

A Call for Teaching Civics

Hungarian philosopher Agnes Heller endured both Nazism and communism, emerging into a stalwart 20th century thinker. • Despite the decrease in mainstream totalitarian movements, she worries about the persistence of populism and discrimination in Europe. The only defense against bigotry, Heller insists, is to teach people the deeper meaning of civics and ensure populations refuse to take freedom for granted. • by Francesca Lancini

At 81, Agnes Heller is among the great witnesses of 20th century life and times. After escaping anti-Semitic persecution, philosophical inquiry helped console Heller, eventually becoming a kind of necessity. As a disciple of Budapest Marxist Gyorgy Lukács, she sought explanations for the tragic events of the first half



of the century. A Holocaust survivor, Heller felt the need to pay homage to those who died, including her father, who perished at Auschwitz.

After Lukács' death in 1971, his followers faced political persecution and harassment. Instead of staying on in Hungary as a dissident, Heller and her husband sought exile in Australia in 1977. In 1986, she moved to New York to teach at The New School, where she occupies a chair in philosophy once held by the famed German theorist Hannah Arendt.

Heller's latest book, "0A Theory of Needs Revisited," posits the existence of good people in the world and seeks to clarify the risks that confront them. Are people really afraid of freedom? Is religious fundamentalism actually growing? Is there a danger of a new Holocaust? Heller answered some of these questions in an interview with east conducted while she attended the Mantua Literature Festival.

The north suffers from economic crisis while the south is the source of desperate migrations.

The gap between rich and poor is widening.

How does the contemporary world look to you?

The conflict between East and West is no longer just an economic matter. China has the largest quantity of cash and India is growing extremely quickly. The economy is not the main cause of differences. Certainly the immense poverty in Africa is the greatest shame of the planet, but it's not the central theme of today's contemporary divisions.

We're witnessing not so much a culture clash as something close to a war between religions. Islamist move-

Agnes Heller.

ments are increasingly anti-Semitic and anti-Christian, and the Koran was nearly burned publicly in the United States at the invitation of a crazy pastor in Florida. These are new phenomena. The real divisions we're facing are caused by totalitarianism and fundamentalism.

How does this manifest itself?

It's not necessarily tied to religion. There are radical right-wing groups that have no religious ties and atheist Latin American left-wing extremist movements. What's certain is that extremism is present in all religions and responds to a world without foundations that fears freedom.

How so?

Before the Enlightenment, people believed that that they lived in a world created by God in which earthly rulers were his representatives. The beginning of the modern era revealed a new kind of discourse in which all could be explained based on reason.

The problem is that the foundations of civilization can never be explained rationally. And a world without a sense of those foundations means a place without certainties. The good news is that people are freer, but at the same time they're more afraid of freedom. People can feel weak-kneed because freedom means responsibility, and



sometimes an unbearable weight. Populist dictators arise in this context. They're usually ordinary, self-made men.

The right controls governments almost everywhere in Europe. Talk to us about crisis of the left and Marxist ideals?

After World War II, Marxist values ceased being relevant. In fact, most true leftist parties evolved into social democratic ones. Then, yes, they lost. They have failed to produce new ideas. After the 1960s, which saw remarkable achievements when it comes to emancipation, the civilizing process was exhausted. The left refuses to admit problems it faces and therefore can't find solutions. Consider the question of social integration. It's extremely successful in the United States but not at all so in Europe. Fighting racism means not sweeping it under the rug but looking in the eye.

Europe the growth of a number of new movements and parties, including the extreme rightist Jobber movement in Hungary, which has been accused of being anti-Semitic, anti-Roma and homophobic. How do you explain its rise?

The Jobber is an extreme right wing, racist, anti-Semitic and above all anti-Roma party. It seeks the introduction of racial laws in Hungary. It represents a minority, but has sufficient seats in parliament [47] to influence national policy. It owes its success to the ongoing need for populism. People still wants strong men who tell them what to do and how to live. It picks them hoping that by doing so they can find and happiness. Marry into the nationalism, the party tells you, and you can find a new foundation.

