From "Rational Utopia" to "Will-to-Utopia": On the "Postmodern" turn in the Recent Work of Agnes Heller

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From "Rational Utopia" to "Will-to-Utopia": On the "Postmodern" turn in the Recent Work of Agnes Heller

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Abstract: Agnes Heller recently described her position as 'postmodernist', suggesting a move from a politically radical to a politically liberal or 'neoconservative' position. The aim of this paper is to assess the degree to which Heller can still be regarded as a radical political thinker through an evaluation of her work on autonomy, democracy and contingency all of which remain key concepts in her thinking about the political. We find in each case that whilst many of the motifs from her critical Marxist period recur in her recent work, they are losing their oppositional or 'negative' character in the sense that making these motifs operational would require changes to the structure or functioning of liberal-capitalism. Whilst remaining in some sense a radical thinker Heller has moved from the advocacy of a 'rational utopia' to a form of theorising which I describe as 'will-to-utopia': radical at the surface, yet conservative at the core.

Key words: Heller, postmodernism, utopia, politics

There is no clearer sign of the stature of a thinker than the publication of a special edition of an internationally reputed journal devoted to examining his or her work.(1) This is all the more true when as in the case of Agnes Heller the person is not merely still alive, but at the most productive and fruitful stage of his or her career with the promise of great work to come.(2) It is therefore with some trepidation that one approaches the task of assessing this extraordinary oeuvre, or even a part of it. So complex and diverse, so multifarious are her interests and passions that it is demanding enough to keep up with her prodigious output without having to judge its merit, relevance or utility for social critique. Nevertheless we are drawn to do so not merely because of the power of the ideas but because of what her work represents. Heller is without doubt one of the century's greatest thinkers and one of the last, we may speculate, to possess the ambition - not to mention the capacity - to assess whole traditions of thought whilst at the same time developing and refining original positions in a variety of intellectual fields. She is also one of the most provocative of recent thinkers. To her credit Heller has never played safe, consistently resisting the temptation to hide behind footnotes or scholarly detail from a desire to engage directly with ideas and arguments. Like the great polemicists and thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, her forte has been and remains the essay (even her longer works read more like essays than conventional academic treatises) - at once personal and

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(1) Versions of this paper have been read at staff seminars in the departments of politics of, respectively, the University of Wales, Swansea and the University of Birmingham. The author thanks the participants for their helpful comments and suggestions.

(2) It is with some regret that I write this piece in the knowledge that Heller is putting the finishing touches to another major piece of work, *A Theory of Modernity,* which is to be published shortly and which is likely to shed more light on a number of the issues addressed here.

compact, unpretentious and unrestrained. An accurate motto for Heller would surely be the Napoleonic cry '*on s'engage et puis on voit*'.

Thinking about Heller's origins, her importance is also her status as one of the most consistently critical or oppositional intellectuals of recent years. By contrast with many of those who emerged out of the nightmare of communist Europe, Heller did not retire from critical or political activity once within the embrace of liberal-capitalism. Her opposition to actually existing socialism did not, in other words, translate into a defence of actually existing capitalism, but rather into a renewed search for the sources of authenticity, decency and social justice in modern society *per se*. As a thinker whose sympathies rested throughout the 1970s and 1980s with the broader Marxist project of creating a 'society of associated producers' and substantive freedom, Heller resisted the temptation to substitute, in Herbert Marcuse's terms, 'negative' for 'positive' or affirmative thinking despite the fact that she and Féher were just as contemptuous of far-left critics of liberal-capitalism as they had been of the communist officials they managed eventually to escape from. Heller was and still is a genuinely radical thinker who has never given up the belief that far-reaching changes are required to liberal-capitalism in order to advance the cause of social justice and individual liberty. Indeed one of the remarkable features of her thought is the consistency with which certain motifs and themes such as 'symmetric reciprocity', 'radical tolerance' and the 'radicalisation of democracy' have appeared in her writings since the 1960s despite the shifts which have occurred elsewhere in her thought (for example, in her account of modernity). Thus whilst others cast off their radicalism as the tide of public opinion and public policy turned towards the conservative right in the early 1980s, Heller's response was to insist on the essential justice and goodness of the socialist project. Her answer to those who proclaimed the death of the Left was to renew socialist theory through the elaboration of a 'rational utopia' which would at the very least demonstrate how individual and collective needs could best be met by a socialist society and at the very best provide a spark, however small, for the renewal of socialist political energies.(3)

In view of Heller's description of her latest work as 'postmodernist' it is legitimate, however, to ask to what extent Heller's politics are still informed by a socialist or, more broadly, radical political agenda.(4) Postmodernism is after all readily associated by both its advocates and its critics with philosophical and ideological relativism.(5) The characteristic postmodernist stance is one of a hostility to notions of certainty particularly as regard the ethical and moral spheres of life. It is resolutely antifoundational in outlook and revels in deconstructing and undermining traditional philosophical categories and verities. In focusing on the 'play of difference', and the arbitrariness of the sign postmodernism rejects commitment to one version of the truth or necessity. The postmodernist attitude is, as Heller herself notes, ironical: it offers a detached knowingness and at the same time an unwillingness to be pinned down as an antidote to

(3) The idea of a rational utopia is fully explored in Agnes Heller, *Radical Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987 [1978]) pp. 141-52 and in 'The Great Republic', *Praxis International*, 5, 1 (1985). For an examination of Heller's utopianism see Richard Bernstein, 'Agnes Heller: Philosophy, Rational Utopia and Praxis', *Thesis Eleven*, 16 (1987). Paul Davies provides a useful defence of Heller's utopian approach in considering the evolution of British socialism in the course of the twentieth century. See his 'British Socialism and the Exhaustion of Utopian Political Energies', University of Wales, Swansea PhD (1993), especially chapter one, 'William Morris'. His point is essentially that without some clear vision of how things might otherwise be socialist praxis is likely to find itself continually compromised by the demand to be 'realistic' leading to a pragmatic rather than radical stance vis-a-vis the status quo.

(4) The first mention I can find of Heller referring to herself as a 'postmodernist' is in Agnes Heller and Ferenc Féher, *The Postmodern Political Condition* (Oxford: Polity, 1988), pp. 1-2. A clear statement of their repositioning on these terms is given in the introduction to *The Grandeur and Twilight of Radical Universalism,* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1991).

