the middle of Europe and deeply influenced by where it sits, but in some very important ways it is not European. Its language is nearly unique -- shared only by Finns and a few very small enclaves in Asia. It is not an Indo-European language but claims a prominent role in its own family of languages -- it is, to be a bit precise, an Ob-Ugric language spoken by about 14 million people world-wide.

Lukacs was not only a great philosopher. He was a good and honest man. His writings are dense and require great devotion from any reader. He was cultured, intense, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Feher Ferenc, Agnes Heller, Gyorgy Markus and Mihaly Vajda, “Notes on Lukacs’ Ontology” in Heller, Agnes (ed), Lukacs Revalued. Oxford. Blackwell.1983. p. 137

devoted to his country and he encouraged those with whom he worked to follow their own positions and interests while being proud of their intellectual and literary traditions.

Three members of the Budapest School are now in their eighties. The fourth died in 1994. They have gone their separate ways after they were removed from their positions in Hungary in 1973. Agnes Heller, the most prolific, travels the world full of energy and life -- lecturing about philosophy and meeting students from the various places where she sought refuge -- Australia and the United States. Mihaly Vajda lives in Germany and Budapest and now writes only in an Hungarian that, according to him and others, cannot be translated. His books on fascism are still among the best that exist. And George Markus has just published his life's work in 600 pages and is now turning his attention to a philosophical analysis of detective novels.

In another paper, I discuss the life and works of the Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukacs and tried to show why he is one of the most important Marxist philosophers. I said that Lukacs, almost alone among Marxist philosophers, took on the task of developing a “complete” and systematic Marxist philosophy. At the close of his life he was developing an ontology of social being. His thinking – and writings – spanned almost all philosophical thought.

I also said that, to me, some of his most interesting and important of his writings are those which were published after his death – especially his analysis of work, which is part of his ontology.

In this paper, I will discuss how Lukacs’ project of developing a “complete” philosophy was undertaken by four of those closest to him – what is now referred to as the Budapest School.<sup>2</sup>

As one member of the Budapest School put it, “We got a task from Lukacs to re-construct Marxism. We wanted to create a new, more flexible Marx. Instead of reconstruction, however, we did a de-construction.”<sup>3</sup>

It is not my goal here to give a thorough – or critical – evaluation and elucidation of the work of these four thinkers. That is for others to do. Now that many of their works are translated into Chinese I would expect that much of what they dreamed about, hoped for and wrote about may find its realization in China.

Instead of trying to be comprehensive, I would rather focus on what I think the Budapest School brings to us – an example of a culture and humanity that built on and extended the work of their master – Georg Lukacs.

---

<sup>2</sup> Individuum und Praxis. Positionen der ‘Budapester Schule’ published by Suhrkamp Verlag in 1975 contains articles of each of those mentioned here as well as articles by Maria Markus and Andras Hegedus, two sociologists who worked closely with the group. Hegedus held many political positions, including Prime Minister. In a letter published as an introduction to the collection, Lukacs says he was never a “lonely thinker” and embraced the notion of these people as part of his “school.”

<sup>3</sup> Mihaly Vajda, conversation with the author in Budapest, April 25, 2011.

During my first visit to Beijing in August 2010, I learned that you have great interest in what is called the “Budapest School.” I called my long-time friend, with whom I had had almost no contact for the past forty years – George Markus – and said – “Gjuri – you know you are famous in Beijing? -- In fact I had lunch with someone whose job it is to study you – and You are A School.”

And he broke into the sustained laughter which brought back many wonderful conversations in days when we were all filled with hope and believed there was really a possibility for a New Democratic Theory to sweep over the world and wipe out the divisions between what we called “East” and “West” (which meant Europe and the United States). We saw hope and found common ground not just in philosophical theory – but in praxis – in political struggles in which each of us played some roles. We laughed a lot – and it was Gjuri’s laugh that was perhaps the most infectious.

The continuing interaction among the members of the Budapest School is perhaps best shown in two of their more recent essays that were keynote addresses delivered at a 2006 Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy Conference at Deakin University. Heller’s contribution, “The Shame of Trauma, the Trauma of Shame,” draws on topics she develops in a series of works. . In his contribution called “Trauma and Counterstrategies of Philosophy,” Markus did a stunning romp through pre-Socratic philosophies, especially the stoics and then turned to Kant with references along the way to Freud.”<sup>4</sup> These pieces may seem far removed from the world of Lukacs best known for his early work on History and Class Consciousness that grew directly out of his political work, but they reflect the observations and understandings of brilliant philosophers who are reflecting on the realities of the world about them.

