

Contemporary Critical Theory

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Abstract: This paper employs the work of Ágnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér as a characterization of a contemporary critical theory. Critical theory is not “an argument across the ages” nor another attempt at traditional metaphysics. Like modern thinkers G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx, influenced by the French Revolution, the critical theory tradition endeavours to practically engage with the present and inches towards an undetermined future. Ágnes Heller and György Márkus fuse knowledge of the modern sciences with a historical anthropology that becomes an agent of practical transformation. These émigrés from Budapest took the opportunities of the capitalist West against modern societies’ fault lines to theorize a potential better future. They marshal modern knowledge against existing social reality towards a present, still typically irrational society. Contemporary critical theory has this intent and occupies this space.

Key words: critical theory, Ágnes Heller, Ferenc Fehér, Budapest School in Australia

It has often been said that the philosophical School has disappeared, and modern philosophy has become more subjectivized and associated with the signature of an individual concept or problem. Against such characterizations, Márkus used to say that philosophy involves the “debate between the philosophical schools.” Despite the demise of “philosophical schools” in terms of the original meaning, this continues to be a good working definition of the ongoing history of philosophy. Unlike an understanding of philosophy as an “argument across the ages” or a discipline that attempts to distil some of the more general ideas gleaned from the contemporary physical and social sciences, critical theory is typically an essentially historical discipline, which always “expresses its age” in various ways, with the additional thought that philosophy is more engaged with the present. This is an intervention into the world and not just mere speculative thoughts. Its essential aspiration is to change its object, in a way that edges towards progress. Márkus drew on the rigour of analytical philosophy but always wanted to

achieve more. This ambition requires the employment of the most general truths of the contemporary sciences but also adheres to a philosophy of history or an anthropology with some general ideas about the possibility of progress. While such thoughts today cannot remain naïve about the ambiguity of “modern progress,” this remains a good working definition of critical theory. This belief in progress cannot today merely be a “fact” but rather a “wager” upon a hoped future.

A contemporary critical theorist must always assess the current temperature of the present social and historical currents of our world. Certainly, this world has an irradicable natural foundation of material conditions, but these conditions are always changing. Unlike traditional philosophy that operates in an almost stationary conceptual universe within the practice of modern science, modern critical theorists remain attune to changing times. New problems are always emerging. One only needs to think of issues like globalization, postmodernism or political populism, climate change or pandemics as new urgent problems confronting the modern citizen as burning practical issues that cannot be ignored. The “novel” is always present as new issues that demand our attention. Ágnes Heller had a great capacity to read movements in contemporary culture and society and turn them to advantage for philosophical inspiration and conceptual guidance. Some of the most fertile and striking ideas in her late books and writings stem from the observation of contemporary cultural and political trends. Her idea of “the bird of paradise” registers the change in the contemporary character of modern philosophy with the shift from a Hegelian-style single direction and location in European nations. Contemporary history has no single and progressive direction but a more open and volatile face that is announcing new locations, voices and audiences. The Budapest School emerged firstly in Hungary as one of these new locations of a new critical philosophical spirit. Relocated to Melbourne, Heller took advantage of the new openness in Western societies to initiate novel ideas like “multiple modernities” and the “cultural transfusion,” taken from the French literary theorist and philosopher Jacques Derrida, which allow us to see the present with new eyes and renewed focus on our most pressing contemporary tasks.

Unable to find permanent work in Australia and less well known in Western academic circles, Fehér’s treatment of biopolitics was both incidental and completely characteristic. These quintessential European intellectuals had only recently moved to Melbourne because they had suffered intellectual exclusion by