(5) See chapter five of Barry Smart, *Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1993).

intolerance and disrespect for the other.(6) Moreover, according to one recent commentator it is an attitude born of cynicism about the possibilities contained, not only in thought and language, but more crucially in the political itself.(7) Not for the postmodernist the earnest or wholehearted expression of sentiments noble or otherwise. The fear of striking a pose or position which might ossify into dogma or 'totalising discourse' is guarantee against that. The postmodernist stance is therefore a sceptical one accounting for its similarities to philosophical liberalism which shares with it the view that moral and ethical positions are inherently incommensurable and hence that it impossible to conceive any 'ideal' model of society being univerally acceptable. This is of course the origin of Habermas's charge that postmodernism represents a form of 'neoconservatism' in that by railing against all attempts at foundational strategies the postmodernist denies him or herself the resources necessary for mounting a critique of the given.(8) Assuming Habermas is right, it follows that the postmodernist stance is rarely radical in the sense of being opposed to or critical of the liberal-capitalist status quo. In the absence of philosophically justifiable foundations for the promotion of a visions of a collectivist form of existence the temptation is to opt for the defence of the individual against the state, and by extension of the market order against attempts to promote 'social justice'. If not ideologically liberal, postmodernism at the very least falls in with the liberal consensus about the form of society, which is most likely to meet our needs as contingent individuals.

The question which therefore confronts us is whether Heller in embracing as she sees it postmodernism has given up her political radicalism. Alternatively, has she found a way of combining an attachment to postmodernism with a continuing commitment to - at the very least - the ideals and principles she held in her critical Marxist phase? In other words, has Heller found the key to unlocking a genuinely radical postmodern politics?

From Post-Marxism to 'postmodernism'

One of the difficulties confronting commentators trying to get a grasp on the concept of postmodernism/postmodern is the manner in which these terms are used interchangeably to mean either the time 'after' the modern or an attachment to values, norms and beliefs that can be distinguished from 'modernist' equivalents. In other words, 'postmodern' means both a period of time and a distinct stance or position within the modern. What is interesting about Heller's recent work is how she has embraced both senses of the appellation. For her the postmodern is both a period of time or 'condition' within modernity - as described for example by Lyotard; but more generally it is also a 'political' stance in the sense of standing for a rejection of the modern as that translates into political practice.(9) Regarding the former, what she means by the sense of the postmodern within the modern is the manner in which we perceive the character of modern society. To speak of 'Modernity' is to speak of the ineluctable progress of society towards some end or *telos*: the progressive unfolding of human essence, of species capability or our mastery over inner and outer nature. In this sense the modern is not just the ensemble of relations within a given social period; it is also a 'project' which is given to us to realise, or, in a more Hegelian mode, which is to unfold according to its own logic or *Geist*. But what also appears with the onset of modernity is the sense of contingency, the sense in which we

(6) Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) is of course often cited as representative of this stance.
(7) Timothy Bews, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1997).
(8) Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity versus Postmodernity', *New German Critique*, 22 (1981).
(9) Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).

no longer have, as Heller puts it, 'fates' but 'destinies' which it is our 'duty' to fulfil.(10) Social hierarchy is no longer the reflection of a stratified caste order and each individual finds his or her place in society by virtue of his or her function in the socio-economic order. A change in the function he or she performs is reflected by a change in his or her social status. Thus what has changed in the course of the unfolding of modernity is our perception of what we are and where we are going. Modern consciousness is no longer, as it once was, dictated by a sense of necessity or inevitability. We now regard ourselves in Kierkegaardian terms as being 'thrown' into the world, and hence as dictating our own goals and ends. The sense of being on board an all-embracing teleological project gives way to the sense of our being discrete, almost Stirnerian entities absorbed by our own plans, objectives and purposes.(11) To underline the point, modern society has not changed in any objective sense according to Heller's analysis. Modernity can still, as she argued in *A Theory of History*, be characterised in terms of the independent logics of industrialisation, capitalism and democracy, or in a more recent formulation, in terms of the hegemony of the functional over the stratified, of the protean over the static.(12) What has changed is how we as 'modern' individuals view ourselves and our relation to the world *qua* 'home'. Postmodernism is in this sense the effect modernity produces in the course of its sweeping away of all those practices, norms and beliefs which once seemed so 'solid'.

According to Heller the success of an emancipatory politics is dependent upon its being able to embrace and build upon these changes in the way we think about ourselves. It means, firstly and most obviously rejecting what she and Féher term 'redemptive' politics (and its bi-polar other, the politics of 'damnation').(13) If it is no longer relevant to talk in terms of modernity as having a goal or end then this renders forms of politics which promise the realisation of that goal in terms of some ultimately good or just form of society equally irrelevant. This is the source of her hostility to Marxism where it equates, as in Bolshevism, to a doctrine of historical inevitability. As she sees it, armed with such a doctrine there is a great temptation to justify everything and anything in the name of an end which, because inevitable, is unquestionably 'good'. Redemptive politics is thus a utilitarian politics; and, as should already be apparent given her understanding of the modern condition, utilitarianism of whatever hue is a flawed moral theory. If individuals no longer think of themselves as part of a class, a nation or race, then a politics that insists on sacrificing some for the sake of the 'many' is one whose likely outcome is the Gulag. Politics must therefore start from the fact of our thrownness, from our perception of ourselves as unique and individual - as 'envelopes' waiting to be 'addressed'.(14) It must start by acknowledging that we already see ourselves as free by virtue of possessing destinies rather than fates. The promise of ultimate liberation must thus give way to a politics of civilised conduct.

From the point of view of developing a radical political agenda this *sounds* like a recipe for *laissez-faire* government and the protection of individual rights against the encroachments of the collectivist state. After all, as Heller recognises, this is an essentially similar starting point to that

(10) This distinction between 'fates' and 'destinies' is a key motif in the recent work of Agnes Heller and permeates all her thinking on the character of subjectivity. See in particular *A Philosophy of History in Fragments* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); *An Ethics of Personality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); and a number of the essays in *Can Modernity Survive?* (California: University of California Press, 1990).

(11) Stirner is at the extreme edge of the individualist tradition, rejecting all obligations and duties that are not self-chosen. See Max Stirner, *The Ego and its Own* (London: Rebel Press, 1993 [1845]).

(12) Agnes Heller, *A Theory of History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 284-5. Heller now stresses that the shift from a static to a dynamic notion of justice and from forms of justification built on the natural to the ontological is the outstanding characteristic of (post)modern as opposed to pre-modern societies. See Agnes Heller, 'Modernity's Pendulum', *Thesis Eleven*, 31 (1992), pp. 5-6.

(13) See in particular Ferenc Féher's essay 'Redemptive and Democratic Paradigms in Radical Politics' in Ferenc Féher and Agnes Heller, *Eastern Left, Western Left. Totalitarianism, Freedom and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).

