Intellectuals, Philosophy, and Politics in Dark Times: Interview of Ágnes Heller by Waldemar Bulira

Ágnes Heller and Waldemar Bulira

Waldemar Bulira: From the very beginnings of your writings, you were involved in politics. You always treat philosophy as something more than a private enterprise, and I wonder about the reasons for that. You did not want to be just a scholar, am I right?

Ágnes Heller: No philosopher wants to be only a private person—there is no private philosophy. And most philosophers want to understand the world, want to be far more than mere academic bureaucrats. If you look only at the philosophical life in the second half of the twentieth century, we see [Michel] Foucault, [Jacques] Derrida, Hannah Arendt—we still have [Jürgen] Habermas!—all of them were very involved in political matters. That was the spirit of philosophy: the interest in public life. Let me repeat: there is no such a thing as a private philosophy. There is such a thing as a personal philosophy when a philosopher does not want to create a school. But a private philosopher is nonexistent.

This interview was conducted over the course of three years during my work on a book about the critical theory of the Budapest School. It is the result of meetings and conversations I had with Ágnes Heller in Wrocław (2014) and Budapest (2017). These conversations, conducted in English, were recorded and then edited. I also asked her via email to clarify several issues that proved unclear or needed to be further developed.—Waldemar Bulira

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Therefore becoming a philosopher meant for me to be also involved in social life and, first and foremost, in political life. Moreover, I was educated in this vein, educated, as you mentioned, in politics. My father was a very politically oriented person. I was four years old when I knew everything about Adolf Hitler and the Hungarian Nazis. I remember my father came to my school to inform me about Germany's occupation of Austria. I was always not just well informed but also enthusiastically involved in political matters even when I was a child and could not be practically involved. There is always a tension between theoretical involvement and practical involvement. Sometimes you cannot be practically involved. If there is a totalitarian government in your country, there are no politics. Hannah Arendt was right. In totalitarianism there are no politics, not even antipolitics. A little bit of loosening of the situation in Hungary—when Imre Nagy was prime minister in 1953—meant that we could think about political matters, think independently, not just say "it is wrong," because it is not politics to just say that is wrong, that it is terrible or crazy. Thinking about political matters is thinking about the alternatives, and that was possible only after the end of Stalinism in Hungary between 1953 and 1956, and then later, after 1958 and 1959 when the Budapest School became possible again. But in a totalitarian state, one can neither think politically nor act politically. Our major political act during [János] Kádár's rule[1] was the so-called Korčula declaration, in which we protested Russian, Hungarian, and Polish intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968.[2] That was a direct political act, but before this we basically intervened only in theoretical matters. We talked about alienation in socialism. It was difficult to take political action, and the one we did was the abovementioned declaration in Yugoslavia. The government definitely took it as a political action. And we suffered the consequences: we were thrown out of work. In 1973, because of this political act we were regarded as a political opposition, as actors, which is not easy to achieve in a totalitarian country.

WB: Could you say more about your father? It seems that he was the first "liberal"—in a political sense—in your life.

1. János Kádár held power in Hungary from after the Soviet Union crushed the revolution in 1956 until the spring of 1988.

2. In her intellectual autobiography Heller says: "Together with four other Hungarians who had participated in the Korčula Summer School in August 1968, I made a declaration to the 'France Press (Agence France-Presse),' where we protested against the invasion of Soviet armies, the Hungarian army included, into Czechoslovakia" (*Short History of My Philosophy*, 23).

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ÁH: My father was born in Vienna. My grandfather died when my father was four years old. My grandmother was the first woman to study German literature at the University of Vienna. When her husband died, she decided to get a job and took her three children from Austria to Hungary for a position as a so-called *Burgerschool* teacher. *Burgerschool* was more than an elementary school, but not yet a gymnasium. It was a school for girls from the middle class. She first taught in the small city of Modor and then moved to the bigger city Újvidék. Neither of these two cities now belongs to Hungary: the first is now in Slovakia, the second in Serbia.

My father was brought up in a world of ethnical complexity. He read his books in three languages when he was a boy: Hungarian, Slovakian, and German of course. I do not know when precisely he became interested in politics, but certainly by the age of eighteen, when he finished his high school in Újvidék and started studying law at the university. He became a law student for a very simple reason. My grandmother was poor, and the university was expensive. She had thirteen brothers and sisters. One of her brothers had a law firm, and he told my grandma that he would help with the education of her son under the condition that he study law; he wanted someone to help him in his office. My father had no inclinations to study law. He was interested in music, played piano very beautifully, he was interested in writing, in philosophy as well, but he studied law because it was the only way to become what you called an intellectual. But then he returned to Hungary. After the Trianon Peace Treaty, in the twenties, my grandmother gave up her job in Újvidék and decided to move to her daughter['s] to Budapest, and so my father moved as well. My father was a soldier in the Austrian-Hungarian Army, he was a judge. When he became a judge, he decided that he will acquit everyone. At this time there was military martial law: someone was either acquitted or killed, and there was no other option. My father did not want to collaborate in murder, and everyone who came to his court was acquitted. But then in 1916, someone willingly confessed that he killed his commanding officer. What could you do in this matter? My father found him guilty, but immediately wrote a letter to the new emperor of Austria-Hungary and asked for a pardon. He got the pardon. I was very proud of my father that no one was guilty, that everyone was innocent during the four years of his judgeship. That is also a political position even if it is not directly political.