the communist regime in their native Hungary. In a late career, Fehér's transition from literary theory to a hybrid form of contemporary political commentary came to fruition in a series of books and articles, mostly co-authored with Heller. These were focused mainly on the events and developments that culminated in the completely unexpected dissolution of the USSR after 1989. Even such perspicacious scholars of the "dictatorship over needs" in 1982, along with Márkus, could have hardly imagined that this decline would be so rapid and definitive. For Fehér and Heller, the major message of a series of political analyses in the 1980s cautioned the political left in Western countries against the early peace movements' vehement anti-Americanism. As political dissidents from Eastern Europe, they felt it was still a great mistake to underestimate the danger represented by contemporary totalitarianism to the delicate dynamics of modernity. Fehér and Heller shared a capacity both for turning everyday life into philosophy and for bringing philosophy to bear on everyday life. In his case, it was heightened by the fact that contemporary political developments in the Soviet orbit had now become Fehér's principal interest. The move to New York also brought these thinkers to the very epicentre of the ferment engulfing American political and academic life around issues of the Vietnam War, feminism, abortion, race, and ecology. These issues had taken on especially combative forms with the emergence of positive discrimination for Afro-American students at university admission, the rapid development of women's and gender studies as recognizable academic disciplines and sexual politics on the campus. These debates provide the rich sociological and cultural material taken up in their version of bio-politics that they popularized. However, what is most decisive is that they bring a distinctively Eastern European slant to their analyses. They argue that the "dictatorship over needs" is characterized by the "total" character of its politics. While they applauded the fact that second-wave feminism's understanding of politics had breached the protective limits that modern liberalism had placed around the personal space of the individual, they were still wary of the impact of total politics on the prospects for freedom in the modern world. This concern took on an identifiable shape within a short time of their sojourn in the United States with the experience of "political correctness" in the academy.

I recall a conversation with Fehér after he and Heller had been living in New York for a few years. I asked him how he was finding New York, and he replied to me with just one word: "Tocqueville." As he later expressed it in a more con-

sidered form, Tocqueville was an “evergreen” because he was the first to capture the totalitarian potential that existed in the culture of American democracy.¹ The climate of “political correctness” that he found frequently in the New York academic scene evoked Tocqueville’s “tyranny of the majority.” Here we have some of the background existential and contemporary political ingredients that informed their substantial analyses of biopolitics.

The historical background of this analysis is the modern history of the body. One of the most impressive features of Heller and Fehér’s treatment of contemporary biopolitics is that it assesses the politics of the various biopolitical movements. For these authors, the two aspects of “freedom” and “life” are only analytically separable but must be thought of as in unity to correctly estimate both the significance and the potential of these new biopolitical causes. For them, the contemporary manifestations of biopolitics also needed to be viewed through a longer historical perspective of disappointed Enlightenment hopes. On the brink of the multiple revolutions that would reconfigure the *ancien régime* and see the birth of the modern world in the 19th century, the Enlightenment has promised the complete mastery of nature. Yet, 200 years later, contemporaries still needed to learn the virtue of circumspection. The great historical landmarks of the 20th century have demonstrated only too clearly that while the modern sciences can be a vehicle of human liberation, they can also have ambiguous, destructive and oppressive results that can neither be ignored nor minimized.²

To underscore the shift of perspectives between Enlightenment hopes and the need for contemporary sobriety, Heller and Fehér focused their special attention on the promise to liberate the body. The new spirit, which energized the young radicals of the post-revolutionary epoch, included the expectation that secular integration would abolish the Christian duality of body and soul and open the road to political and religious autonomy. Hegel’s philosophy of spirit was just one expression of this optimistic mood, which prophesied a historical evolution raising humanity to the level of spirit. Leaping forward to our own time, Heller and Fehér employed the views of Michel Foucault, the father of contemporary biopolitics, to exemplify the illusory character of such hopes and to underscore that all such extravagant predictions had shown to be completely empty. Foucault

¹ F. Fehér, *Redemptive and Democratic Paradigms in Radical Politics*, “Telos: Critical Theory of the Contemporary” 1985, No. 63, pp. 147–156.

² Á. Heller, S. Puntischer Riekmann, F. Fehér, eds., *Biopolitics: The Politics of the Body, Race and Nature*, Averbury, Aldershot 1996.

is especially caustic when it comes to the genealogy of the modern soul. Rather than a vehicle in the programme of human emancipation, the modern soul “is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy” in which “the soul is the prison of the body.”³

At the very centre of Heller’s theory of modernity is her contention that the values of freedom and equality (in the sense of life chances) have become the universal value ideals of modernity.⁴ Well acquainted with the brutal political realities of “really existing socialism” and the Cold War, Fehér and Heller were especially attuned to the potentially volcanic tension between these universal values. For example, it is easy to sacrifice the value of freedom in favour of comfort in respect to material “life chances.” For them, this tension constitutes the defining political terrain of modern biopolitics, and its resolution provides the key normative standard on which this politics must be judged. The authors reminded us that there is nothing intrinsic to the politics of the body favouring its alignment to the value of freedom. In fact, the history of the 20th century confirms that biopolitics made its entry into world politics on the side of racism. Only the defeat of fascism and the resulting post-war consensus that democratic politics must serve both supreme values finally dictated that biopolitics would also need to find a place for itself on this democratic terrain. Nevertheless, adopting this consensus does not mean that biopolitics has now forever repudiated its inauspicious initial appearance in the grand drama of modern politics. Accepting the supreme value of the ideals of freedom and life does not determine which values are likely to ultimately prevail.⁵