(14) Heller, *A Philosophy of History in Fragments*, p. 25.

shared by liberals and libertarians such as Friedrich von Hayek, Isaiah Berlin and even Robert Nozick, the *bête noire* of collectivist do-gooding. How therefore does Heller square the defence of the discrete, radically unencumbered individual with the oft-expressed desire to promote social justice? If we are in a crucial sense already free what is left for the political radical to argue *for*?

The antinomies of autonomy

Despite her embrace not merely of the rhetoric but also the existentialist account of the constitution of subjectivity, it is evident that her existentialism stops short of the Nietzschean advocacy of a transubstantiation of all values. Heller retains a commitment to that quintessentially modern epoch, the Enlightenment, in the sense of keeping faith in the possibility of delineating rational values. Although it might appear that we inhabit a McIntyrean world of value heterogeneity, pluralism and incommensurability, this in fact masks the significant degree to which we all as human beings share an attachment to certain 'universally valid value ideals'. These are minimally the values of life and freedom (with equality and democracy as possible members of the set as well). Heller's postmodernism is thus at least weakly foundational.(15) Far from being concerned to obliterate the idea of shared norms and values, she has spent the past of twenty years trying to establish an at least minimal base from which to develop certain regulative principles by which to measure the social and political rationality of any given society and from which to develop a rational utopia. Not for Heller therefore the almost irrational celebration of uncertainty and flux characteristic of some postmodernist thinkers. Her 'postmodernism' is one that retains the distinctly modernist ambition to develop and sustain minimal universal or transcendental principles (or 'maxims') of justice without which in her view civilised living is impossible. The postmodern character of the solution is essentially a recognition of the necessarily limited, contingent nature of the undertaking, its 'incompleteness' as she sometimes puts it. Her project is the product of a 'theory' rather than a 'philosophy' of history and thus recognises the openendedness of human action. The principles she wishes to develop are universal not in the sense of providing a recipe for happiness for all times and places, but in the sense of challenging us to propose better or more fitting principles in the here-and-now. Postmodernism is not on this reading equivalent to an embrace of relativism, but rather a recognition of our 'historicity', and the historicity of our 'universal' values and beliefs. This of course still leaves the question of how she envisages these values being realised. What kind of society is entailed by an attachment to the values of life and freedom?

Looking back over her work in this field it is interesting to note the continuities in her thinking about the necessary constituents of the just society. Despite the apparently dramatic nature of the shift from a humanist Marxist to a post-Marxist and then a postmodernist position we find the equation of the values of life and freedom with the call for the development of 'symmetric reciprocity' for 'radical tolerance' and 'self-management' and up until relatively recently, even 'the positive abolition of private property'.(16) Although her commitment to the latter two motifs seem to be on the wane, the first two appear as important to her conception of the just society as they were in the 1960s and 1970s. But what does an attachment to such notions

(15) On the paradox of Heller's 'foundational' postmodernism see Richard Rorty's review of *The Grandeur and Twilight of Radical Univeralism* in *Thesis Eleven*, 37 (1994), pp. 119-26. In his view 'they both see "relativism" and the doubts about philosophy common to the pragmatists and the so-called "poststructuralists" as dangers'; p. 121. And, indeed, Heller makes her position very clear in labeling relativists 'the cowards of thinking'; *A Philosophy of History in Fragments*, p. 35.

(16) Heller is, for example, still discussing the positive abolition of private property in 'On Formal Democracy', an article which appeared in 1988, pp. 139ff.

commit her to? What would have to change in the structure of a liberal-capitalist order to bring about or ensure 'symmetric reciprocity' and 'radical tolerance'?

Symmetric reciprocity is according to Heller a society of equals. It is a society in which individuals are regarded and treated as ends in themselves rather than as means to someone else's ends. It therefore implies a society in which hierarchy, subordination and domination have been conquered and hence where the 'asymmetric' class or caste societies, which characterise traditional, static forms of society have been overcome and where consequently each individual can enjoy autonomy. It also implies the extension of 'radical tolerance' in the sense of recognising the *legitimacy* of all needs or desires which, as she has always made clear, does not mean the *satisfaction* of all needs and desires (as in Marx's 'negative utopia'), but rather the willingness to consider all needs as worthy of respect and consideration by the social body. To be an end means in this sense not just the absence of exploitation, but also the fostering of respect for each person as a unique entity with unique feelings, plans and goals. It also implies the right of individuals to express and, indeed, attempt to satisfy whatever they feel to be a need. Censorship begins with the definition of what it is we can and cannot legitimately call our needs.

In her critical Marxist phase Heller interpreted this vision as demanding radical changes to the character and functioning of all modern societies, socialist and capitalist alike. In the 1980 article 'Can "true" and "false" needs be posited?' for example she equates such a call with the necessity of empowering the community to judge between competing needs in order to ensure that the productive process does not enslave people as she believed it did in both state socialist and capitalist societies.(17) As she argued then: 'All needs should be acknowledged and satisfied with the exception of those whose satisfaction would make man into a mere means for the other. The categorical imperative has, therefore, a restrictive function in the assessment of needs'.(18) In state socialist societies people were regarded as workers but were given no power over production or indeed consumption, implying only a 'negative' abolition of private property and hence the capacity of the state to define or dictate which needs are to be satisfied. In capitalist societies the market system ensured the autonomy of the person *qua* consumer, but not as producer. The 'positive abolition of private property' means retrieving the idea of autonomy as a relation extending to all aspects of social and economic functioning, not just discrete parts of it. It means being treated as an end in oneself in all aspects of one's existence, social, economic and political, the true essence of 'self-management'.

Reflecting her interest in contemporary liberal theory by 1987 Heller was experimenting in *Beyond Justice* with the idea of autonomy as equality of 'life chances', a familiar demand of radical welfare economists which calls for the redistribution of resources to eliminate the effect of class and initial social position on a person's life prospects.(19) As Heller argues, what this means is in effect ensuring that everyone's talents and endowments are developed to the maximum possible extent and hence that no cultural factor is allowed to impede his or her progress. But what she goes on to argue is that the satisfaction of all other needs not connected with the development of endowments should be regarded as a secondary matter. In other words, the bulk of societal resources would be directed towards the development of individual talents and endowments rather than, as in liberal-capitalism, towards the satisfaction of needs through the market. Again, the radicalism of the suggestion is undeniable in that what is implied is society's right not just to

(17) The article can be found in Agnes Heller, *The Power of Shame: A Rational Perspective* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).
(18) Heller, 'Can "True" and "False" Needs be Posited?', p. 290.
(19) Agnes Heller, *Beyond Justice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), chapter four, pp. 195-99. I say 'experiement' here because Heller did not follow up the suggestion and appears now to have adopted a broader welfarist conception whose starting-point is an acceptance of the market and hence of deep structural inequalities in wealth and income.