After the war my father joined the so-called bourgeois political party [*bürgerliche Partei*]—the Hungarian Democratic Party at the time, a small party in [Miklós] Horthy's regime, which had very few people in Parliament, if any at all. It was called the Rassay Party (Károly Rassay was head of the

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Party). My father was disappointed with everything. Of course, he hated Horthy's regime and Hitler's regime even more from 1933 onward. He always said that he was a politically minded person but lived in bad times. He should have lived during the French Revolution, then he could have had more options to choose from. In his day every option was bad. He hated communism, he hated Nazism, he hated fascism, he hated Horthy. What could you do in that time? Only one thing: rescue people. And this is what my father started to do after 1933: rescue people. The first rescued people came from intern[ment] camps in Germany. For example, I remember a person came from Dachau, so I knew about Dachau. Then he continued rescuing people who came from Czechoslovakia, then those who came from Poland, Jews and non-Jews. He was also a member—how can I express it—of a group of people who did nothing but rescue other people, getting them false papers. My father went to Germany many times. He looked like a German, in fact, and brought false passports to people there. He told me that he had a very guilty conscience because he was eating only in the restaurants where Jews could not enter. There was a sign in such places—*Juden verboten*—and he went only there. He became more and more active in this so-called conspiracy, and it turned out that Horthy and his men knew about it, but they did not move against them because at that time they realized that Germany might lose the war, and they needed to have some contacts with the English and Americans. During the German occupation of Hungary, the Gestapo took my father together with the others, mostly German citizens. But my father was a Hungarian citizen. Germans are very law-abiding people, and they could not keep or kill a person who was not a German citizen, so they gave him to the Hungarian authorities, who decided that he was a Jew and thus could not go home and should be send to the internment camp. There were three internment camps in Csepel; two of them were deported to Auschwitz, there was no time to deport the third one. My father went to one of the two that were deported. He was not just a political man. He was a really wonderful man, a good man. And he was a person who was always in [a] good mood. He cheered people up. People who came home from the internment camps tell stories how my father kept everyone's spirit up and cheered them up when they were in a state of total depression.

WB: What was your mother like?

ÁH: As a child I never understood what brought my mother and father together. My mother was a totally different person than he. She was of Jewish ancestry

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from eastern Hungary; she respected and loved my father, but she did not understand anything [he did]. Later, she did not understand what I did either. She was a great reactionary in the communist times, which I now appreciate but I did not back then. She always said that I did stupid things. What does it mean to do philosophy? Rather, I should marry a wealthy person and have a good household. That was my mother's idea. I never understood why those two people married each other. Finally, though, I understood it. It was because of a shared good mood. My mother was also always merry and happy, always in a good mood, cheering up everyone. I think it was at this level that they really met each other. There was a merriment in our house. We were poor but it was also celebrated. We celebrated everything, a celebration of life—in spite of everything, in spite of the worse things that happened after the German occupation.

WB: What did you know about the situation of the Jews during World War II?

ÁH: Before the war ended, I knew almost everything that happened to the Jews. I did not know about Auschwitz, I did not know about gas chambers, but I knew about the ghettos and deportations. I knew enough to understand that we should not go when they wanted us to go. I told that to myself after March 19,[3] and I told my mother that we should not go because they are going to kill us. I do not know how I knew that, maybe that was the instinct of a young girl: "If you go where they take us, they are going to kill us. We should never obey them." That was the first principle. And in between there was a correspondence through a mediator between my father and myself. The correspondent was a social democrat. He took parcels to my father, brought letters from him. On June 16, 1944, my father was deported, and after that we did not hear from him again except a piece of paper from the train.[4]

Let us go back to March 19 [1944], when my father did not come back home. This is when all the anti-Jewish measures were taken: the yellow star, the yellow star house, and later on the ghetto. Since all Jews were deported from the Hungarian countryside, only half of the Jews, those living in Budapest, remained. We belonged to that half. They had no time to deport us, because they listened to [Adolf] Eichmann and not to the Hungarian experts, who

3. March 19, 1944, is when the German occupation of Hungary began.

4. While being transported to Auschwitz, Pál Heller threw from the train window a small note in which he assured his wife and daughter that he was feeling well and that they would see each other soon. A stranger who found the note sent it to the Budapest address of Heller and her mother, which Pál Heller had written on it. The card is now in the collection of Heller's daughter.

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said that Budapest should be deported first, because the cleverest Jews are living in Budapest. But Eichmann said that it would be the wrong decision because then they could escape to the countryside and hide. That is why they deported the countryside first, and Budapest would be later. We were, in fact, saved by Eichmann's stupidity or prejudice, if I may say so. Only half of the population of Budapest Jews were saved because the young men were taken to the labor battalions, sent directly to the front and died from the cruelty of their officers and from the front itself. Many were taken from Budapest not to Auschwitz but to Austria, forced to walk to the Austrian borders, et cetera. I won't tell you everything, it was a very difficult time. I discussed it with a friend, Mihály Vajda—you know him! He told me a few days ago that he will never get over the feeling of total humiliation, that he is nobody, that he can be killed at any moment. And that he still feels this sense of humiliation. I have not felt this! I have never felt myself humiliated. I was proud of my yellow star, identified with it. Why should I be humiliated? They were the ones who should feel humiliated! I never felt myself humiliated, but I felt that my life was constantly, at every moment, in danger. When I was taken to the Danube, and everyone was shot before me, I only had a moment to decide whether to jump into the river or not.[5] This kind of being between life and death, this kind of narrow margin between life and death—that was my trauma, but not humiliation. People can feel different kinds of trauma from similar experiences, and no two people can have exactly the same experience.

WB: For you the war was over when the Russians entered Hungary.

ÁH: Yes, then came liberation. For me, the Russians liberated me. In Hungary you can no longer speak about liberation because it is "a dirty word." But I was liberated, indeed. We have to remember that liberty does not come out of liberation. Liberation is the condition of liberty, but liberation can be misused, and another kind of oppression can be born from liberation. And exactly this happened in Hungary: it was a liberation, and from this liberation the other oppression followed. After liberation there was a two-year period of quasi democracy in Hungary, which was then the only state in Eastern Europe, Poland included,

5. Heller escaped death several times during purges carried out by Hungarian nationalists in 1944. One place where the Nyilasists executed Jews was on the banks of the Danube (near the Margaret Bridge). Once Heller was lined up with other Hungarian Jews in front of a firing squad, but at the last moment she was saved from death by one of the executioners, whom she knew personally. Heller did not cross the Margaret Bridge until 1956, while demonstrating during the Hungarian Revolution.

