I. SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE IMAGINATION OF OUR TIMES

Interview with Agnes Heller

Conducted by Nikolaos Vlahakis
(PhD Candidate, Sofia University)

1. You have interpreted modernity as "a world which draws on two sources of imagination: the technological and the historical". You have also said that "Modernity has no foundation, since it emerged in and through the destruction and deconstruction of all foundations. In other words, modernity is founded on freedom." and "freedom is the arché of the modern world."[1] But by such a definition we understand that the only foundation of modernity is the non-foundation, insofar as modernity has to re-invent itself again and again.

Might such a definition not lead to a sort of a theoretical "anarchism" largely characterizing the postmodern condition and its relativism? And what are the main antinomies of this freedom in the "modern social arrangement"?

A.H. It will be difficult to answer your questions properly without writing a new book, or at least a long lecture…

With the seemingly self-contraditory thesis, that the foundation of modernity is freedom and freedom is a foundation which does not found, I meant in fact something very simple. In traditional well-founded societies,

[1] Agnes Heller, "The Three Logics of Modernity and the Double Bind of the Modern Imagination", *Thesis Eleven* 81 (May 2005): 63-79.

the foundation played a double legitimating role: it legitimated both the existing hierarchical social order and the world interpretation of this order. Whenever the legitimating function of the foundation was questioned the social order was about to collapse. Once the statement "all men are born free" became accepted as foundational, no hierarchical order could be legitimated only by relying on the foundation, or, alternatively, some very different foundations could equally be considered adequate.

Foundation and the dominating idea normally coalesce, and this is the case also with freedom. However, contrary to the dominating ideas of traditional societies, no interpretation of freedom is excluded, not even the free choice of un-freedom, since every exclusion from interpretation would contradict freedom. (Not just atheism or skepticism was excluded from the legitimate discourse in the Middle Ages, but so was Epicureanism). From this follows that every project and their opposites can legitimately refer to freedom and that the concept of "truth" gets pluralized.

What, then, are the options in modernity (given the absence of firm foundation)?

First, self-foundation. A republic founds itself though a constitution. As the American Declaration of Independence formulates it, "We take these truths to be self-evident…" (Members of a well-founded republic sign the statement that everyone is equally born free, etc.).

Second: fundamentalism, the kind of world interpretation that identifies freedom with one concretely-defined fundament, no longer open to interpretation. These are the ideologies. Totalitarian states or movements use ideologies as their compass, which indicates the aim to destroy, whether the ideology is that of race, class, or religion. Anarchism can be a world interpretation, but an anarchist state or society is impossible. One could say, however, that a kind of relativistic way of thinking can support, even if only negatively, social or political processes, which open a way to a kind of mild or strict fundamentalism.

2. You have witnessed the main political events in Europe during the 20th century, as the century of this kind of modernity. In the aftermath of this era, what is your assessment of these events and the mainstream

theories which accompanied their appearance in history. Are they guided by the "Hegelian spirit of the Negation" as the main principle of this development? What is the main reason for the rise of various totalitarianisms during this century, in which freedom was the basic principle and demand?

A.H. The 20th century introduced itself by the original sin of Europe: World War I. Without the original sin of Europe, the whole century might have taken a different turn. In the wake of World War I and its peace, Europe became the practice ground of totalitarian states, the territory of unprecedented mass murder.

In the second part of 20th century, sooner or later, Europeans started to learn some lessons from their past. But historical traditions do not just disappear, for they leave their mark on collective memory. The 20th century has not become a closed book, just because we have entered the 21st century.

To use a psychological term: Europe has never practiced frustration tolerance. As long as there is no frustration, one can easily remain true to the republican interpretation of freedom. But heaven knows what European nations would do in case of a long lasting frustration, how they would answer? Would they long again for a new Führer?

This brings me to the question of historical and technological imagination. These establish, to use Castoriadis's term, the institutions of imagination. The institutions of technological imagination operate with an essentially homogeneous concept of truth: an empirical concept of true knowledge. To repeat Popper and Foucault: a scientific statement or theory can be both true and false. Moreover, theories or statements can legitimately participate in a scientific discourse with their own truth claims, if it is accepted that the claim can be also proven false. True knowledge is produced in discourse, but there are conditions for the participation in the discourse. All in all, both the political and the economic sphere subscribes to this concept of the "true" (i.e. the empirical, defined as the theoretical or narrative organization of interpreted facts). This is not the case in historical imagination, their institutions, nations, peoples, and communities included. They rely heavily on collective memory, narratives, on philosophies and

religions. (The truth concept of philosophy, religion and art is revelatory, if in religion revelation comes from God, in philosophy it is from argument or narrative, while, in art, the work of art itself reveals). Books on history have their own criteria of truth, a combination of the above mentioned two. The work or products of imagination are neither by themselves "good" or "bad" or even "evil". Heidegger said that we are "enframed" by technological imagination, this evil grandchild of metaphysics. Yet, we are enframed in historical imagination as well, since we are imprisoned in the prison of our present. So also were our ancestors imprisoned in theirs. But since they had a fundament, they were unaware of the closure of their horizon, whereas modern men and women are, or can be, aware of it.