ensure (for example through taxation) that provision is made for social welfare, but to dispose over the fruits of production. Whilst lacking the participatory thrust of the earlier article, this is still a decidedly radical formula for it implies that the primary task of production is the empowerment of the individual rather than the enrichment of those who hold the means of production itself. It is still therefore very much in the left radical tradition of theorising albeit starting from a liberal egalitarian starting point.(20)

Since *Beyond Justice* it is becoming evident, however, that Heller is steadily retreating from the view that the promotion of symmetric reciprocity and radical tolerance require major let alone radical changes to the basic structure of liberal-capitalism. In *The Philosophy of Morals,* for example, symmetric reciprocity is characterised not in terms of producing the conditions necessary for every person to be autonomous, but rather in terms of individual moral conduct.(21) Autonomy here is regarded as a project for the 'decent' individual rather than for society to realise. As long as people treated each other as ends in themselves then this would of itself bring about a society based on the principle of symmetric reciprocity. Thus, as Heller argues, what brings about such relations is not institutional change, but 'that persons with self-esteem respect the person-hood of other persons with self-esteem'.(22) Similarly the 'recognition of all needs' which has been a constant demand of Heller since the 1970s equates with the demand to tolerate the articulation of needs of whatever rather than, as before, the societal determination the needs to be satisfied in a process of collective deliberation 'free from domination'. In this way the demand for substantive structural change in the political economy of society becomes a demand merely for formal safeguards protecting free speech and interest group activity. The 'recognition of all needs' which once seemed such a radical demand, calling as it did for the bringing of hitherto unrecognised needs to the political 'table' now seems merely to equate with a celebration of the market as the impersonal regulator of desire.(23) What is absent is a recognition of the gulf between 'recognition' and 'satisfaction' of needs in market society and hence between those with the resources to satisfy their needs and those without. Does it really make any difference to the person without the means of satisfying his or her needs that they have at least been 'recognised'? How, we need to know, is his or her position better than the person with needs, which are neither satisfied nor recognised?

This emphasis on the personal rather the societal dimension of autonomy may be a reflection of her justified pessimism about the prospects for radical change particularly, as until very recently, most major liberal-capitalist societies have been in thrall to the ideas of the New Right concerning the need to rein back the 'overloaded state'. But what it also represents is surely the final displacement in Heller's thought of the Marxian conception of 'autonomy' as the development of the 'many-sided individual' by a Kantian model which insists that it is the way people relate to each other that determines the degree to which they are able to be considered ends in themselves. We have already noted Heller's anxiety about the degree to which

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(20) For a critique of both conceptions of social justice see my 'The Vicissitudes of Radical Centrism: The Case of Agnes Heller, Radical Centrist avant la Lettre', *Journal of Political Ideologies,* 3, 2 (June 1998), pp. 147-67.

(21) See the discussion in Agnes Heller, *The Philosophy of Morals* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 89-107; see also Agnes Heller, 'Rights, Modernity, Democracy' in Agnes Heller, *Can Modernity Survive?* (pp. 145ff.) where she identifies symmetric reciprocity with contingency thereby effectively identifying the former with modernity *per se*, rather than as a project to be realised or fought for. As she puts it: 'There is no longer a "social pyramid". The modern world is flat because it is symmetrical', p. 152.

(22) Heller, *Philosophy of Morals*, p. 93.

(23) As Heller in a strikingly candid moment puts it: 'The ideal-type of a modern democratic society is a population where there are rich and poor, or at least where some people have more money than others, but there no single other distinguishing feature among men and women. The way of life, taste and everything else that one encompasses in the term "system of needs" becomes identical – it is just that the satisfiers can be of greater or lesser monetary value'; Agnes Heller, A Theory of Needs Revisited', *Thesis Eleven,* 35 (1993), p. 21.

philosophies of history such as historical materialism are able to, and indeed call for, the subsumption of the individual within notions of the collective good, and what has clearly taken root since the publication of *A Theory of History* is the notion of the ineliminably deontological character of autonomy. What this means is that she finds it unbearable to countenance the idea that individuals might have to be sacrificed in order to bring about a form of society in which individuals *could* finally become ends in themselves. In her view it is simply inconsistent to argue that the cause of human emancipation allows or, worse, necessitates an instrumental or utilitarian attitude to the person. Trotsky's dictum that 'one has to break eggs to make omelettes' is the logic, she argues, of someone who is prepared to countenance mass murder for the sake of realising their 'ideals'. As Heller, quoting Collingwood, puts it, 'there can be no progress with losses'.(24) No cause is evidently so great or so just that it justifies the sacrifice of a single human life.

This is an understandable sentiment which reflects Heller's close hand experience with the consequences of, as it were, institutionalised utilitarianism in which everything and everyone was regarded by the Party as a mere means for the satisfaction of some allegedly greater end. But it is a sentiment that sits uneasily alongside the call for radical social change. The proposals she has offered even relatively recently concerning, for example, 'the positive abolition of private property' and the extension of the principle of self-management equate to the call for a massive shift of wealth and power from private individuals towards the community. Since any such moves would inevitably be met with resistance by those whose wealth and power is under threat it follows that to remain true to her principles Heller has a dilemma to resolve. It is after all inconsistent to be advocating what in effect amounts to a social revolution whilst at the same time holding that there can be 'no progress where there are losses'. The choice she is confronted with is thus either to tone down the proposals so that a consensus might conceivably be reached on the necessary conditions for the realisation of autonomy, or to accept that the cost of radicalism is a 'minimal utilitarianism' permitting some losses where these are greatly outweighed by the gains. On the evidence presented so far, it is clear that Heller has opted for the former rather than the latter option allowing the 'ethico-political' dimension of her 'rational utopia' to give way to an implicitly moral conception which stresses the possibility of realising autonomy via the observance of moral maxims. Although this is an understandable move, it is one that comes at a price for surely what it amounts to is the abandonment of struggle or contestation. If we cannot weigh losses against gains, if we cannot decide between courses of action by reference to the relative benefits each delivers, then we cannot act 'politically' in the sense of pursuing a given vision of social justice. Such action always 'hurts' someone whether in the form of increased tax, loss of proprietary rights, or some other disbenefit and thus incurs 'losses' on Heller's terms. What still has to be established, however, is whether this move presages a wholesale retreat from the political to the realm of the ethical and the moral, to the realm of norms of conduct rather than of social justice. Has 'politics' and social justice been given up in the name of a Kantian inspired deontological perfectionism?