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that had a democratically elected government. The prewar political parties received 60 percent of the votes—the Communist Party only had 17 percent of the vote in the first elections. There were two free elections in Hungary, and of course Russia put an end to it in 1948. That was the time of [Josip] Tito's rise. The turning point was a show trial of László Rajk, which started Stalinism in Hungary. Stalinism began in 1948, not in 1945, not at the moment of liberation. At the time communists were [in the] minority. There were also Christian Democrats, the Freeland Owner Party—that was the majority of the government. After that we entered Stalinism, which was the second worst period in my life. The first period was certainly the nine months of active deportations and active Nazism together with the takeover by the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party (Nyilasists).[6] But then, after the war, to speak in personal terms, I was abandoned. I lost everyone who was important for me. I lost my father, who was the most important person; I lost the company of four girls and four boys, with whom I lived. It was a small group, we liked each other, we loved each other. My first love was among them, and he was killed by an Arrow Cross member in January 1945, two weeks before liberation. He was not hiding and was shot. This is why I never had a grudge against Germany. Many people always asked: "Why don't you hate the Germans?" But why should I hate the Germans? The Hungarians killed my friends. I hate Nazism and totalitarianism, but the Germans—I never had this feeling about them. Some Jews, in fact, many Jews had the feeling that they would never go to Germany. Even now they would never visit Germany. I never ever felt this way. I do not think it was a matter of human nature. That is why I was so interested in ethics and politics personally. Because my question was not why Germans did it, but how humans could do that. Similarly, my question about the Soviet regime is how such a political system can exist at all? I hate neither Russians nor Germans. I never identified political systems with nations.

WB: Can we say that your father or [György] Lukács were tragic persons? Were they victims of History with a capital *H*?

ÁH: There is no such a thing as a "victim of History," because history is not a necessity. History is neither destiny nor fate. History is a condition under which we can choose and act. No one is a victim of history. If there is a moment you

6. The Arrow Cross Party was a far-right, ultranationalist party that held power in Hungary from October 15, 1944, to March 28, 1945, and was responsible for tens of thousands of deportations and deaths.

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can choose, the moment you can act, you are no longer the victim of history. You are an actor in history. Lukács was not a victim of history. Neither was [Martin] Heidegger, neither was anyone who joined any totalitarian ideology and country.

WB: But it was a unique moment in history. . . .

ÁH: Before World War I the conditions were bad. People had become dissatisfied with the last twenty years of peace. They were dissatisfied because nothing interesting was happening. European society was a boring society. In Hungary, in Germany, in Austria, in France nothing really happened. In the Third Republic, of course, there was the Dreyfus affair, but after that again nothing interesting occurred. The people were extremely enthusiastic about World War I. They could finally show that they are no worse than others; that they could be courageous; that there were heroes among them; that they cared about something; that politics was not just a day-to-day, bureaucratic business; and that they were creating a new world, a new idea, a new utopia, and could get it done, et cetera. That was the general feeling of the young people before World War I. And then came the disappointment that all those dreams were not realized, while something else, something very different happened: millions of corpses happened. Yet this did not diminish but only increased the desire for redemption. You had a double need for redemption, not only from boredom, but also from the world in which all of this was happening. Then came the totalitarian movements: Bolshevism, Nazism, and first of all Italian fascism. [Benito] Mussolini was the first because in the twenties he was ready to abandon the idea of having a fascist government in order to become prime minister of the government elected by the king. Italy was not really a totalitarian country—not like Nazi Germany and Bolshevik Russia. It became totalitarian only at the end, when Mussolini returned to the Salò Republic. Mussolini's position was quite clear: we need heroes, we need to be heroic, we need to be like the ancient Romans. It has to be a great nation. And, of course, in a way Italy was left out from the partition of the world by European powers, they wanted to have colonies.

Sympathy for new totalitarian movements was very typical of intellectuals. Italian intellectuals and then German, Hungarian, Austrian, and Russian intellectuals. In Russia this process was interesting, because these intellectuals started to develop totalitarian ideas even before the Bolshevik takeover; it had deeper roots. In Hungary and Austria, totalitarianism had no real roots, unlike

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in Italy and France. This explains why Italian and French Communist Parties were different from other communist parties—they had their own traditions and did not have to rely just on the Russian tradition. That was Lukács's world.

WB: It was the world of Lukács and Heidegger. . . .

ÁH: Heidegger and Lukács. Heidegger wanted to redeem Germany; Lukács wanted to redeem the world. That was the difference. Heidegger believed that it is possible to re-create in Germany ancient Greek culture, that is, ancient Greek tragedy, poetry, and philosophy. He believed that Germany—the people of philosophy, the people of wisdom, and the people of poetry—will become the leading power in Europe. As he says in the second part of *Being and Time*, everyone chooses his hero. And, of course, he chose his hero in Adolf Hitler. But he was disappointed. He wanted to overcome this lousy, disenchanted world of technology, of science and rationality, of boredom.

Lukács wanted to overcome not the disenchanted world, but the world of nations, the world of particularity. He wanted the idea of world domination. He believed that when he joined the Communist Party, he would become the new Augustine. Augustine joined Christianity while previously being a Platonist, and the worst Platonist in his own eyes. He chose Christianity and later became a great model for all Christians. Lukács believed that when he joined communism, especially after writing *History and Class Consciousness*, he would become the great Augustine of a new world movement. He believed that Bolshevism will be the new Christianity. It was of course the worst illusion he could have had. But when he learned that he was wrong, he was not courageous enough to escape.

WB: When did he realize that?

ÁH: He realized that communism is not the new Christianity when he wrote the *Blum Theses* (1928), which really proposes, although very reluctantly, a kind of democratic socialism. That was the moment when he realized that something is wrong. But then came the Nazi takeover. He could not go back to Hungary, where he was sentenced to death. He could not go to any part of the West because he was a functionary of the Communist Party. He had no escape. He had to go to the Soviet Union. It was unavoidable for him to become more and more involved in something that he himself already considered absolutely untrue. And he tried to get out of it by sidestepping, by speaking not about politics, but

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about Goethe or Schiller. That was a way to escape, to remain loyal and to perform self-criticism.