3. You use both terms–the technological imagination and the historical imagination–in the sense of Heidegger and Castoriadis as the "enframing" of the modern sense of truth. It is the dominating imagination of the modern sciences and this modern concept of truth which identifies truth with true knowledge (the correspondence theory of truth) and with the unlimited progression of knowledge, technology, and science. Here science is used as an ideology (in Habermas's term) becoming (in place of religion) the dominating imaginary institution of the moderns. Is this concept still valid in postmodernity? What is the new role of the technology in the 21st century?

A.H. Maybe, I have answered this question already…

Where the unlimited progress of contemporary science is concerned, I have reasons to doubt it. Since nothing is unlimited, some time–we do not know when–the marvelous progress of science and technology must also stop. This, however, is not our business. Our business, rather, lies in something else. Namely, that in a divided world where there is no hope for any international or global institution of cooperation or justice, where ever new dangers appear every day on our horizon, and which threaten our world in all possible ways, only technology is really global. The only global

"thing" or institution of imagination all nations and peoples of the world share can, precisely because of this reason, benefit all and alternatively destroy all. I would not describe this as the antinomy of modernity, but as one among many antinomies that characterize the modern world. This is why the question can be raised, but not answered, whether modernity can survive. (I mention only in brackets that both art and entertainment also become more and more global.)

4. You have also developed the concept of "dynamic justice" as that socio-political aspect, constituting the normative foundation of an "incomplete ethico-political concept of justice". Do you think this is the main element of a "discourse ethics" between rational subjects? Or, is this mainly a procedurally institutionalized situation of norms? In other words, is this a product of "*Sittlichkeit*", as we know it from the German philosophical tradition, or of a legislative procedure instead based on socio-contractual mechanisms?

A.H. Dynamic justice is not a new phenomenon. We encounter it in the Bible and in philosophy from Socrates onwards. This kind of justice (contrary to static justice) does not query or test only the application of norms and rules of justice, but the norms and rules themselves. If you wish, it is a kind of language game: "not simply 'this is just' as you believe it is, but 'something else would be just or more just'". An exception in traditional societies, this language game of dynamic justice became the rule in modernity. This is why we have newspapers, program-based parties or even class-based parties. Contestation of justice is one of the main force-fields in modern societies. In times of peace, contestation goes on in discourse, demonstrations, strikes, and so on.

But to the question of "what is just", there is no general, even less global, answer. We can come to an agreement, consensus in some instances, yet not, by far, in all of them, neither on the national or on the global level. Since justice is not a substance, like salt, one cannot measure the justice content of an institution or given measures. An institution is just, if the

overwhelming majority of people concerned believe that it is just. Even then, the minority will claim that it is unjust. And the majority can become a minority, of course. This is why a just society is not only impossible, but also undesirable. A society cannot be free where everyone agrees that all institutions and measures are fine, good, and just. Such a society would, in any case, be static, unchangeable, and not modern.

5. How could we see the "universalization principle" functioning within the broader framework of the era of globalization, in conditions of a "global justice" in a "world society"? Is that a "realistic utopia" as John Rawls has proclaimed?

A.H. Obviously, I do not share the attractive illusion of universal progress. Neither do I join the chorus crying decadence, regress. But I think, or rather hope, and hope not without reason, that within our world, *hic et nunc*, one can improve the situation of men and women with whom one shares the globe both materially and spiritually.

6. We watch the contemporary European economic crisis, which might undermine the European unification project's realization of the Kantian "perpetual peace". Do you share this opinion? What is your perception of this crisis? Do you believe we have to deal with a typical example of identity-crisis within our modernity?

A.H. Kant made the proposal of perpetual peace for republics (nowadays called liberal democracies). If all states of the world were liberal democracies, perpetual peace would be possible. But this situation is very unlikely to occur. At least, there is no sign of it. Thus, our world remains a dangerous place, as it always has been.

7. Lastly, I want to ask you about George Lukács and the influence he has exercised not only on Marxist philosophy, but on European philosophical thought in general. What is the actuality of his work today?

A.H. There is not one single Lukács, there are several.

First, there is the early Lukács, the author of *Soul and Form* and *The Theory of the Novel*. In my view, *Soul and Form* is the first and still-valid presentation of the so called "postmodern"' view of modernity and, first and foremost, of modern literature.

Second, there is the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*, the author of the study on reification. This is in my view the only original work in Marxist philosophy, discussing (in the spirit of Marx) the greatest philosophical dilemmas of his age.

Third, there is the Marxist literary critic, who wrote a few splendid studies and some interesting interpretations of German classicism, yet who also developed seriously one-sided, dogmatic, and anti-modernist views on 19th century realism.

Fourth, there is the communist author, who, in his book, *Destruction of Reason*, on Nietzsche and more besides, slandered several philosophers whom he had adored in his youth.

Fifth: the teacher of a generation (myself included) who, in the classroom, dropped all of his dogmatism and encouraged us to think.

Sixth: An ideological helpmate of a lethal political regime, yet who also was an internal heretic of the same regime.

****

N.Vl. Thank you very much Prof. Heller

A.H. My best wishes.

****