Power to the people? Democracy as a universal value

Part of the answer to the question above must lie with Heller's position regarding democracy which since the jettisoning of Marx's analysis of the relationship between civil society and the state has assumed increasing significance within her political thought. It was Féher rather than Heller who first insisted that democracy join the ranks of the 'universally valid value ideals' alongside life and freedom, but nothing Heller has recently written on the subject would lead us

(24) Heller, *A Theory of History*, p. 300.

to think that democracy is now not only one of the defining logics of modernity, but a universal value as well. The achievement and protection of democratic institutions and practices must, she argues now, be regarded as prior - even lexically prior in the Rawlsian sense - to any other substantive end or goal. What has to be borne in mind, however, is that until recently this was a view of democracy as radical as that found in the work Luxemburg and Pannekoek both of whom equated the achievement of socialism with as Heller herself puts it, the 'radicalisation of democracy'.(25) At certain moments particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s we find her advocating a substantive, participatory model of democracy going far beyond the notion of the state as a mere underwriter of the autonomy of civil society to embrace the idea of citizen involvement in all aspects of social functioning. Here in the 'Great Republic' the distinction between producer and consumer, between ruler and ruled, and participant and spectator would finally dissolve in place of the omniscient *citoyen* so beloved of post-Rousseauian radical republicans.(26) This notion of the link between emancipation and democratisation had always been an important theme of Budapest School thinking as it sought to find a middle way between a utopian socialism that dreamed of the transcendence of the political altogether and the form of Leninist absolutism which insisted on party rule as the necessary bulwark against 'counter-revolution'.(27) It was only really Heller, however, who pushed the suggestion to its logical limits insisting that formal democratic structures and procedures had to be augmented by the fullest possible participation of the people in the process of governing. 'Humankind', she writes, 'would be "liberated" if every human person had the right and the equal possibility of participating in the decision-making processes affecting the present and the future of humankind'.(28)

Again, the radicalism of her views of what it takes to realise fully the democratic ideal is undeniable presupposing as it does the capacity of the body politic to determine matters of production, distribution and exchange. If, as she argues, the demos is not to be a mere talking shop, but is actually to empower the community in this collective fashion then control if not ownership will have to pass to society generally rather than to the state ('the negative abolition of private property'). We see therefore that the 'radicalisation of democracy' is in fact the necessary condition for the 'positive abolition of private property' which Heller discusses until the late 1980s. What is curious, however, is that the demand for the radicalisation of democracy is accompanied by a defence of *existing* forms of democracy in which by and large the citizen is reduced to an impotent spectator in the political process. What is all the more curious is that on numerous occasions she holds up the 'Declaration of Independence' as a model basis for a radically democratic society.(29) This is a document which was after all designed to *protect* the individual from the encroachments of the state by ensuring that his or her rights 'to the pursuit of happiness' were not sacrificed in the name of social justice or the collective good.(30) This is

(25) See for example Agnes Heller and Ferenc Féher, 'The Fear of Power. A Contribution to the Genesis and Morphology of Eurocommunism', *Thesis Eleven*, 2 (1981). They discuss here, as they put it, a 'new type of democracy: a combination of the representative system with direct democracy', p. 157.
(26) Agnes Heller, 'The Great Republic'.
(27) As the title of his book implies, this is the thrust of Douglas M. Brown's study of the Budapest School's thought, *Towards a Radical Democracy: The Political Economy of the Budapest School* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1988).
(28) Agnes Heller, 'Marx and the Liberation of Humankind', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 9, 3/4 (1982), p. 367. We should note that she now explicitly rejects direct democracy as opposed to representative democracy viewing the former as being based on 'blood relations and of being rooted in the same soil'; Agnes Heller, 'With Castoriadis to Aristotle: From Aristotle to Kant: From Kant to us', in Agnes Heller and Ferenc Féher, *The Grandeur and Twilight of Radical Universalism*, p. 500.
(29) See the opening comments of Agnes Heller, 'Past, Present and Future of Democracy', *Social Research*, 45, 4 (Winter 1978), pp. 866-86, and especially, Agnes Heller, 'The Declaration of Independence and the Principles of Socialism: Contribution to a Discussion', *Social Praxis*, 1/2, 6 (1979).

partly due to Heller's understandable preference for any kind of democratic system over any other non-democratic alternative, but there is more to her defence of formal democracy than meets the eye.

What seems to be clear is that Heller takes seriously the notion that for democracy to have any meaning it must be in the sense of a given community ruling itself rather than being ruled over. Democracy must in some sense be the institutional expression of the will of all, if not the General Will. Democracy must, like the individuals whose actions sustain it, be contingent. It must be an existential setting for an existential age if it is successfully to renew itself. The notion of 'closure', of democracy limiting the actions of the people is inherently contradictory to the essence of this form of rule. As Heller puts it: 'The principles of formal democracy do regulate our way of proceeding in social affairs, the manner of delivering our conflicts, but they do not impose any limitations on the content of our social objectives'.(31) Given this understanding of democracy as a realm of possibility it should hardly be surprising that one of the more persistent themes in the work of Heller and Féher throughout the 1970s and 1980s is a suspicion of - and contempt for - those calling for the overthrow of democratic institutions. The reasoning is impeccable: if democracy is the institutional vehicle for the expression of the collective will, then inevitably anyone seeking to overturn democratic institutions and structures must by definition be regarded as a usurper. For Heller and Féher there is no inconsistency in contemplating the possibility of fundamental social change and at the same time holding the institutions and procedures of liberal-democracy sacrosanct for on their terms a system cannot be called 'democratic' if it limits future possibilities. Democracy is the embodiment of futurity which is why, as Heller has recently put it: 'Democracy as the adequate political form of modernity could become the home of all moderns, liberals and anti-liberals alike'.(32) It follows that to be legitimate change to the structure and functioning of such states must come within. Any attempt to force radical changes from without will only result (as the experience of the Russian Revolution shows) in the swallowing of civil society by the state.(33)

This attempt to maintain the commensurability of the notions of formal and substantive democracy is a vitally important pillar in Heller's attempt to keep afloat her particular brand of radical reformism. Without it she would either have to accept the limitations imposed by acting within the confines of 'hum-drum' politics of the sort found in 'normal' liberal-democratic politics, or she would have to adopt a position uncomfortably close to the one she has criticised for so many years, namely to argue that the only way to bring about a radicalisation of democracy is through the overthrow or, less dramatically, displacement of existing institutions and practices. Again, however, the historical record is hardly favourable to her analysis. Not only is it difficult to think of a single example where the 'radicalisation of democracy' has occurred through normal parliamentary procedures, it is equally difficult to think of many examples where a political party or leader has been elected on a programme to implement the sort of policies which might further such a goal. Where radical changes have been undertaken this has largely been against a background of war, crisis or the collapse of extant institutions any of which might

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(30) We can note that of course Heller also embraces rights as essential safeguards of individual liberty. See Agnes Heller, 'Rights, Modernity, Democracy' in Agnes Heller, *Can Modernity Survive?*, pp. 155-57. We might, however, also note how it has not yet occurred to her that the cost of the defence of individual rights is a weakening of the state's capacity to act in the collective interest, the source of the tension between, for example, Roosevelt's New Deal package and the Supreme Court defence of the Constitution.