To emphasize the priority accorded by fascist politics to the value of “life” over “freedom” is not a historically irrelevant curio. Heller and Fehér turn their attention to the vehement contemporary US debate over abortion in the late 1980s, a topic that continues to remain a political issue in current US politics as the Republicans attempt to reverse the 1973 *Roe v Wade* Supreme Court judgement in favour of legal abortion rights. They contended that both the pro-choice and pro-life camps viewed themselves as resolute defenders of the body: however, in each case, the parties chose to align themselves with different bodies. The pro-life groups adopted the cause of the foetus and the value of life in the sense of the

³ F. Fehér, Á. Heller, *Biopolitics*, Avebury, Aldershot 1994, p. 22.

⁴ Á. Heller, *Can Modernity Survive?*, Polity, Cambridge 1990, pp. 145–159.

⁵ F. Fehér, Á. Heller, *Biopolitics*, op. cit., p. 22.

survival of its unborn potential and autonomy, whereas the pro-choice defenders chose the woman's body and the defence of its autonomy and freedom of individual woman.⁶ While our authors' sympathies are clearly on the pro-choice side, their reasons are especially revealing. In the case of abortion, the woman making the choice is or should be the "custodian" of the potential new life; she is the one who is inevitably confronted with the practical choice. This practical dimension of the question reinforces Heller and Fehér's axiomatic opposition to "substitutionalist" politics. They utterly reject the idea that one party, typically more organized, knowledgeable, and well-funded, should take it upon itself to speak on behalf of others.⁷ However, it remains a fact that the West has been unable to reconcile its own leading values with absolute consistency.⁸ Our authors focus on the question of how to reconcile the values of freedom and life. They locate the origins of contemporary biopolitical struggle between these values almost a decade before Giorgio Agamben nominates the question of the fate of "bare life" as the key biopolitical question of our age in *Homo Sacer*.⁹

It is the election of Ronald Reagan and the programme to install Pershing nuclear missiles in Europe that brought about a regeneration of the anti-nuclear movement in the early 1980s. For Fehér and Heller the movement had seriously miscalculated in viewing the Soviet Union as "a peace-loving power being threatened by American aggression."¹⁰ The proposal that the American missiles be withdrawn – with its possible consequence of committing the West to a policy of unilateral disarmament – was, according to them, a naïve capitulation to Soviet manipulation. For Fehér and Heller, this crucial episode of biopolitics signified a failure of courage on the crucial value question of modernity. The anti-nuclear spokespersons had demanded that not freedom, but life be given priority.¹¹ Opting for life against liberty was a drastic departure from the legacy of modernity. These advocates had simply not considered whether modernity could be sustained without freedom. This miscalculation was not a contingent misjudgement but flowed from the deepest interstices of the anti-nuclear movement and its bio-

⁶ Ibid., p. 23.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1998.

¹⁰ F. Fehér, Á. Heller, *Biopolitics*, op. cit., p. 22.

¹¹ Ibid.

political perspective.¹² The basis for this withering critique lies in twin assertions. First is the claim that the strategy of biopolitics is based not on dialogical politics but on a “politics of self-enclosure.”¹³ This means several things. First, it means that the subject of biopolitics is, in fact, a symbolic body – the body of nature. This recourse to a symbolic subject is an ideological move that invites political substitution. Any politics that allows the voice of concrete political agents to be usurped by another party claiming to speak on their behalf is rife for manipulation. In this case, the idea that the anti-nuclear movement should take upon this role claiming to speak on behalf of the human species or nature is a sophistic ploy that robs the real historical agents of the opportunity to make their own real choices. Second, a “politics of self-enclosure” is derived from the militancy or radicalism of this perspective. For the activists of biopolitics, the achievement of legal reforms is only the first step. To achieve the movement’s real goals, past cultural traditions cannot be allowed to obstruct the path.¹⁴

