Research Article

The “Bird of Paradise”: Heller and Márkus

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Agnes Heller and György Márkus became two of the leaders of what became known as the “Budapest School” in the early 1960’s. This group was finally forced to leave Hungary and became political refugees in Australia. Their friendship survived the strains that attended their very different personalities and the difficulties of post-Budapest School lives and work. Even when they came separated across the world they kept in close contact and continued to share their work. In the following, I consider Agnes Heller’s final critique of Márkus’s work and assess its strengths and weaknesses. The difference between Heller and Márkus reveals the philosophy is not the “Owl of Minerva” but a “Bird of Paradise” permanently in flight and change.

The “Bird of Paradise”: Heller and Márkus[1]

Agnes Heller and György (George) Márkus grew to maturity during those “dark times” of the later years of the Second World War. Hungarian Jews imperilled by the Hitler inspired “Final Solution”. They reached intellectual maturity as part of a small group associated with the aging György Lukacs in the late nineteen fifties and early sixties that became known as the Budapest School. During the late sixties, this group found itself increasingly critical of the existing communist orthodoxy. After the death of Lukacs in 1971, they came under intense political pressure and some were then dismissed from their academic position in 1973 and others resigned in an act of solidarity. The elevation of political oppression finally compelled the key members, Heller and her second husband Ferenc Feher and Maria and George Márkus and their families to become political refugees and move to Australia. Heller’s family fled to Melbourne and the Márkus’s to Sydney. After another ten years Heller and Feher mainly in Melbourne moved again after found it difficult to get a permanent position in Melbourne, heading to New York. Heller would be finally appointed as the Hannah Arendt Professor of

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the New School in New York. The Markuses settled into academic positions in Sydney, where they lived with their two sons for the rest of their lives.

Despite their intentions to continue their collective work, physical distance and different temperaments meant that the old friends went their own ways. Nevertheless, Heller and Márkus remained in close contact and continued to exchange and comment on their individual projects. Herself a great modern philosophical virtuoso, Heller knew George's work intimately. Her lengthy review of his post-Budapest School essays on high culture begins by observing that at first appearance George's philosophical output seemed modest. Like his older mentor Lukacs, Márkus followed Schleiermacher's dictum that all significant thinkers have one simple driving idea or theme. For Márkus, his own guiding idea was to be "culture": it initially emerged in the early Budapest years through his studies on epistemology and the Philosophy of Science. For Márkus, the intellectual rigor required by analytic philosophy became a philosophical commitment that would charge all his work. Heller underlines that these early preoccupations and ideas were not lost but transformed in his later work in Sydney. This constancy of purpose is evident in the essays that were collected in his final major publication: *Culture, Science and Society.* Heller observes that Márkus was uncomfortable with the traditional form of the book and preferred the long essay. Márkus was a perfectionist and therefore a slow worker who always reconsidered and revaluated and refined his previous work. This is also evident in the 25 lectures series that he gave in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Sydney. Heller knew Márkus well enough in the early days to be convinced that these lectures would be of the highest quality and should be published. Taking these erudite, carefully crafted 'works' into account, Márkus's actual philosophical output was much greater than his formal list of actual publications suggested.[2]

Márkus's late lectures and papers were always going to be much more than the work of a "musicologist". His great learning and attention to detail would be mobilised in pursuit of a single vision focused on the question: 'what is culture'? Here Márkus references the Hegelian idea of Absolute Spirit but exempts religion. This modern notion of "high culture" is future orientated and continually produces the novel and the unexpected. These are narratives or stories written from the standpoint of the "end of history" or from the perspective of an ultimate wisdom that remains in a permanent flight: this is the "bird of paradise, this constant historical itinerant". Márkus does not provide a single answer to the question but provides a historical story of the various social and historical forms of the understanding of the concept of culture. This methodological approach is also

an interpretation, and theory, of modernity that rests upon an intricate genealogy. Márkus locates the first modern articulation of the notion of culture in its plural understanding as a dichotomy between a generalised "second nature", that is found as a universal anthropological way of life, and a concept of "high culture"that is expressed in terms of the triad of "author, work and reception" as the axis of the pragmatics of High Culture.