WB: Ferenc Fehér wrote an essay about Lukács's Weimar in Russia.[7]

ÁH: Yes, Lukács had a Weimar in Russia because he was escaping from there to Weimar. Escaping to Goethe, to Schiller, escaping to German classicism. And, of course, Goethe had a very big influence on Lukács's work. Goethe was perhaps the single most important influence on his work. But at the same time, Lukács had to show that he is loyal. And that is why he had to write his book against [Friedrich] Nietzsche. The first book against Nietzsche was not bad.[8] It was Nietzsche and fascism. It was a one-sided interpretation of Nietzsche (of course, every interpretation is one-sided) and an unjust interpretation of Nietzsche. But it was not a bad book. But then came the first part of *The Destruction of Reason* (1954), which is a total, tremendous failure. In fact, I think, he lost his brilliance in this book. That is the worst thing with all compromises. Lukács was a genius, and his works were the works of genius. His first book *Soul and Form* (1910) discovered the essay as a form of future philosophy. And the preface is wonderful. Even *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), although it is a very Bolshevik book, has its splendor of theoretical argumentation and presentation. He addresses the major issues of that time and finds their solution in a unification of the empirical and the transcendental. That was a good philosophical solution to a very old and important philosophical issue. That is why it was an important book. After that he wrote something interesting, I sympathize with it, about the historical novel. The first part he wrote in the early 1940s[9] in the Soviet Union, a very good comparison of historical drama and the historical novel which you can still use. In my book on the contemporary historical novel, I rely heavily on it in the preface. But in the second part of *The Historical Novel*, his great genius is gone. It is not bad what he writes. It is the work of a clever scholar, a clever intellectual, but it is no longer the work of a genius. That is a problem of the later Lukács. In the book on aesthetics (*Ästhetik: In vier Teilen*, 1972–76), his major work, he forgot what he wants to know—that the essay is a real and proper form of modern philosophy. He still knows that in *History and Class Consciousness*, because the chapter on

7. Fehér, "Lukács in Weimar."

8. Heller probably means Lukács, "Der deutsche Faschismus und Nietzsche."

9. *The Historical Novel* first appeared in Russian in 1937; the German version was published in 1955.

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Verdinglichung (reification) is an essay, and the whole book is in fact an essay volume. Even in *The Historical Novel* he knew that very well. But somehow time and again he turned back to the bad idea of Ernst Bloch. Bloch persuaded him when he was young that we should not abandon the old forms of philosophy, that we should write long monographs which include everything. And Lukács tried it in the *Heidelberg Aesthetics*, which remained unfinished but contains some very interesting ideas. It was published in early 1970. But he abandoned this idea. He went back to this idea when he started writing on aesthetics. And as a very great monograph, *Ästhetik* includes everything, which means that many good essays are included. But what remains true about essays as his other form of expression is also true about his book on aesthetics. There are good essays there, but there are also very bad ones there. The book is a combination, a compilation of different kinds of essays. And in this respect, you can say it has its great merits, but as a whole I think it is no longer readable. And as far as *Ontology* (1972) is concerned, we, his students, in his lifetime already presented him our judgment and our problems with this book.

But as a person he remained brilliant. He was a master teacher, I can tell you that. The first seminars I attended with him were on [Immanuel] Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and [G. W. F.] Hegel's *Aesthetics*. We were lucky that Lukács offered a seminar devoted to the topic on which he never wrote anything in his Marxist period. That was important. He had to revisit his experiences and thoughts of his youth when he discussed those books with us. That was the young Lukács that we got. And Lukács at the time was almost seventy. These were brilliant courses. He was a great teacher and great master. He controlled the seminars in a wonderful way. We were very much taken by him in these seminars. He was also a teacher in other matters. He was so sure that he was the embodiment of the world spirit that he was happy when others told him that he was wrong. This proved that they were loyal to him! This man was full of self-contradictions. I told him that he is wrong when I was eighteen years old, and he was teaching us about [Jean-Paul] Sartre. I pointed out that he was wrong to claim that Sartre in his book *Existentialism Is a Humanism* said something that was the exact opposite of what he had said in *Being and Nothingness*. I said: "Comrade Lukács, it is not the case because he only interpreted his own composition and essentially it is all the same," and he looked at me and said: "You might be right." And this was always his answer. When I told him that I read his essay on [Honoré de] Balzac's *The Peasants*, "Professor Lukács, everything you wrote about economy in Balzac is good, but it is a bad novel," he looked at me and said, "Perhaps you are right." I was amused by his reply; he

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liked counterarguments. He always knew that he was right, but he loved counterarguments. And that is why I think of him as a good teacher. But as I told you, what is the conclusion? Loyalty. He used to say: the Party may be right or wrong, but it is my party. But if there was a conflict between his party and himself, he demanded 100 percent loyalty of his students against the Party. We should not be loyal to the Party, we should be loyal to him! Because he is the truth, and the Party can be untruth. And this was the case. He rejected all the students who chose the Party, who remained in the Party when he was no longer in the Party. He even did not want to talk to them. Why? Personal loyalty was the thing. He was a combination of the communist functionary and a very honest, very decent gentleman.

WB: Let me go back to the category of an intellectual. Is there anything like a mission or task of an intellectual?