Heller and Fehér acknowledge that contemporary biopolitics has very little institutional imagination and “almost never proposed (major institutional changes).”¹⁵ From the perspective of the radicals of 1968, this meant new social communities, sexual liberation and attacks on “consumer society.” Such an imaginative deficit only serves to underscore the apocalyptic aspirations of this movement. As Agamben will later clearly exemplify, if the problem is an exclusionary logic of the whole Western political tradition, then the “politics to come” “remains largely to be invented.”¹⁶ In the face of a truly messianic task, the problem of institutional imagination is simply dwarfed by the scale of the redemptive challenge. Students of the Budapest School will recall the distinction Fehér introduced between “democratic” and “redemptive politics”: the redemptive paradigm is characterized by a reduction of the complexity of modernity, the homogenization of the intrinsic heterogeneity of such societies, and the dismissal of rational and predictable institutions and a preference for pseudo-religious solutions.¹⁷ It should be noted that biopolitics shares all these characteristics. However, in this instance, it is the idea of a messianic decisionism on which all fates depend that

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁶ G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁷ F. Fehér, *Redemptive and Democratic Paradigms*, op. cit.

clearly allots the anti-nuclear movement to this paradigm. Heller and Fehér's repudiation of biopolitics contains some valuable political insights. Their critique of redemptive politics clearly undermines the theoretical and practical options taken by later advocates of biopolitics.

Before we follow the further adventures of biopolitics, one aspect of Heller and Fehér's critiques requires a closer review. This concerns their interpretation of the fundamental tension between the values of freedom and life in modernity. While the normative dimension of their theory of modernity is an instructive point of orientation in assessing the strengths and weakness of biopolitics, it needs to be interpreted with extreme rigour. This becomes evident when we take a closer look at the politics of the anti-nuclear movement of the 1980s. Heller and Fehér admonished the anti-nuclear movement for its critique of US foreign policy and its benign assessment of its Soviet competitor. As they see it, the desire for unilateral disarmament was unambiguously a vote for life over freedom and therefore a betrayal of the deepest aspirations of modernity. Needless to say, this type of analysis operates at a very high level of abstraction. When the key issues are approached more concretely, its shortcomings become obvious. The anti-nuclear movement's proposal that missiles be withdrawn from Europe is hardly a vote for totalitarianism. Rather, it is primarily a vote against nuclear annihilation. This vote does give priority to the value of life, but can there be any freedom after mutually assured destruction?

Heller and Fehér refused to compromise with totalitarianism and viewed it rightly as the antithesis of freedom. However, does this mean that, in practice, it is better to choose nuclear annihilation? If the value of freedom is a crucial constituent of the "good life," it remains true that this "good life" presupposes "life." Totalitarianism may be a scourge to the prospects of freedom but, as we have seen in the post-Second World War epoch, societies can recover from totalitarianism and go on to build the institutions of freedom. What does the future look like after nuclear Armageddon? Clearly, political rhetoric and abstraction have triumphed over precise analysis. Fehér and Heller suggest that the exclusive value choice that biopolitics makes for "life" over "liberty" precipitates the real danger of overbalancing the delicate pendulum of modernity. As good former Marxists, they should have known that even the singular and unmediated choice of the value of freedom is not without problems. The value of life cannot simply be taken for granted, and these two values must be carefully mediated in all instances.

The critical power of Foucault's late works was underscored by emphasizing its differences from the Marxism that dominated the critical discourse of the Western left to the end of the 1970s. If the neoliberal project involved an expanded notion of political rationality by incorporating biological life into its calculations, contemporary critique needed to cover this evolution in governmental strategy by turning its critical attentions to the normalizing conditions that produced productive economic subjects acclimatized to the demands of the new neoliberal world. Expanding our understanding of government allows us to enter a terrain that previously lay beyond the compass of the Marxian critique.

Heller first met Foucault in New York at a social event after a conference and found a shared interest in ancient Stoicism, and later Foucault invited her and her son to his apartment for dinner in Paris. Heller was subsequently to write an appraisal of his work that has never been published, entitled "Michael Foucault: The Personal Thinker."¹⁸ Foucault's work was not concerned with individualism but with the modern destruction of traditional metaphysics. Subsequent thinkers like Hegel and Marx had sought to create a new many-sided individuality beyond metaphysics. Foucault's exploration of the later liberal tradition was very much in keeping with Heller's own critique of contemporary liberalism and its disfigurements.