(31) Agnes Heller, 'On Formal Democracy' in John Keane (ed), *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives* (London: Verso, 1988). See also Heller, *The Power of Shame,* p. 133.

(32) Agnes Heller, 'Where are we at Home?', *Thesis Eleven*, 41 (1995), p. 14.

(33) This observation allows Heller consistently to berate Marx for not accepting that the radicalisation of democracy 'could be conceived as a process within the established framework of an already existing democracy'; Agnes Heller, 'Marx and Modernity', *Thesis Eleven*, 8 (1984), p. 52.

provide the popular impetus needed to overcome entrenched interests and elites (such as in Britain after 1945). Of the few genuinely radical left wing parties to be elected to power the record suggests that not only do they have to contend with resistance from within but, more worringly, opposition often in the form of aggression from without. The example of Salvador Allende's regime in Chile (brought down almost openly with the help of the CIA) provides a salutary lesson in the perils faced by popularly elected, law-abiding left radicals in their attempts to promote just the sort of ideals advanced by Heller. In short, there is little to suggest that democracy really can be a home for 'anti-liberals' as she argues. On the contrary, the historical evidence shows very clearly the difficulty of advancing a radical socialist agenda in a liberal-capitalist society.

What is bemusing in this discussion is that Heller should ever think that democracy *was* in this sense a vehicle of 'possibility' and openendedness when those who defend liberal-democracy and, indeed, as in the case of the authors of *The Federalist Papers,* helped to found it, argue to the contrary. As modern republican theorists from Hamilton and Tocqueville to Oakeshott make clear, part of the point of formalising democratic institutions and structures was and is to provide a bulwark *against* radicalism, particularly of course *collectivist* radicalism which by definition poses a 'threat' to the individual's 'enjoyment' of his or her property. The doctrine of 'the separation of powers', the system of checks and balances and the idea of dispersing power between federal and state or regional agencies was designed quite explicitly to prevent the state assuming the sort of powers and scope for activity described by Heller in her discussion of what socialism might look like. It was also designed to prevent any radical moves towards the establishment of such a system, part of the *raison d'être* of liberal-democratic systems being to make radical change as difficult as possible. In this sense liberal-democracy has long been justified in terms of its ability to produce stable, sober governments which, because of the difficulty of altering the basic institutions and structures of the state, confine themselves to the day-to-day business of economic management and piecemeal social reform. The notion therefore that liberal-democracy could provide the vehicle for the creation of a radically collectivist republic is one that would be anathema both to those who conceived and help build liberal or representative democracies and to the vast majority of those who continue to advertise its virtues. It was certainly anathema to those who brought down Allende, sponsored a war against Nicaragua's Sandinista regime and invaded Grenada all actions justified in the name of 'defending' democracy.(34) The point is liberal-democracy is seen *by its advocates* as a realm not of possibility as Heller suggests, but of 'closure', of safety and certainty.

It is just such considerations, which have led many within the same tradition of thought as Heller (i.e. the democratic or libertarian socialist tradition) to question the possibility, never mind the likelihood of radical change occurring through parliamentary activity. There are countless radical thinkers who agree with Heller and Féher about the necessity of radicalising democracy, but who also point to the 'antidemocratic' nature of many of the practices which routinely occur as part of the *normal* functioning of such systems. Noam Chomsky's critique of media manipulation and agenda-setting by 'big business' comes to mind as a serious attempt to expose the lack of substantive democratic practice in democratic systems.(35) So too does Carole Pateman's analysis of the shortfall between the rhetoric of democratic participation which serves at least in part to legitimate liberal-democratic states and the reality of the elitist, interest group

(34) Noam Chomsky, for example, has persuasively argued that the greatest threat to those wishing to advance a left radical agenda is from those (such as the United States government) who view all such initiatives as threats to the 'world order' and as attacks on 'democracy'. See his *Deterring Democracy* (London: Vintage, 1992) and (with Edward S. Herman) *Necessary Illusions. Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (London: Pluto, 1989).

(35) See in particular Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

activity which passes for 'politics' in such contexts (36) What such critics argue is that the idea of 'radical democracy' is so at odds with the practice of liberal-democracy that we are talking about two quite different systems. What they are also suggesting is that the passage from one to the other is unlikely to come about through normal democratic procedures. It follows that the realisation of a radical democracy necessitates extra-parliamentary activity designed if not to 'overthrow' liberal-democracy then certainly its displacement by new institutions and practices. If they are right, then to hold that liberal-democracy is merely at one end of a continuum whose other end is the participatory republic advocated by Heller and also that advancement from one end to the other is possible without an act of confrontation is inevitably to bring into question the genuineness of the commitment to radical democracy.

The source of the difficulty with Heller's stance is evidently that she views all attacks on existing democratic systems as an attack on the normative desirability of democracy itself. It is as if not to defend democracy in whatever guise it may appear demonstrates a less than wholehearted attachment to the value of democracy *per se*. Attacking democracy is to lend succour to anti-democrats in their drive to topple institutions whose legitimacy is derived from their enjoying - no matter how indirectly - the 'consent' of the governed. Any form of democracy is on these terms preferable to any form of despotism. This is of course an understandable sentiment coming from someone with such close hand experience of life in non- or rather anti-democratic system. But it is surely one thing to say that I prefer living in a liberal-democratic system, no matter how compromised or inadequate, to any other type of non-democratic system and another to say that liberal-democracy is the same type of system as radical democracy and hence that movement from one to other is likely to be painless and peaceful. To suggest that it might is surely to demonstrate a romantic view of the operation of power in modern democratic societies and to ignore the wider social and economic context in which such systems operate and gain their legitimacy. It is, for example, true as Heller intimates that the 'positive abolition of private property' has not been banned by an article in the Bill of Rights and hence that it remains a 'possibility' to be realised. It is irrelevant on these terms to ask why no such demand has ever seriously been raised in the United States or why, even were it to be adopted as policy of a political party, it would stand no chance of being enacted. Whilst she is prepared to concede that there are powerful forces operating in liberal-democratic states actively ensuring that such demands are rarely heard let alone seriously contemplated, she is clearly not ready to concede that such measures are ruled out by virtue of the manner in which the system has been constructed and the political culture which serves to sustain it.(37) This would serve to undermine her claim that democracy is the realm of contingency and possibility and hence force her either to revise her views on democracy or to moderate her political radicalism. What we are left with, however, is a theoretical and political *aporia*, a sphere of non-determination and, paradoxically, of inaction for it is surely a sphere in which those who wish to advance her vision of a radical democracy are prevented from doing so by the insistence on remaining within the confines of a system that has proven remarkably resistant over the centuries to all attempts at radical reform. With this in mind it is difficult to escape the conclusion that again Heller's radicalism is compromised by an insistence on remaining within the confines of the given, the known, the real for fear, one can only surmise, of invoking dark, agonal forces of contestation and violence.