ÁH: I do not think that intellectuals have any special task. At least not in liberal democracy or even in half-liberal democracy or even in illiberal democracy. As long as they can act as citizens, they have the same obligations and duties as other citizens, and they can decide whether to do their duty or not; whether they will be active citizens or passive citizens. In a totalitarian country or in any kind of strict dictatorship, intellectuals have other functions. They should act as if they lived in a democracy and expressed their views irrespective of the consequences. Intellectuals in Iran have a different obligation than intellectuals in America, where intellectuals have no special function at all. Or intellectuals in Hungary where we have a tradition of the intellectual's influence. Our government is an antiliberal democratic government, so here we can still act as citizens and need to do it irrespective of consequences. But the consequences are not the same as in a dictatorship. In a dictatorship the consequences are imprisonment and can include the death penalty. But in a country where there is no death penalty, you do not face this kind of consequence. A different kind of courage is needed, civic courage and not so much military courage; in a dictatorial or totalitarian state, you need a kind of courage which is similar to a military one, although we are not soldiers. But even in illiberal democracy you can practice civil courage. It is not the courage of a soldier. You do not need to be heroic.

WB: But the Budapest School had a mission.

ÁH: Yes, because that was a totalitarian government. In a totalitarian state, there are no citizens, just subjects. In totalitarianism there are no politics. We

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could resist, and in this case resistance was a function of being intellectuals. Politically involved intellectuals can resist. There is passive resistance and there is active resistance, and you can choose whether passive or active resistance is the possible avenue of opposition. It is not always the same. [Mohandas] Gandhi wanted passive resistance. I would say that active resistance is also possible, but I am strictly against violence. In liberal democratic states the opposition should not be violent. And in all states, irrespective of whether they are democratic or totalitarian or whatever, I am very much against every kind of terror.

WB: But during your Budapest period did you consider yourself a radical?

ÁH: In that time we thought about ourselves in various ways. We were different people. Mihály Vajda and I thought of ourselves as radicals. But György Márkus never considered himself a radical. In fact, we were judged in exactly the same way by the government. Whether we were members of the Communist Party or never belonged to it or were thrown out of it, we were treated in the same way because the Party was interested only in one thing: who is against and who is with us? And if someone is against us, he is by definition not with us. That was a clear-cut policy. I understood myself as radical because I fancied a relationship with the New Left and the radicalism of the New Left, which was anti-Soviet and anti-communist, yet still was a form of leftist radicalism.

WB: What did you know at that time about the New Left?

ÁH: I had contacts with the New Left in Germany and some New Leftists in France and in America. At the time I started to publish in *Telos* in America which belonged to the New Left. I was permitted in 1965 to go to Korčula [in Croatia], where there was a summer school and where I personally got acquainted with some members of the New Left, which did not yet exist but was *in statu nascendi*. There were a lot of leftists, totally different sorts of them. There were Trotskyists, anarchists, liberal leftists, rationalists, et cetera. I do not remember all of them, but all of them were anti-Soviet. In Korčula there were people like Lucien Goldman. I was very pleased that I could be there and participate in the discussions. Everyone believed that we had a message for the world. Today that sounds ridiculous. Of course, we did not mean that we could redeem the world, that was something different—we thought that what we saw was important, and it changed something. It was a kind of

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political attitude. Whatever we saw, whatever we discussed—history, domination, even ethics—it had to do something, we realized that it would make things happen in the world. And that is why I feel a nostalgia about this time, because such a discourse does not exist anymore.

WB: You also met Leszek Kołakowski in Korčula.

ÁH: Yes, but the first time I met Leszek was in Berlin. In 1956 there was an interesting and important conference on freedom organized by Ernst Bloch and Wolfgang Harich. It was just after the famous Khrushchev speech,[10] so we knew what he had said. We were together with Kołakowski in Berlin at this conference, which was considered to be an opposition conference carrying out the promises of the change of our regime. We believed after Khrushchev's speech that the regime will collapse; we were there to prepare something new. Then I got to know Leszek who was a brilliant young man, and I believed then that he will be the great philosopher of our future. In a way I am sorry, but I was mistaken. He became a very important man but did not become the kind of person I believed that he should have become. I do not know why. I was thinking about it and even discussing it with other Poles. Maybe because as a young person, he was very much a Marxist. In *Po prostu* he wrote brilliant things. There were three people from Poland in Berlin: Kołakowski, Andrzej Walicki, and Tadeusz Kroński. Wolfgang Harich invited all of us to a dinner, and we started to talk about what has to be done. When we started to discuss the Soviet Union, I still remember, Leszek and myself said: "Fifty-fifty. It is a terrible place but at the same time they defeated Nazism et cetera." We judged it but found some benefits. Kroński started to shout at us: "You are crazy, you two! Murderers, they are murderers! There is nothing to defend, no justifying circumstances. They are just murderers." This was my first meeting with Leszek, I knew him from this period.

And then came the Hungarian Revolution in October [1956]. Leszek sent Wiktor Woroszylski to Budapest as a journalist. Leszek put us into contact, and I informed him about the revolution, and he published a book in Poland, but my name was changed. Only after the system change was the book published with my real name. Then, in 1957, I was sent by Lukács to Poland. That time he could not go. In Hungary the reaction after 1956 came slowly. János Kádár was a clever man. The great trials came later. In 1957 for a while, things slowly devel-

10. On February 25, 1956, Khrushchev delivered the "Secret Speech" at the Twentieth Party Congress, in which he denounced Stalin's purges and commenced a less repressive era in the Soviet Union.

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oped. People were not yet imprisoned. I was sent by Lukács because at the time Istvan Örkény and two other Hungarian writers were in prison. Lukács said that I should enter in contact with the Polish Writers Union, which could intervene with the French and Italian Communist Parties to rescue Örkény and the others from imprisonment. I contacted them in Warsaw and perhaps they did something. They did something for Lukács for sure, because when Lukács was in Romania there was a successful intervention from [Palmiro] Togliatti. During my stay in Warsaw, I met Leszek for the second time. We had a lengthy conversation and a good time in Warsaw, which looked very different from how it looks now. I also met others: Zygmunt Bauman for instance. I met him again half a year ago in Italy and reminded him that he invited me, and his wife told her story from the ghetto.[11] I met Włodzimierz Brus and other people from the same group. I liked them very much. But after returning to Hungary my passport was taken so I could not leave again. I met Leszek at the time once again because he came to Budapest and visited Lukács. I introduced Leszek to Lukács. But because I could not go abroad again, the next time I met him was in Korčula.