This late paper of Heller and another on the Frankfurt School are most pertinent to the shape of a contemporary critical theory.

In a short lecture I will be brief.

In the paper on the Frankfurt School, she focuses on the role of Max Horkheimer during the two phases of his intellectual career. The first after the ascension of Hitler to power in Germany after 1933 and the second, when he and Theodor Adorno returned to Germany after the Second World War and played key roles in the higher education system as the heads of J.W. Goethe University. Heller stresses that in this early first phase Horkheimer was an outsider: a Jew, a radical, influenced by the works of Marx and leading a group of like-minded Jews who were critical of contemporary capitalism and wanted to play a practical role in transforming contemporary society for the better. The solidarity of this group led Horkheimer to depart from orthodox Marxism in response to the changed historical conditions. Linkage to the organized working class was no longer an option in fascist Germany. Horkheimer now emphasizes the role of the

¹⁸ Á. Heller, *Michel Foucault: The Personal Thinker*, "Thesis Eleven," forthcoming.

independent critical intellectual and this was manifest in the pessimism of thinkers he shared with Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, who could see no progressive elements in the working class and were even more critical of contemporary mass culture. In the second phase after the Second World War, Horkheimer retreated from the intellectual field and adopted a more conservative position. He became one of the pillars of the new Germany after the democratic reconstruction and became the *Rektor* of the J.W. Goethe University and he repudiated his old works and language. Only the publication of Martin Jay's *Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950*¹⁹ would again popularize these early works in resonance with the rise of the cultural revolution in America during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Despite his intellectual reticence, Horkheimer continued to assert his authority as the Head of the Frankfurt School and the financial control of the chair that had been established by Felix Weil's wealthy father in 1923. He continued to demand a high degree of orthodoxy from his colleagues and their students in terms of control of their journal and famously he rejected Jürgen Habermas's dissertation and he was required to *Habilität* at Marburg. Heller also mentions the fact that Horkheimer did not support Adorno's full professorship until 1957. For Heller this was another example of "the school" still surviving past its useful historical life.

Another contrary example is the career of Michel Foucault. For Heller, Foucault is a "personal thinker." Heller believes he will be continually read by contemporary audiences because he was the first to "reject 'isms,' schools and represented his own personal philosophy."²⁰ This has nothing to do with pride or individualism but a response to historical exigency and an answer to the present philosophical situation.²¹ Heller goes on to analyze Foucault's response to Kant's diagnosis of a contemporary "immaturity" at the time of the Enlightenment and the need to break from this imposed political authoritarianism. Heller reinforces that from an early age Foucault always tested authorities. In tracing Foucault's later career, Heller stresses his resistance to the fashions of the time and the standard interpretations of his works, like the frequently invoked view that he was a "structuralist" or "an anti-humanist." He proclaims the Enlightenment ideal to "Dare to know!" against such authorities. Foucault was never interested in con-

¹⁹ M. Jay, *Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950*, Little Brown, Boston, MA, 1973.

²⁰ Á. Heller, *Michel Foucault*, op. cit., p. 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*

structing a system and saw himself as a post-metaphysical thinker.²² To commit to the Enlightenment required the recognition that both “humanism” and “anti-humanism” were now defunct discourses. For Heller, the contemporary critical theorist must find their own individual path and dispense with the theoretical crutches that past epochs have relied upon.

Contemporary critical theory at its best could take the path revealed by Fehér and Heller. Fehér’s comments to me that American democracy was best understood by Tocqueville as a tyranny of the majority, a condition that remains so fascinating and infuriating both for commentators and even many of its citizens. To live in a democracy is a wild ride and a wager that often leads to frustration and disappointment. For the critical theorist it must produce new voices and new audiences and employ the latest scientific and humanistic knowledge of history and society. However, its practical aim is to diagnose the present and to locate its key weaknesses and fault lines. Consider the most recent issues of climate change or pandemic in a globalized capitalist economy and the rise of the economic and political power of modern China as challenges to the hegemony of the United States since the end of the Second World War. In this context, critical theory has a unique combination of intellectual fire power to sustain a continuing intellectual relevance and practical impact for old and new audiences into the future.

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²² Ibid., p. 4.