Their articles are excellent examples of applying the methodology developed by Marx and Lukacs to an important human phenomenon – trauma – a topic not often treated by philosophers.

The members of the Budapest School embody the legacy of Lukacs in the best sense – as honest and inquiring thinkers, writers and teachers.

## **Revolutionary Tolerance**

These four summed up their relationship to their “teacher and friend” in an introduction to the publication after his death of critical comments of Lukacs last writings. Their love – and understanding of his mission – shines through their explanation of how they worked with Lukacs.

Listen to what they say:

---

<sup>4</sup> Trauma, History , Philosophy (With Feature Essays by Agnes Heller and Gyorgy Markus). Matthew Sharpe, Murray Noonan, and Jason Freddi. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 2007.

“Georg Lukacs firmly believed in the truth of his standpoint, and yet when we claimed the truth of our side and outlined our views, which were opposed to his in decisive respects, he accepted them as justified *though* contestable. The basic intellectual attitude we shared, summed up in the term ‘revolutionary tolerance’, uncompromisingly rejects every perspective that does not seek a liberated human race or regards this ‘regulative idea’ as an obsolete illusion of this century and feels no duty towards it. Our basic intellectual attitude supports a theoretical collaboration based on critical understanding with all efforts that, as witnessed by their words and deeds, aim at the realization of these goals. This ‘revolutionary tolerance’ had long lived in us as an intention, but now it was crystallized into a concrete principle in the course of these conversations. This was the *philosophical message* of the long debate that transformed our unfading memory of our teacher and friend into a didactic model of thought.”

These words were written by the four members of the Budapest School – Feher Ferenc, Agnes Heller, George Markus and Mihaly Vajda -- to elucidate the publication of some very critical comments they had made on Lukacs last – and crowning – work – The Ontology of Social Consciousness. His four students, the Budapest School, summed up their relationship to Lukacs in the introduction to “Notes on Lukacs’ Ontology”<sup>5</sup> The introduction is particularly poignant for me since the critical analysis was being written and given to Lukacs at a time when I was fortunate to be in Budapest and meeting with Lukacs.

The “old man” held them together, but they were not just studying him – they were doing philosophy and writing and thinking in his manner of thinking. They were his colleagues and his critics.

So what is this revolutionary tolerance of which they speak? It is an attitude and a way of life which Lukacs pursued during his eighty years of philosophical work and political activity. It is not tolerance that says that we will each live our own lives and tolerate one another. It is a tolerance that grows out of firm conviction and moral commitment to a more humane society and a recognition that no matter how much one may be committed to the revolution – no matter how hard the struggle may be – a certain modesty is necessary. This modesty is the ability to listen and learn from others – and to allow others to speak their piece without fear of retribution.

Too often revolutionary movements devour their young – and often their old as well. They adopt a level of certainty and fervor that is often characteristic of religious movements based on the proposition that those who are not “saved” are of no value and are, in fact dangerous and need to be eradicated from the face of the earth. That is an attitude that Lukacs – and the Budapest School – resisted throughout their lives.

In order to understand the Budapest School we need to look at the year 1968 which marked the turning point in their lives – and the turning point of many other revolutionaries.

---

<sup>5</sup> Feher Ferenc, Agnes Heller, Gyorgy Markus and Mihaly Vajda, “Notes on Lukacs’ Ontology” in Heller, Agnes (ed), Lukacs Revalued. Oxford. Blackwell.1983. p. 137

## 1968

1968 was a wonderful year to be a Marxist. And, for a while, it looked like a good year for revolutions. While Lukacs' students were busy criticizing the crowning work of their master, revolution was in the air – and on the ground. Back in the United States my students had taught me that we were part of an international movement – and in our opposition to the horrendous war in Viet Nam and the repression of the growing Black Power movement in the U.S. we believed revolution was on its way– and knew that we had friends around the world.