WB: I asked about the New Left because during emigration you and Fehér were “at war” with the New Left.

ÁH: We were not critical of the New Left as such, because it was a combination of many different kinds of tendencies. One of them was an idea about communities. Of course, this could have been naive, but I would still support this idea. There was the idea of antiviolence, and I would still support this idea although it is very naive. There was an idea of an anti-communist party, particularly in France, but not just in France. I supported this idea. But then, later on, the proviolence sector came to the surface. The worst sort of people who emerged from the New Left made a case for violence and for terror, especially in Italy. I was immediately against that. My book *The Theory of Need in Marx* (1976) was published in Italy seven times. I know that some people liked it because they believed that it supported a kind of violence. I immediately wrote an article translated into Italian: “Please, do not misunderstand me: I reject all kinds of violence.” I started to oppose the interpretation of my own work by people from the New Left with whom I disagreed. I agreed with certain people from the New Left, but there was a part of the New Left that started idealizing

11. Janina Bauman published her memoirs while in exile in the United Kingdom. See Bauman, *Winter in the Morning*.

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Soviet dictatorship. Come on! In some way I understand that they wanted to identify themselves with something which did not only exist in their brain. And they had to find a country with which they could identify. It was Yugoslavia, Prague Spring, Kadarist Hungary. If all of that turned out to be false, then it was [Ruhollah] Khomeini. Even Foucault sympathized with Khomeini when he came to power after the Iranian Revolution.

WB: Foucault and Khomeini—indeed, that sounds unbelievable. . . .

ÁH: Yes, he did. So many intellectuals sympathized with Mao Zedong and his Cultural Revolution, that means with all kinds of crazy violent actions. Of course, I was against these tendencies. I did not write against the New Left, but against exactly these tendencies of the Western Left, maybe that is the better term to use here, which idealized Eastern European (and not only Eastern European) dictatorships because they were critical of their own countries. We—Fehér and I—were against this, but not against positive aspects of the New Left, which I still appreciate.

WB: Probably the best example of this position would be your essays and the book about the antinuclear movement.[12]

ÁH: Definitely. It was directed especially against the peace movement in West Germany. Maybe I have already told you the story of how it started?

WB: No, I am listening.

ÁH: I was invited in Bonn to the great peace demonstration. The organizers asked me to speak, and I did so in their spirit. And then I listened to the speakers after me and realized how wrong I was. I wanted to speak a second time. I got the chance to do so and said that everything I had heard here was wrong. Everything was different. Only then did I realize what the peace movement was. They wanted to make us believe that the Soviet Union is a great peaceful state and America is the greatest danger in the whole world. America is going to war, and the Soviet Union is poor and peaceful. I said that it was totally false. Then I came home and told Feri that maybe the antinuclear movement is a kind of German nationalism. Because perhaps Germans cannot tolerate that they were liberated by these terrible democratic countries, so now they use the

12. Fehér and Heller, *Doomsday or Deterrence?*

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nationalism of: "We are different." In a way I think I was right. Then Feri and I sat down to write the book about the nuclear weapon as deterrence. It was against this peace movement. And, look, after the system change when archives were opened, it turned out that they were really organized by Russian informers and agents.

WB: And there was also *Dictatorship over Needs*,[13] a book written with Márkus and Fehér, which was critical of the Western Left.

ÁH: It was written a long time before. It was the only book that we wrote directly after arriving in Australia [in 1977], and the book about the peace movement was written later. In *Dictatorship* we wanted the Budapest School to somehow remain. We wanted to write a book together, the three of us. Ultimately, we wrote three different books. If you read this book, you can find entirely different sorts of conceptions in it. Afterward we did not and could not agree on our ideas. We agreed only on one thing—that the communist/real existing socialist world needs to be rejected, but why it should be rejected, why it is bad—here we disagreed. My position was different from the position of Márkus and from Fehér's. As a result, it is a book that consists of three essays on a similar topic. But totally different conceptions.

WB: That is the last book of the Budapest School.

ÁH: Indeed, I think that it is the last book written by the Budapest School. In Budapest we had different judgments and different positions as well as different philosophies. But we had something that Lukács described as a renaissance of Marxism, which held us together, although none of us worked on fulfilling this renaissance. In my book on feelings,[14] there is zero Marxism, not just no "renaissance." But something still kept us together. Maybe it was the opposition to our government? I mean that we did something different than official Marxism. But with emigration there was no common opposition because there was no common enemy. Additionally, we had different kinds of interests, and these different interests came to the fore. Vajda was the first who took up against the common project. In Australia Fehér, Márkus, and I just wanted to complete the last part of it. So, you are right that the analyses of real socialism as a form of dictatorship over needs was the last undertaking of the Budapest School.

13. Fehér, Heller, and Márkus, *Dictatorship over Needs*.
14. Heller, *Theory of Feelings*.

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WB: Was Vajda skeptical of this project?

ÁH: Mishu [Vajda] told me that he disliked Fehér's chapter and believed that Márkus's chapter is very well written, but it has nothing to do with the whole project, and that he only liked my chapter. He said that ten years ago. I do not know what he believes now.

I started my part with the conception of Max Weber. The categories of legitimation, rationality, et cetera. were taken from Weber. All my categories in the book are Weberian. I remember that I wanted to apply them to understanding the Soviet regime. When I speak about ideology or terror, I do not think there is anything Marxian in it because my concept of ideology was entirely different from the Marxian account of ideology. I remember the ideas of Márkus and Fehér, but I do not remember how much of Marx was there. In my part I could not possibly use Marxian categories because they were not applicable. But I do not think that any category is applicable as such to anything. I mean that you can apply categories in a good way or in a wrong way. I do not use Marxian categories anymore, but I have nothing against people who do use them if they illuminate something when using them. I am not opposed to doctrines, I just do not like any doctrinairism. It was a long time ago that I ceased to do Marxism as a profession. Besides, I do not think that I was ever a Marxist, although I identified myself as one. How could I be a Marxist if my book on everyday life[15] rejected the role of the proletariat, rejected the paradigm of production? How could I be a Marxist while rejecting two major theses of Marxism? But I considered myself a Marxist, and this is the issue of how you describe yourself. I ceased to describe myself as Marxist, but it does not mean that I became anti-Marxist. I am not an "anti-anyone." I am not an anti-communist, I am not an antifascist, I am not an anti. . . . I do not like "antis."