Heller thought that one of Márkus's great virtues was his cognitive empathy where he is drew on the thinkers he liked and avoided those for whom he had a distaste. Closest to Kant and to thinkers of the historical Enlightenment, Márkus writes a history of the modern sciences. However, he also responds to the hermeneutics of his own era, in which Enlightenment and Romanticism formed the constitutive, mutual tension between oppositional poles and continually inched modernity forward. Heller believed that Márkus's richly genealogical narratives about the strained self-understandings of modern culture provides us with both great insights and pleasures. At the same time, it sharpened her own theory of modernity into a critical perspective equipped to discover inconsistencies in Márkus's account and underlined the philosophical schism between them. Heller suggests that Markus's almost universally negative relation to his contemporaries and to modern art, is closer to Adorno's attitude: notwithstanding his sympathy for some key musical composers, Adorno had abandoned irrational hopes that the age of "ultimate sinfulness" (Lukacs) could be the anti-chamber to redemption. Even though Markus's diagnosis of modernity turns on the opposition to be negotiated between Enlightenment and Romanticism, the latter is missing as any positive presence from his account of modernity. This accounts, she supposes, for his neglect of the important contributions of some of her own favourites, foe instance, Kierkegaard and even Heidegger in their efforts to reveal "the things themselves" and the everyday. She is convinced that in Márkus's account the dichotomous engine room of modernity is about to finally peter out and disappear. This is despite Márkus's acknowledgement that hermeneutics has complicated the polarity between the various spheres of science and the philosophical speculation that addresses the fundamental everyday questions of life and the good life.

This is where the differences between Heller and Márkus are starkest. For Heller, Foucault, Heidegger and Derrida, our contemporaries provide striking metaphors and languages produces concepts and perspectives that are essentially novel. Heller's constitutional optimism made her much more open to the "now", to modern cultural industries and consumer societies; despite claiming the critical theory tradition for the Enlightenment, Márkus has sympathies with Habermas who he sees as an exception

to the more radical romantic critics of modernity. On board with Habermas's post-metaphysical thinking, and like him resistant to the task of building philosophical systems. Heller claims that Foucault and Derrida remained beyond the horizon of Markus's interests and that this neglect speaks to his one-sided bias on favour of Enlightenment within modern culture. However, while he remained deeply critical of their positions, Markus continued to read and write about their work as is evident in several papers that were completed but not published until after his death in 2016.

Heller acknowledges Markus's superior expertise in the philosophy of science. She claims that his account of the practices of publication in the hard sciences did not meet Markus's own criteria of reception for high culture. She queries his remarks that journals in the hard science were not really read by the public and are only really understood by experts with sufficient technical knowledge and capacity. Against Márkus's suspicion that the modern "hard sciences" could no longer meet the receptive standards of high culture, Heller counters that in many areas of the hard sciences, like biology and climate change, there is now a spectrum of scientific journals with a wide readership and genuinely popular interest. To Márkus's claim that the hard sciences cannot guide a non-expert public, Heller insisted that philosophy could bridge the divide and here she agrees with Márkus that the "hard sciences" cannot tell the general public about "the good". Heller maintains that philosophy has a creative role to play in translating the "truths" and consequences circulated in the hard sciences into "truths" of an everyday debate about what was "good" or "evil" and what was permitted or not. The stakes in this dispute are obviously high. Heller supposes that she has rescued the hard sciences for Márkus's own account of the autonomy of high culture from his pessimistic conclusions regarding the public's capacity to meet adequate normative standards of reception. On this account, science was saved for the pragmatics of high culture once the relationship between "author", "work" and "reception" and their interrelated institutions and relations was reinstated as an active realm of citizen autonomy and debate.