When I arrived in Budapest, I found a similar air of anticipation as we went into 1968. Exciting things were happening. Democracy was in the air. The Hungarians had recovered from – but not forgotten about – the brutal repression of a spontaneous rebellion in 1956 that was put down by Soviet tanks. You could still see the marks on the buildings in the main squares of the city where they had been shelled by tanks.

I was welcomed into their group during eight wonderful months. We met at least once a week in someone's apartment. The rooms were filled with smoke – and the conversation was lubricated, when someone could find it, with Bison Vodka from Poland. We smoked and drank – but mostly talked about all kinds of topics. The conversations would go on late into the night. There was plenty of revolutionary tolerance in the air.

But in 1968 a new government was in the works. Lukacs was back in favor again – he had been part of the Hungarian Soviet in 1918 and was the only survivor of the short-lived government in 1956 before it was crushed. He was finally readmitted to the Party in 1967.

Those associated with him had found employment doing research in the Academy of Science.

And revolution was in the air not just in Hungary.

The intelligentsia in Poland was active and seeds were being laid for a workers uprising a few years later that eventually brought down the bureaucratic and repressive government of Poland.

The poets and playwrights were rising up in Czechoslovakia.

The philosophers in Yugoslavia were holding annual conferences on the island of Korcula and were publishing an international (as well as a Serbo-Croatian) journal called Praxis.

There was truly an international movement afoot and we saw a new day dawning – or so we thought – and hoped.

Before 1968 ended, however, the world was reverting to “normal.” Students in France and Germany and the United States found riot police and tanks confronting them as their “protests” were put down. The Soviet tanks rolled in again – this time into Prague, but the tremors were felt in Hungary and Poland as well.

In the August of 1968 as the tanks were rolling through the streets of Prague, the students and workers in Paris were being brutally tamed by the police, the cities of the United States were under military occupation to prevent “riots” by a rising tide of Black Power reacting to the murder of Martin Luther King and students. Demonstrators at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago were beaten down in what was later officially described by the U.S. government as a “police riot”. The armies were taking control of the streets – everywhere in the “East and West.” We lost.

The Budapest School soon found themselves unemployed – and lived by translating.

But in 1968 for a few months we all saw a new world dawning.

This is the Budapest School I knew – intense, brilliant, creative, questioning, active and – above all – hopeful. Theory and praxis were united and that unity was essential for good praxis and good theory – or so we all thought and hoped.

In Hungary Lukacs was the leader and protector of what became the Budapest School. His stature and his standing in society and the party gave them the space to do their work – and to dream of a better life.

When the tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia in 1968 we were at a conference organized by the Praxis group in Korcula, Yugoslavia. The topic, appropriately enough, was “Marx and Revolution.” The conference had become the focal point for those in what was then called “East” and “West” who were searching for a new and more vital understanding of society – and saw Marx as the theoretician who, perhaps, could show us how to think – and, more importantly, to act.

Those of us in Korcula knew that we were no longer just talking about revolution – we were witnessing an international repression of movements we had hoped would bring us a better tomorrow.

The Hungarian delegation to the Korcula Conference did not hesitate. They issued a public statement condemning the invasion of Czechoslovakia, left the conference and took the train to Budapest knowing full well that nothing good awaited them. Within a few years three of the four left Hungary in order for their families to survive. All four were examples of “revolutionary tolerance.” All of them lost their jobs and positions. Lukacs had purchased apartments for each of them with the Goethe Prize money he won, so they did have a place to live. But they were forced into a wilderness, just as Lukacs had been in so many wildernesses in his lifetime.

Their political lives ended – at least in a direct way.<sup>6</sup> But their philosophical lives continued.

They all went on to various lives – in various countries – but everything they wrote and taught from then on was shaped by those days in 1968. All that came before and all that came after revolved around the events of 1968.

## **Continental European Philosophers**

All possibilities for philosophical work and political activity in Hungary closed after 1968. The political organizations and movements around which they had built their lives were eradicated. They stayed on in Hungary for a while, surviving by doing translations but as time passed it became clear that there was little future in Hungary for them as philosophers and, even more important, for their children.

Some of the students of the Budapest School went underground in Hungary and continued to write – even though publication and jobs were impossible.<sup>7</sup> The Budapest School dispersed to survive and it lived on through the lives of the people whose paths crossed in 1968.