(36) See Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) and *The Problem of Political Obligation* (Cambridge: Polity, 1985).

(37) She mentions multinational corporations, secret police agencies and military establishments as possible 'enemies' of democracy. See Heller, 'On Formal Democracy', pp. 134-8.

From agora to household: from we to I

As should be apparent from what has already been said, Heller gives the strong impression that in an important sense with the establishment of democratic institutions and procedures the political phase in the liberation of humanity is over. 'Democracy', as she puts it, 'is the absolute present, encompassing the past of present and the future of present'.(38) For postmoderns there is no outside of democracy because democracy is the institutionalisation of the contingent person. Democracy has provided the terrain upon which every possibility can be played out. To put the same point differently, democracy allows us to pursue our dreams and fantasies, experiment with personal or collective utopias, in short, be who we want to be without being made subject to other people's conceptions of how we should live.

The allusion to Nozick's 'utopia of utopias' is not accidental.(39) Heller is keen to acknowledge the manner in which the individual - one might say the 'postmodern' individual - is placed at the centre of his thinking about how society should be ordered. The problem with Nozick's rendering of the Good Life is that it gives too little space to the moral dimension of life; to the fact that we live amongst other individuals. His world is not one of social beings, but of self-absorbed atoms coming together purely for mutual benefit. Nozick's position is thus both paradoxical and inconsistent for whilst extolling the importance of a Kantian vision of autonomy, his thinking is at the same time informed by an essentially Hobbesian account of humanity in which the other is regarded as a means for the satisfaction of my ends. The way forward in Heller's view is not, however, to jettison the individualist perspective of Nozick, but rather to augment his understanding of what it means to be an individual so that the social is brought back into the equation. We have to start, in other words, from the fact of our sociality as well as our contingency and historicity. Looking at Heller's most recent work it is evident that her ambition now is to reconcile these three facets of our humanity, or to put it another way, to 'humanise' individualism and by extension liberalism.

It is clear that for Heller what this project entails is mobilising the capacity to choose which lies at the root of our contingent being in the service of autonomy. Like Kierkegaard who is evidently the dominant influence on her recent work Heller regards 'thrownness' as making possible the development of the autonomous moral personality. It allows us to decide who or what we will be, either a 'particular single being' or an 'individual unique person'.(40) Choosing ourselves ethically means, as she puts it, 'to destine ourselves to become the good person who we are'.(41) As she reminds us, we know what goodness is, we all know that 'good people are possible' and hence what doing good involves: we are after all confronted with examples not only in daily life but in art and literature.(42) Goodness does not hide itself, but rather shines like a beacon for all to see. The problem in our society is that people either do not see that they can be good or they choose selfishness or narcissism over goodness. For Heller however, if more people chose to be good or 'decent' then quite simply the world would be a better place; a true home for humanity. The onus is thus on us as individual as to make out world better by being better people. It is to act in the 'here-and-know' as 'concrete enthusiasts' for particular values

(38) Heller, 'Where are we at Home?', p. 16.
(39) In a passage which echoes the sentiments of Part III of Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* Heller notes that 'a utopian form of life which cannot live peacefully with all other forms of life, should not be recommended in the form of a socio-political utopia'; Agnes Heller*, A Philosophy of History in Fragments*, p. 58.
(40) Agnes Heller, 'Death of the Subject?' in Heller, *Can Modernity Survive?,* p. 73.
(41) Agnes Heller, 'The Contingent Person and the Existential Choice', *Philosophical Forum*, 1-2 (Fall-Winter 1989-1990), p. 62. See also Heller, *Philosophy of Morals,* chapters one and two.
(42) This is the thrust of the argument in Agnes Heller, 'The Basic Question of Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 11, 1 (Summer 1985), pp. 50-2 and also of chapter eight of Agnes Heller, *General Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

and principles rather than as 'abstract enthusiasts' who, for the sake of realising 'universal goals', are prepared to sacrifice some for the greater good of the whole.(43) Heller's fascination with Nozick's evocation of the 'utopia of utopias', of a world in which can fashion his or her own ideal form of life, reveals itself in a Tolstoyan declaration of faith in our capacity to embody the ideal of 'symmetric reciprocity' in our dealings with others. As she puts it: 'The good person is utopia incarnate', for the good person is someone who in regarding the other as an end in him or herself makes possible a world in which Nozick's vision can be transformed from libertarian pipe-dream to practical reality.(44)

Heller has said explicitly that her views on the nature of contingency and our 'thrown' condition are not political but rather moral in character.(45) Her position seems to be that she has moved on from considering requirements or preconditions for ensuring social justice to a concern with outlining the ethico-moral basis of good or right conduct. Kant has been augmented by Aristotle in the quest for the basic constituents of civilised living. Nonetheless the suspicion must be that the most recent turn in her thought is the consequence not only of a disenchantment with the realm of the political, but as we noted earlier the displacement of the political by the ethico-moral as the site of the good life. Symbolic of this displacement is surely the reinterpretation of the key notion of 'symmetric reciprocity' as an ethical rather than political or emancipatory project. Where only recently the demand to treat others as ends in themselves required a political solution in the form of the positive abolition of private property, all it now calls for is 'radical tolerance' of the other, a stance which apparently requires no fundamental change in the fabric of social or economic relations. As she herself makes clear, it is the good person not the good society which constitutes utopia 'incarnate'. It thus begins to appear that having identified that justice can, as for Aristotle, be equated with being just for which we read being good or decent, it is but a short step to conclude that goodness can substitute *for* justice. It is not so much that, like Thoreau, Godwin or Tolstoy for that matter, Heller is optimistic about prospects for moral improvement or 'enlightenment'; indeed Heller's work evinces that Arendt-esque 'darkness' which speaks of one who has experienced at close quarters people's capacity to choose evil. It is that she has clearly become sceptical about the prospect of the state or indeed any other collective agent being able to manufacture just outcomes without the prior existence of 'decent' individuals.