WB: A significant part of your work is on totalitarianism. Why didn't you ever write anything on fascism? It was only Vajda who, as part of the Budapest School, wrote a book on fascism.[16]

ÁH: In my mind Vajda's book is [a] very well written one.

WB: It is a Marxist book.

15. Heller, *Everyday Life*.
16. Vajda, *Fascism as a Mass Movement*.

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ÁH: Right, but it is a very interesting Marxism. It is returning to the roots. Vajda's Marxism is an unorthodox one. His position on fascism is entirely different from the official conception of fascism by the Communist Party at that time. This book provides an interesting, new conception of fascism. . . .

WB: What is this difference?

ÁH: The comparison between the New Deal and fascism. In America and Europe, they had to face the same phenomenon. But you can deal with the same phenomenon in entirely different ways. And this was an entirely new conception—to write about the New Deal as a way of handling the same problems, crises, et cetera. and in an entirely different way than it was treated by fascism. I think that it was a brilliant book.

WB: Why didn't you write anything about fascism?

ÁH: In philosophy it is not good to decide about the topic, the topic decides that you should write about it. You should ask Mishu how this topic addressed him in such a way that he thought he should write about it. I can tell that there is something in the air and, of course, Hegel was right when he said that philosophy is nothing but a time formulated in concepts. But Nietzsche is also right: philosophy is autobiography. And Vajda, Feri, Márkus, and I, we all wanted to grasp our own world in concepts, but we have different biographies. And you have to ask Vajda why this book on fascism fit his biography so well.

WB: You wrote many things with Fehér. How did this intellectual cooperation work?

ÁH: That is an interesting question. Our whole cooperation was in political theory. You mentioned books about the nuclear issue, about the Western and Eastern Left,[17] there were also papers on class or on literature. But ultimately it was all on political theory. We never cooperated on anything that did not concern political theory. What Feri wrote about the French Revolution[18] was entirely his work. And as I just heard in France, this is the only book about this event written by a foreigner appreciated in France. It was really a very good

17. Fehér and Heller, *Eastern Left, Western Left*.
18. Fehér, *Frozen Revolution*.

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work, but I did not cooperate with him there. I have no talent in understanding these little connections of facts and interpretations that historical writing is all about. He also wrote many articles about Hungarian history which you do not know obviously. He has not cooperated in many of my philosophical works. I asked him to read them, he made critical remarks, but that was all. Cooperation happened when something interested us both. And this was political philosophy.

WB: Márkus was very critical about your contemporary philosophy. There is some disagreement between you.

ÁH: There was always disagreement, and that is beautiful.

WB: But this disagreement seems to be fundamental.

ÁH: What is fundamental disagreement? Fundamental disagreement is when you cannot discuss it. As long as you can discuss, a disagreement may be there but is not fundamental. A difference of opinion is very important because without it you have no discussion. You cannot enlarge and enrich your own position if you don't have someone who disagrees with it. And I loved that Márkus disagreed with me from the very beginning. I gave him all my papers, and he always criticized every second sentence, why it is wrong, why it is bad, et cetera. And I was very grateful to him that he did so. I either listened to him or I did not. Sometimes I was completely satisfied with what I had written, and with regard to his comments I thought: "Fine, but I will not change anything. That is his opinion, and this is mine." Sometimes I changed something in my position because of his disagreement. It is very fruitful.

WB: Can we say that you have different views on the role of contemporary philosophy in our culture?

ÁH: You are right, this is the essential disagreement between us. We have different views about contemporary philosophy and culture. Márkus has a conservative soul. And that is autobiographical. He is a cultural critic, and for him, even if he does not use this word, contemporary philosophy and art are decadent. In this respect he is the only true follower of Lukács, although in a non-Marxist way. And I am not. I love contemporary philosophy and art because I am curious. Curiosity for me is very important. "Go to the exhibition of

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contemporary art," I try to persuade Márkus, "look at the works of art, listen to this music, if only once." But he rejects it. In this respect you cannot have an argument. He listens too much to music from the eighteenth century and has seen too many pictures painted in that period. The problem is that you cannot have a discussion about this. You cannot discuss philosophers, because he did not read them. In one case I persuaded him and that was Foucault. He started to appreciate Foucault, although initially he rejected him. For Márkus, Derrida is nothing, Foucault was zero, everything contemporary was zero except Habermas, whom he appreciated for his rationalism. Márkus is a rationalist. It was my success that I persuaded him to take Foucault seriously. Now he does. But in this respect, he didn't need to persuade me about anything because I am just curious. Maybe it is a gender difference. Maybe for men agreement or disagreement is what matters. For me the crucial thing is how interesting a given position is. It is not interesting whether I agree or disagree. That is not the main point, but whether something is beautiful, impressive, interesting, challenging. I do not mind if I think the opposite.

WB: You met Foucault before his death. Did his writing influence you in any way? You wrote a book about biopolitics, for instance.[19]

ÁH: I started to like his philosophy before I met him. I even started to teach Foucault in Australia. I met him when [Ronald] Reagan was first elected, I was in New York, and he also was there. We were invited by the same institution—New York University. So that was the moment when I first meet Foucault, but as an author I knew him earlier. I started to like him personally after that meeting. I was also curious, his views were interesting, a totally different point of view, a different outlook on the world. It fascinated me simply: it was original, I had never come across this way of thinking. That was my impression of Derrida as well: something entirely different. [He was] the person about whom you cannot ask the question: What did he say? What was his position? How funny! An author, a philosopher whom you cannot ask the question "what is your position?," because it is not about positions. So, I like those two personally, and I like their philosophies. I am a happy person because I like personally those philosophers whose philosophy I also like. I like Foucault, Derrida, Habermas, Luhmann, and of course I like Leszek Kołakowski. I think I am in [a] good situation.