They were – and are—continental European philosophers steeped in the history and works of classic Western philosophy. They were united by a common humanity, civility and humor that reflected that of their mentor. To use their words, they uncompromisingly rejected “every perspective that does not seek a liberated human race or regards this ‘regulative idea’ as an obsolete illusion of this century and feels no duty towards it.”

The members of the Budapest School are, each in his or her own way, excellent creative philosophers who continue to work as philosophers. But they were never again able to engage in political praxis – which fed and enriched all of Lukacs’ writings – even his most abstract ones. There was no viable party available.

They delved into the history of Western philosophy. – and expanded our understanding of the topics that can be considered as “philosophical.” They each became individual thinkers with valuable contributions in their own right – not just as students of a great philosopher.

Let us turn to each of the “school” members and look at their works after 1968.

---

<sup>6</sup> Dictatorship Over Needs. Feher, Ferenc, Heller, Agnes and Markus, Gyorgy. New York St. Martin’s Press. 1983. This book, addressed to Western leftists, is their final intellectual break with the “Eastern European” world dominated by the Soviet Union through tanks and armies.

<sup>7</sup> See publications by Gyorgy Bence and Janos Kis for some of the underground publications by students and associates of the Budapest School. After the fall of the ‘Soviet-backed government, Janos Kis led one of the political parties. In 1978 (London, Allen and Busby), they published *Towards an East European Marxism* under the pseudonym of Marc Rakovski. Kis is now a professor at Central European University in Budapest and New York University in the United States. Bence died a few years ago.

## George Markus

The one with whom I am closest is George Markus. He was the Wittgenstein scholar with a philosophy degree from Moscow. Like all those in the Budapest School (and most intellectuals in Hungary) he is fluent in several languages.

Gjuri was the quiet and polite one – with the Polish Sociologist as a wife and two young sons. In conversation his intense eyes sparkled and his laughter and wit transformed the conversation.

Intently serious – he went on to a career teaching in Australia at the University of Sydney for twenty years focusing on the concepts of enlightenment and culture. His life work was a continuation of Lukacs’ – to develop a theory of cultural objectifications. His six hundred page work summing up his later thinking has just appeared.<sup>8</sup>

The description of Markus’ teaching and research in his Festschrift reveals a teacher and scholar who immersed himself in the history of philosophy, just as Lukacs did. He is described by his colleagues as follows:

“What sets Markus apart is his character and his fundamental orienting values....When George arrived at Sydney in 1978 the department of General Philosophy was a seedbed of faction and internal struggle...Almost from the beginning, Markus introduced a completely new tone into these internal politics....He always would put his view forcefully and politely in terms of principles. He always encouraged the climate that whatever divisions existed it was important that individuals be respected and the we all should feel the solidarity of our common responsibilities,”<sup>9</sup>

It is appropriate that the two leading articles in his Festschrift were written by his friends Agnes Heller and Mihaly Vajda.

Their love for one another and respect for the search for truth shines through.

And their humanity and generosity are a given part of their relationships.

Markus’ early work on the “nature” of man demonstrates the care and detail of his historical and textual analysis.<sup>10</sup> His writing is tight. His thinking is structured. His insights are brilliant.

---

<sup>8</sup> Markus, Gyorgy, Culture, Science, Society : The Constitution of Cultural Modernity. Leiden ; Boston : Brill, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> “The Paradoxes of Philosophy: Gyorgy Markus at Sydney University by John Grumly. Culture and . Essays for Georgy Markus. Edited by John Grumly, Paul Crittenden and Pauline Johnson. Hampshire, England. Ashgate Publishing. 2002. pp 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> Markus, George, Marxism and Anthropology. The Concept of ‘Human Essence’ in the Philosophy of Marx. The Netherlands. Van Corcum. 1978. His other major publication is Language and Production, a Critique of the Paradigms. Dordrecht, Holland, Reidel Publishing Company. 1986. The



He took the concepts Lukacs was developing in his ontology of labor seriously and explored Marx's writings in detail and in depth as he delved into the "nature" of man and the importance of labor as a fundamental human activity.

We have much to learn from him.

## **Mihaly Vajda**

Misu is the affable and loveable one. His specialty was phenomenology and he went on to write a stunning analysis of fascism. Misu stayed in Hungary, although he established a close relationship with Germany and taught in Bremen from 1977-80. He is deeply attached to the Hungarian culture and language and says that his current writings, all in Hungarian, are not translatable – even by himself.