The drawback with this conception is that questions of power and ownership recede further into the distance as the role of the state comes to complement that of civil society. Where once her discussion of, for example, citizenship was infused with a passionate insistence on the necessity for the collective disposal over social and economic resources, now her view of citizenship is more moral tone. Heller evidently has in mind the Aristotelian *civitas*: a world built on the obligations we owe to each other as friends and neighbours rather than as participants in a larger public-political process. As for Aristotle it is world in which the point of politics is less the crude determination of who gets what, than the fostering through *peideia* of civilised conduct and sympathy for our fellow beings.(46) This is a 'politics' whose function is not the resolution of 'the metaphysics of the social question' but the up-keep of an institutional and legal framework whose virtue is held to be that questions previously regarded by Heller herself as matters of

(43) Heller, *Philosophy of Morals*, pp. 190-2.
(44) Heller, *A Philosophy of History in Fragments*, p. 59.
(45) In a discussion of the 'decisionism' of Carl Schmitt she states that: 'The existential choice … is of no direct concern for political philosophy, since it is, and remains, a personal, not a political choice men and women choose themselves and themselves alone'; Agnes Heller, 'Decision as Will or Choice' in Heller and Féher, *The Grandeur and Twilight of Radical Univeralism*, p. 411.
(46) Heller, *Philosophy of Morals*, p. 72.

public concern are left to be resolved by private or contractual arrangement.(47) The brute energy of the Great Republic, an assembly for Everyman, is transformed into a gentleman's club in which good manners and a concern for others are invoked as a citizen's chief virtues.

What is particularly worrying about the latest moves in the development of her thought is the manner in which increasingly, the emergence of the contingent individual under modernity is regarded by Heller as undermining the case for a politics of liberation or emancipation. In an important sense this represents the conflation of the achievement of a 'universal humanity' with the attainment of equality in all spheres of life. The reasoning is understandable if unfortunate from the point of view of developing a *left* radicalism in that it almost exactly replicates the rhetoric of freedom deployed by libertarians such as Nozick and Hayek who argue against any deployment of the state to advance the cause of equality where equality is understood as something more than equality before the law. She is keen, as we would expect, to stress that with contingency comes responsibility for one's fellow beings, which presumably translates into something like a Lockean duty of care to others; (48) but what might be less apparent to her is how quickly the celebration of individual indeterminacy and possibility begins to sound like a defence of the liberal-capitalist status quo with all its entrenched inequities in power and influence. For example, it is surely not enough to declaim with the defenders of the American Dream that since all Americans are 'born equal' they all have the same chance or, worse, opportunity of becoming President of the United States. This grotesque caricature of the meaning of equality has long been regarded by left radicals as the fiction which serves to keep in being one of the most *unequal* societies known to history. We have come a long way when, as now, it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell apart the content of Heller's measured invocation of contingency and historicity from the liberal individualism she once so energetically opposed.

Conclusion: From 'rational utopia' to 'will-to-utopia'

As I think is obvious Heller remains in the original sense of the term a radical thinker. There are few theorists who are more willing are able to reveal the roots of the human condition and the meaning of modernity or postmodernity than Heller. She has the power of thought and imagination to penetrate the thick fog which shrouds our identity as modern individuals. My worry about the recent turn in Heller's thought is that in her haste to ditch her Marxist past with all those unwelcome associations which 'Marxist' now has for her she has jettisoned part of that critical, oppositional spirit that was so evident in her earlier work and which coalesced around the idea of a 'rational utopia'. Of course her suspicion of Marxism is as much about the evident 'will-to-power' of those who count themselves as Marxists as about the theoretical flaws in Marx's doctrine. But in attempting to redress the past what becomes apparent is how easily it has been for Heller to adopt a stance between that resigned 'realism' characteristic of social democratic thinkers and the radical utopianism of those such as William Morris who wished to place principle before practice. The result, as I have argued elsewhere, is a stance which might be termed 'will-to-utopia' as a gesture to both the subliminal - if not unconscious - quality of the 'positioning' and the fact that it retains some trace of the radical energy of her earlier stance. What I mean by will-to-utopia is the now repressed desire to construct the no-place which is good, thereby escaping the vicissitudes of power altogether. This is the realm of the 'nearly'

(47) The reference is to the Arendtian sounding article 'Against the Metaphysics of the Social Question' in Heller and Féher, *The Postmodern Political Condition.*

(48) Thus, as she puts it, 'radical tolerance' implies an active rather than passive relation to the other which presupposes a 'caring relation', not indifference. See Agnes Heller and Ferenc Féher, 'Citizen Ethics and Civic Virtues', *The Postmodern Political Condition*, pp. 82-6.

possible which yet remains outside the grasp of the political, the real, the sphere of power and domination/liberation.

We mentioned earlier how the 'postmodern condition' has sometimes been characterised in terms of cynicism and disregard for the notion that the realm of the political can still be regarded as the realm of the possible, yet thinking about Heller's work it is certainly not cynicism which characterises Heller's thought. On the contrary, her stance is one, which if anything demonstrates a *fear of* the political. Heller writes as one who has seen the raw power of the state being manipulated for irrational purposes by those who justify their actions in the name of the 'common good'. She wants to guarantee that Leviathan will never again be unleashed on the innocent. Her strategy is therefore to disarm those who claim legitimacy to rule on the basis of possessing the answer to the 'riddle of history', 'universal happiness' or by virtue of the fact that they understand our 'true' needs. We saw, firstly, how her perfectionist deontology makes political action impossible by disbarring the weighing of 'losses' against 'gains' and hence challenging the existing pattern of distribution or access to power for fear that one element of society will 'lose' out to another (which it of course would). We then saw how in her discussion of democracy she conflates the practice of existing liberal-democratic systems with democracy *per se* making impossible the reasoned critique of such systems from a radical democratic starting-point. Again, what we find is that the status quo is left untouched because of the well-documented difficulties of advancing a radical political agenda in a liberal-democratic setting. Finally, her insistence on the identity between contingency and equality makes it impossible to criticise the market order on grounds that it hampers the attainment of equality – whether in the form of equality of opportunity or of life chances. If all equality amounts to is the enjoyment of basic rights and liberties then there is nothing in the structure or functioning of liberal societies which requires remedying. In all these various moves what we see is the emptying of the idea of politics as 'possibility' to the point where, as she intimates herself, all that is left is for us as individuals to be good or decent. In this final move we see most clearly, not the 'exhaustion' of utopian energies as lamented by Habermas, but rather their reincarnation in the form of an 'ethics of personality', a manifesto of individual responsibility for those wearied by the uncivilised struggles which compose politics. Will-to-utopia returns full circle to greet will-to-power in the displacement of the political from the realm of action.