Turning from the alleged sociological blind spots in Márkus's account of the author-receptor relations in the contemporary hard sciences, Heller moves on to consider the pragmatics of "the work". According to Márkus, other objectivations of high culture, like literature or art, sustained their autonomy, hence their contribution to the ideal of a self-critical, self-reflective citzenry, by their production of "the novel". The hard sciences signified the accumulation of knowledge, but this is not the case for philosophy nor art where modernity's hope for continuing progress is not so straight-forward. The latter are presented as "the novel" in various ways but this does not imply simple

accumulation. Rather, the products of philosophy and the arts appear as "expressions", bound to their time and place. Heller argues that if we take Márkus's negative doubts about the capacity of contemporary philosophy to serve the needs of contemporary reception, we have attained the end of metaphysics and philosophy no longer belongs to high culture. However, it is not clear me that Márkus wanted to go so far as to eliminate philosophy from the domain of high culture. While there can be no doubt that he was concerned with the communicability of the contemporary hard sciences, he did not point to this paradox of its essential technical-expertise and its greatest vulnerability.

According to Markus, other objectivations of high culture like literature or art belong to high culture because they produce "the new". In the hard sciences the new means the accumulation of knowledge, however, this is not the case in philosophy or art. Heller argues that if we take Markus's negative attitude towards contemporary philosophy, this signifies end of metaphysics and philosophy can no longer belongs to high culture. It is not clear to me that Markus wants to go as far as to eliminate philosophy from the domain of high culture. While there can be no doubt that Markus is concerned with the communicability of the contemporary hard sciences, he does not want to completely excise it from the hard sciences but to point to the areas of its greatest vulnerability.

Heller finally turns to the last segment of the triad concerned with the pragmatics of high culture: reception. We have seen that Markus pointed to some of the difficulties with the expert character of the hard sciences. Rather than viewing the modern evolution of the modern hard sciences as a communicative dead-end, he insisted that public recipient could still be affected, positively or negatively. However, Heller maintained that if the hard sciences could no longer be a segment of high culture, then Markus's general theory of high culture seemed to contradict itself. On this basis, his theory would be a casualty of history and class society had reached crisis point. Heller maintained that for those who cared about these things, these struggles are now more friendly because we live in the age beyond the twilight of Absolute truth. Contrasting her existential personality with Márkus, she claimed to be more comfortable in the modern consumer world and more receptive to its inducements. You could think here of Heller's claim to be of her own times and some of her earlier key ideas like "radical needs"[3] or her much later support of American foreign policy, the invasion of Iraq and the idea of "Old Europe". Heller had an emotional attachment to Israel and after 9/11 and as a resident of New York and a "hawk", she fully supported Us foreign policy that led to the invasion of Afganistan and the efforts of US policy to isolate its critics by denouncing them as supporters of the "Old Europe" and opponents of the US policy to export freedom and democracy to the Middle East. Márkus, as a

philosophical agnostic had no real emotional attachment to Israel or contemporary US foreign policy. Like Habermas, Márkus remained within the camp of "Old Europe' camp and opposed to US military adventurism. In this respect, Márkus was also much more resistant to fashionable modern ideas and ideologies.

Towards the end of their lives, Heller did finally move closer to Márkus, both politically in support of social democratic reformism as she became more aware of rising contemporary authoritarianism. For his part, Márkus's late essays on mass culture and the cultural industries also revealed a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the tensions in the domain of mass culture and finally not as generally negative as attributed to Heller.[4] However, by temperament Markus remained more cautious and sceptical and remained the key difference between these two old friends. These final differences reveal both the different personalities and their remaining intellectual virtues and prejudices.

Footnotes

[1] I would thanks to Pauline Johnson, who is always my final reader and assists with the clarity of the final version and another two edit by my old friend Arthur Glass and Gavin Kitching who also aided the clarity of the final version.

[2] All of Heller's key point comes from a review written by Agnes Heller entitled *The Great Book of György Markus,*

[3] Heller, A. *The Marxian Theory of Radical Needs* Allison& Busby, London, 1974

[4] See Markus, Gyorgy. 'The Path of Culture: From the Refined to the High, From Popular to Mass Culture' *Critical Horizon, (2013) (14 (2): 127-185)* Here again, Markus disclaims any substantive competence in respect to the content of mass culture or the culture industries but only to provide a "topographic" conceptual model of this terrain.

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