Vajda was the first member of the Budapest school to publicly break with Marxism in the mid-1970's. He described his journey out of Marxism as follows:<sup>11</sup>

1956 – there was an intellectual movement that believed the leaders had betrayed Marxism and we needed to correct the official, dogmatic view of Marxism. A spontaneous revolt broke out that was crushed by Soviet tanks. A new leadership, led by Janos Kadar, was installed by the Soviet Union.

1957-62 We believed that there could be a way out of our situation. Kadar wanted to correct a lot of things but we could not forgive him for the loss of life and the suppression of the 1956 uprising.

Mid- 1960's We saw significant changes in the government and reforms that promised to bring about the dissolution of the system introduced in Russia and forced on Hungary.

August 1968 – With the invasion of Czechoslovakia we were finished with the Russian system and began to dissolve our dogmatism. We gave up on reform, We did not want anything to do with any "ism".

By the mid-seventies the views of the three members of the Budapest School began to diverge. Vajda, who described himself as the "most radical" member of the group was the first to break openly with Marxism, but the others soon followed.

Vajda's most significant early work – written during 1969 and 1970 is Fascism as a Mass Movement<sup>12</sup> The topic of the nature of fascism is central to an understanding of Lukacs

---

book was originally published in French in 1982 and is volume 96 of the Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science edited by Robert S. Cohen and Marx W. Wartofsky.

<sup>11</sup> Conversations with the author April 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Vajda, Mihaly, Fascism as a Mass Movement. London, Allison & Busby, 1976.

and his pupils. Der Junge Hegel, which I believe is one of the most interesting and very best of Lukacs work, was written in Moscow during the 1930's, but was not published until after the war. It is very much about fascism – and how one is to understand fascism. That book, like everything that Lukacs wrote was not an academic exercise – it was written to correct a series of false interpretations of Hegel, who had been claimed by the fascists as one of their founding fathers (an interpretation that was widely shared in the Soviet Union where Lukacs was living when he wrote the book).

How did fascism come about as a mass movement in some European countries when all signs – after 1917 and the success of the Bolshevik revolution – pointed to an international proletarian revolution? What happened to the promise and promises? How did fascism succeed, when communist revolutions were limited to Russia and Hungary until after World War II.

These are the issues that Vajda raises – and answers – in his brilliant little book.

In the introduction to the 1976 English edition, he publicly broke with the “lukacsian concept” that holds “there is a distinction between ‘empirical’ and ‘imputed’ class consciousness, and that the *actual* consciousness of individuals belong to a certain class which becomes manifest through their actions is not the same as the class consciousness which the individuals of the class in question *ought* to possess as an inevitable consequence of their class affiliation.” (pp 7-8)

He says that what is needed to correct these errors is “a critical reconsideration of Marx’s concept of class.” (p.8)

Vajda’s analysis of fascism focuses on it as a “mass movement” – and rejects attempts to characterize all objectionable governments – such as the ones that dominated Hungary and Spain as fascist. What is fascinating, for him (and for Lukacs) was the fact that fascism in Germany and Italy were genuinely mass movements and could not be understood – or dismissed -- through a simplified Marxist analysis.

Vajda’s work flows out of a very different part of the Lukacs’ heritage than the other members of the Budapest School. He is much more overtly political in his writings. His book on fascism, for example, which was written in 1969-70 – immediately after the 1968 events that led to his expulsion from his positions and livelihood – draws heavily on Lukacs’ 1928 Blum Theses. These theses were written for the Party and put him at odds with what was to become the prevailing ideology.

Vajda is also the one who articulated the political transformations they all went through as they watched the social world in which they had grown up and educated collapse and fall away. He watched with sorrow as the social and political environment they once hoped to transform into a human and vibrant society fell into the dustbin of history.

His later views are described in a collection of essays published in English in 1981.<sup>13</sup>

In his introduction he sums up his transformation after the collapse of the 1960s.