Can culture be an effective antidote to totalitarianism and racism?

That depends on what you mean by culture. According to anthropologists everyone has a culture. Every tribe and every movement. Even the Nazis had a culture. Many representatives of European high culture supported Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, and Franco.

Is there a formula to keep the worst at bay?

In my view it's republican thinking, and by that I mean civic-mindedness and an awareness of what it means to be a citizen. Democracy must be defended and taught daily. Why? Because from a political point of view it's not natural. Its building has no foundation. It's a choice that requires responsibility. It's up to citizens to rally around the

phrase "all men are born" free and do so again and again.

Could there ever be another Holocaust?

Everything that's been done before can happen again. Everything that's been done can also become a model for the future. Everything is possible, especially in modern times, where totalitarianism is a point of reference for many political parties. Racism is among the chief pillars of totalitarianism and there's simply no hope that it's destined to disappeared from Europe forever. It could come back with some kind of mass slaughter, even if the Holocaust has to be considered in its own terms, as unique event and tied to a specific historical context.

Where did you find the strength to resist first Nazi persecution and then the Communist regime?

Under Nazism, I got lucky, but my experience as a Jew who endured persecution helped me empathize with those threatened under communism. After the Holocaust I made a deal with the justice system that allowed me to oppose the regime.

You were in New York City on September 11, 2001.



How did you experience that day?

I was deeply shocked because my son was very close to the Twin Towers. When he came back home I focused instead on the ability of people to organize on a voluntary basis in such a short time. It was more than the solidarity of the kind you see in all disasters. It demonstrated an incredible degree of well-managed autonomy. People rolled up their sleeves. They created meeting places; they held collection drives for those in need; they opened a service center.

Such energy seems to be missing from young Europeans, who seem so oppressed by work and personal insecurity that rebellion is out of the question.

Has Europe become a continent without hope?

Europe is a wonderful museum, if you will, but we need to see in just what way it's connected to the present. I'm admittedly concerned about the skepticism of the Europeans. They don't seem to believe in anything and seek only to improve their lives. Worst of all, most don't even believe in freedom. They're becoming increasingly indifferent. I very much hope that Europe has a future, but I wonder what kind.

Do you see ways of getting beyond this state of limbo?

By paying a price. In the past, things have changed with civil wars, but the Europeans are not ready to pay any price.

There's the European Union, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, but what does 'Europe' really mean today?

These kinds of definitions really don't interest me. Europe has many different identities. If you want definitions you can find them in Christian and not pagan, liberal and non-doctrinaire, freedom-loving and non-totalitarian, illuminated and non-colonialist.

You've said that culture and philosophy exist thanks only to sharing. In those terms, how do you see the current situation in Hungary and other former Communist countries?

The Communist countries were by far the most individualistic. People lived in fear. They had no trust in others and couldn't say what they thought without risk of reprisal. Behavior was automated even when it came to participating in meetings. The change has come with the creation of democratic opposition that has progressively increased the overall sense of solidarity, and with it a sense of community and sharing.

You mention another virtue, goodness, is your work.

Who are 'the good' in today's world?

Those who decide to be good and identify themselves in the choice. I agree with the Socratic definition: "The good prefer to suffer injustice than to commit it." Of course, nobody is perfect, but it is important to be aware of what's far from good. People who are aware of and seek decency are good people.

How would you imagine a better society?

Equality in itself is nonsense if you do not specify in what you're supposed to be equal. I have fought for equal rights, seen in terms of the emancipation of Jews, workers and women. It's absurd, however, to talk about equal income. What everyone should have is a livelihood that's sufficient to manage a home, buy food and provide for the education of children. Poverty is a relative category. It always depends on the structure of needs. There are those who are considered poor simply because they can't buy the latest mobile phone for their child. The just is the necessary, not the extraordinary: A life of dignity. ●