“This book contains my political and theoretical writings from the 1970s...It is typical, in one way or another, of the development of many East Europeans who in the 1960s as faithful socialists were searching for the renovation of marxism, and were waiting for a marxist renaissance (Georg Lukacs)” pp. 1-2

“I changed my original socialist faith...for a definite conviction, even if not for knowledge. The conviction was that if man is free, it is at least not impossible for him – even under the most difficult circumstances – to do something to establish more free, i.e. more democratic forms of living together...What can we do at the place where we live, which we are most familiar with, where we can best grasp the situation, the latent or sharpening social conflicts, in order to have more freedom, in order to solve the conflicts in a democratic direction?” pp. 2-3

“Man being a *free, reasoning* being – both characteristics are stressed—he is able, or even obliged, to argue for his choices. So he cannot evade a theory.” P. 3

“Property relations are only one instance in the relationships of individuals and social groups of which the society consists.” P. 6

“It is capitalism (and *up to this point* in the whole of human history capitalism alone) which is characterized by the artificial separation of the economy from politics and ideology. The capitalist *form of production* was an accompaniment of the depoliticization of civil society and of property. It is only this separation between the political state and bourgeois society which renders possible the advent of private property in the concrete sense of the term. Under capitalism the political state is not the direct representative of the interests of the capitalist class. It is thus a bourgeois state in that it “considers birth, status, education and profession to be *non-political* distinctions” and as a result “allows free rein to private property, culture and professional activity to develop and flourish according to their natural essence” (Marx). “*As long as these distinctions exist and are effective in civil society*, depoliticization is of benefit to the holders of *economic* power, i.e. the bourgeoisie.” (p. 143)

“It is quite clear that if we are to make *genuine* changes in the socialist system as it exists today, we must fight for political democracy. It may be that this step will not lead straight to socialism. But without it it is surely impossible to achieve anything at all.” P. 146

Despite many opportunities – and often encouragement by the government – to emigrate, he remained in Hungary and he worked to build a philosophy department at the

---

<sup>13</sup> Vajda, Mihaly. The State and Socialism. Political Essays. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1981

University of Debrecen, a provincial university. He focused more and more on Hungarian literature and culture and his writings were, according to him and others, completely untranslatable. He remains active and teaches once a week at another provincial university and has students located throughout Hungary.

Vajda says that he gave up the task of changing the world and focused, instead, on specific issues and specific people with whom he worked. Like the other members of the Budapest School he focused on teaching – specializing on modern German philosophy.

The same humanity and hopefulness that infuses all of the work of the Budapest School shines through, but the possibility of achieving that world in the near future has disappeared for Vajda.

## **Agnes Heller and Feher Ferenc**

Heller and Ferenc lived a life together. Heller is the philosopher – the one interested in Ethics – and much more. Ferenc focused more on literature and immediate politics, but their works were generally co-authored.

After Heller and Ferenc left Hungary for Australia and, eventually, New York, they eventually ended up in New York – and published a mountain of philosophical books as well as political works.<sup>14</sup> The two were a life-long couple and inseparable until Ferenc's death in 1994, shortly after they returned to Hungary.

Heller took on the project of writing a “complete” philosophy. Her works are voluminous and imbued with a deep understanding of the history of continental European philosophy. Her writings also reflected the intense sorrow that characterized important parts of her life. Her father was a victim of the holocaust. She was among the closest personal associates of Lukacs.

She took the notion of “every day life” that was central to the thinking of the late Lukacs and elaborated on it at length.<sup>15</sup>

She became enamored with Wittgenstein – not the Wittgenstein who launched analytical philosophy – the barren wasteland of anglo-saxon “thought” that came to dominate “philosophy” in the United States -- but the latter, more tactile, Wittgenstein.

---

<sup>14</sup> Feher Ferenc is generally listed as the lead author in the political works. Two particularly interesting works are their discussions about the place of “Eastern” Europe – the part of Europe that was occupied by the Soviet Union after World War II. They lay out with convincing clarity the place of these countries as a result of decisions made by the Soviet Union and the United States to establish their spheres of influence. *Hungary 1956 Revisited. The Message of a Revolution – a quarter of a Century After.* London. George Allen and Unwin. 1983 gives their analysis of the historic events in Hungary in 1956. – Cite book on post-Yalta.

<sup>15</sup> Heller, Agnes. *Everyday Life.* London, Routledge and Regan Paul. 1984. The work was first published in Hungarian in 1970.

She took one of the founders of analytic philosophy and delved into the depths of his later works – his notes – his thoughts and feelings. She developed a philosophy/theory of feelings – a project in keeping with Lukacs early preoccupation with theater and aesthetics.

Heller, like Lukacs, understood that life is rich and full and that “reason” is not all that makes sense in life – any more than adherence to a particular dogma makes sense.

She took on the “post-modern” philosophers with a vengeance and in a book dedicated to the Markuses, she writes:

“Postmodernity is not a stage that comes after modernity, it is not the retrieval of modernity – it *is* modern. More precisely, the postmodern perspective could perhaps best be described as the self-reflective conscious of modernity itself. It is a kind of modernity that knows itself in a Socratic way. For it (also) knows that it knows very little, if anything at all.”<sup>16</sup>

Her work is fully in the tradition of Lukacs and serves as an excellent example of what philosophers who call themselves Marxists should be doing – exploring the full range and scope of human endeavor and philosophical activity.

The scope of Heller’s work is huge. Heller and Ferenc have 73 titles in the holdings of the Library of Congress. The sweep of their work is grand and broad. It is in the best tradition of Lukacs – and of orthodox Marxism, even if her references to Marx are fewer and fewer as her works pile up. Perhaps the best way to give a sense of what they have done is to simply list the titles of some, but not all, of what she has produced. I have cited English editions because it is my native languages, but her works have been widely translated. She is far better known in other countries than in the United States, where she was a professor of the New School that still serves as a home for Europeans in exiles who maintain their roots back home.

She was never able to develop her full potential in Hungary – and when she, like the others, made the heart-wrenching decision to leave the country and the culture and the life they knew and loved in order to provide lives for their children, she undertook her own odyssey – first to Australia and then to New York City, where she became a professor at the New School, a refuge for many European intellectuals who were forced into exile. They were able to do theory, but were never involved in praxis – which was what fed the intellectual and political work of Lukacs.

She has returned to Budapest where she spends much of her time now. Her friendship and collaboration with Markus and Vajda continue.

Here are some of their books. Read them. Follow their example – and those who have worked with her:

---

<sup>16</sup> Heller, Agnes. A Theory of Modernity. Malden, Mass. Blackwell. 1999. p. 4.

The Theory of Need in Marx. London. Allixon & Busby. 1976 (translated from German copyrighted in 1974).

Dictatorship over needs by Ferenc Fehér, Agnes Heller, and György Márkus. Oxford : B. Blackwell, 1983.

Doomsday or deterrence? : on the antinuclear issue / Ferenc Fehér and Agnes Heller. Armonk, N.Y. : M.E. Sharpe, Inc. c1986.

Eastern left, western left : totalitarianism, freedom, and democracy / Ferenc Fehér and Agnes Heller. Atlantic Highlands, NJ : Humanities Press International, 1987.

Hungary 1956 revisited : the message of a revolution--a quarter of a century after / Ferenc Fehér and Agnes Heller. London ; Boston : Allen & Unwin, 1983.

Marx és a modernitás / Fehér Ferenc, Heller Ágnes. [Budapest] : Argumentum, 2002.

Aesthetics and modernity : essays / by Agnes Heller ; edited by John Rundell. Lanham : Lexington Books, c2011.

Alltag und Geschichte; zur sozialistischen Gesellschaftslehre. [Neuwied] Luchterhand [1970]

Beyond justice. Oxford [Oxfordshire] ; New York, NY, USA : Blackwell, 1987.

Can modernity survive? / Agnes Heller. Berkeley : University of California Press, c1990.

An ethics of personality. Oxford, OX, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA : Blackwell, 1996.

Everyday life / Agnes Heller ; translated from the Hungarian by G.L. Campbell. London ; Boston : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984.

From Yalta to glasnost : the dismantling of Stalin's empire / Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér. Cambridge, Mass. : B. Blackwell, 1991.

General ethics / Agnes Heller. Oxford [Oxfordshire] ; New York, NY, USA : B. Blackwell, 1988.

The grandeur and twilight of radical universalism / Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér. New Brunswick, N.J. : Transaction Publishers, c1991.

Immortal comedy : the comic phenomenon in art, literature, and life / Agnes Heller. Lanham, Md. : Lexington Books, c2005.

[Heller, Agnes.](#) Instinkt, Aggression, Charakter : Einl. zu e. marxist. Sozialanthropologie / Agnes Heller

On instincts translated into English by Mario Fenyő. Assen : Van Gorcum, 1979.

A philosophy of history in fragments / Agnes Heller. Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA : Blackwell, 1993.

A philosophy of morals. Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA : B. Blackwell, 1990.

The postmodern political condition / Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér. New York : Columbia University Press, c1988.

The power of shame : a rational perspective / Ágnes Heller. London ; Boston : Routledge & K. Paul, 1985.

A radical philosophy / Agnes Heller ; translated by James Wickham. Oxford, England ; New York, N.Y. : B. Blackwell, 1984.

Renaissance man / Agnes Heller ; translated from the Hungarian by Richard E. Allen. New York : Schocken Books, 1981, c1978.

A short history of my philosophy / Agnes Heller. Lanham, Md. : Lexington Books, c2010

A theory of feelings 2nd ed. Lanham, Md. : Lexington, c2009.

A theory of history. London ; Boston . : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.

A theory of modernity / Agnes Heller. Malden, Mass. : Blackwell Publishers, 1999

The time is out of joint : Shakespeare as philosopher of history. Lanham, Md. : Rowman & Littlefield, c2002.

Trauma / Heller Ágnes. Budapest : Múlt és Jövő, 2006.

### **The Lessons of the Budapest School**

Each of the members of the Budapest School has gone on to create independent and fruitful intellectual lives and each leaves an important legacy to anyone who is striving to build a Marxism that is relevant to the world in which we live.

They came together around Lukacs – who served as their inspiration and who gave them the task of reviving and rejuvenating Marxism. They did not succeed in that task because it was not possible for them to do so.

The dogmatic Marxism that developed in the Soviet Union and was exported to other countries, including Hungary, eventually crashed and dissolved.

Perhaps the most important thing we can learn from these thinkers – and from their mentor Lukacs – is to develop what they once called an attitude of revolutionary tolerance.

Tolerance does not mean accepting whatever someone else says – but it does mean that one holds his or her own views with conviction and listens to others. It is in the dialogue – in the ebb and flow of history and human thought – that we can do our part to create a world in which alienation is mitigated and in which work becomes an honorable and honored creativity of mankind.

After the events of 1968, the members of the Budapest School were never able to combine their theory with praxis. They became very good philosophers. There was no party or political movement available for them, as there was for Lukacs who developed his understanding of Marxism out of the crucible of the short-lived Hungarian Republic in 1919 and the development of a vibrant Communist Party under the leadership of Lenin. Lukacs remained faithful to the Party, at great personal and intellectual costs, but in the end, the hopes and aspirations that he had come to naught with the collapse of the form of communism imposed on central Europe by Soviet tanks.

They, like their mentor Lukacs, did their work in a Euro-centric environment. Their work was very much the product of a cold war between the United States and the USSR and they did not escape those boundaries. For that reason we see no references in their works to many important topics and issues of the day. There is no recognition of the role of colonialism and imperialism. Nor any discussion of the profound role racism plays in our societies.

They remain philosophers – but very good philosophers – who were not able to participate in a practical way for a better world.

We have not heard the last from this remarkable group.

It is up to all of us to carry on their tradition of revolutionary tolerance.



## Time Line

April 13, 1885 – Lukacs Born

October 1917 - Russian Revolution

1918 – Lukacs joined Hungarian Communist Party

March 21- August 6, 1919 - Hungarian Soviet in which Lukacs served as a Minister.

1928 – Lukacs to Berlin

1930-- Lukacs to Soviet Union

1945 – Lukacs to Hungary

1956 – Hungarian Revolt

1956 Janos Kadar installed in Hungary by the Soviet Union.

1967 - Lukacs Re-admitted to Party

1968 – Soviet Union invades Czechoslovakia Budapest School denounces invasion publicly. Lukacs sends private letter to the party.

June 4, 1971 – Lukacs Died

1973 – Budapest School expelled from Academy of Sciences and lost positions.

1977 – Heller and Ferenc emigrated to Australia and later to New York. Today she travels the world from her home in Budapest.

1977 – Markus emigrated to Berlin and then joined Heller in Australia where he remains today.

1977.80 Vajda in Bremen

1990 – 2005 – Vajda became leader of philosophy department in Debrecen. Retired as leader in 2000 at age of 65. Lives in Budapest and Tübingen, Germany.

1992 – Feher Ferenc died in Hungary.