19. Fehér and Heller, *Biopolitics*.

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WB: What was the reaction to your book on biopolitics?

ÁH: I do not know. I must confess something: the older I am, the less I am interested in reactions. I wrote the book together with Fehér. I also wrote a special study on biopolitics in a volume I edited with another person[20]—I spoke about Arendt's conception there. *Biopolitics* was an ad hoc book. There was no program behind it. This book belongs to the political philosophy I wrote together with Feri. It was a reaction to the fashion of dealing with politics that was popular back then: the politics of gender, the politics of race, the politics of population growth. The concept was coined by Foucault, and we followed in Foucault's footsteps but reacted to the then contemporary issues which were not yet apparent in his time because, unfortunately, he died very young.

WB: You often criticize contemporary feminism as a kind of biopolitics.

ÁH: I very much appreciate women's liberation, but I am very critical about feminism because I am critical of all isms. If you accept any ism, then you accept a group of theses and have to join all these theses. You cannot be a feminist if you do not accept that thousands of years ago women created works which were as important as the works of Sophocles or Rubens, and I think that is ridiculous. Creating a history of women which aims to prove that we have created as special works of art as men, that our philosophers were as great as your (male) philosophers is nonsensical. I do not want to fight the class war against men, and at the time we were supposed to do precisely that. There were two classes: the men class and the women class. I cannot accept that. I love women's liberation, but I do not like the grand narrative of feminism. By the way, I was the one who rejected the idea that we should have gender studies at the New School in New York. I said: "If you want to have gender studies, I agree on one condition: only men should teach it." Women should teach philosophy, physics, chemistry, history but not gender. Gender is the new kitchen. I do not want to be pushed back to the kitchen. From the position of women's liberation, I am very critical of certain kinds of feminism.

WB: Let's go back to Lukács. You once said that Lukács was a type of person who had to have a school.

20. Heller, "Has Biopolitics Changed the Concept of the Political?"

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ÁH: That is true.

WB: Is it a natural desire of an intellectual to have some pupils, some followers?

ÁH: I cannot speak about intellectuals as such, but there are certain professions: philosophy, psychology, or economy where there were the masters who wanted to have a school. Not everywhere. Writers do not have schools, painters perhaps do, but writers do not. Of course, it depends on the person. Philosophers normally did have schools. It is important for them to get together with the students—students take part in the wisdom of the master. Lukács wanted to have a school already as a young person in Budapest. He was only twenty when he had a school. The young Karl Mannheim, who at that time was a high school student, belonged to this school. Then Lukács wanted to have a school in Austria, in Germany he could not have it, he tried to form one in the Soviet Union but without success. There was only one person with whom he was strongly affiliated, and that was Mikhail Lifshitz.

When Lukács came back to Budapest, he tried to create a school, but those students betrayed him—they chose the Party instead of him. We were his second school in Budapest. And we were chosen by Lukács as a school. I was his student very early on, since I was eighteen, and the others joined later. Márkus was in the Soviet Union, Mishu was younger, he was from the Lenin Institute and came to Lukács through me, because I was teaching at the Lenin Institute for a very short time. After that Vajda came to our university and became a follower of Lukács. Fehér was also with Lukács from very early on, later than I but still very early. Only later he was at the university, but he was close also in a private way. Then came the young generation, the so-called Lukács's kindergarten. They were mainly the students of Márkus, who was teaching at the University of Budapest and thus not directly Lukács's students—János Kis, György Bence. Sandor Radnoti was a student of Feri.

WB: Many years ago, you wrote a paper about the responsibility of a philosopher. In what sense and for what is a philosopher responsible?

ÁH: It was a paper I wrote for Lukács's seventieth birthday. In a way it was addressed to him. I was very young at that time. What is a philosopher's responsibility? The answer depends on the issue of "responsibility for what?" We are responsible for friends, and this kind of responsibility we share with all others. We can be responsible for our writings and our ideas, and this is a special

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responsibility of a philosopher. We have to be responsible for what we are writing, what we are telling our students, whether we say what we consider to be true or whether we are pretending, whether we are accommodating, whether we behave like a parvenu, et cetera. This is the responsibility as a philosopher, the responsibility as a writer, the responsibility as a teacher. And there is also the other kind of responsibility, which is political responsibility. The latter is, in a way, present all the time, either positively (responsibility for what we are doing) or negatively (we are responsible for what we are not doing). But the specificity of responsibility of a philosopher comes down only to his responsibility for his thinking, his writing, for his students.

WB: Was Marx responsible for his philosophy? What about Nietzsche? What about Heidegger?

ÁH: Marx is naturally not responsible for Bolshevism; Nietzsche is not responsible for Nazism. Of course, there was something in their thinking which could be used by Bolsheviks or by Nazis. But the fact that something can be used is not the responsibility of the person whose ideas were used. Your ideas can be used and misused. You are not responsible unless you are still alive and can say: “Do not do it!,” “It is not what I said,” “It is not what I wanted.” One can do whatever one wants with a dead person; one can get something from his/her teaching and use or misuse it for one’s own purposes. Karl Marx is responsible for what he actually did. Nietzsche is responsible for what he actually did. Marx is responsible for volume I of *Capital* and for the different essays he wrote during his lifetime, but not for the other volumes that he never finished. He is responsible for his writing, the content of the writing, but not for the interpretations of it. They are not his responsibility.

WB: Heidegger?

ÁH: Heidegger is responsible because he participated personally by voting for Hitler. Even a group of his students voted for Hitler. He is responsible as a person for voting for Hitler. And as a person who was a coward, a real coward, he was a petit bourgeois. His philosophy does not have much to do with his personality. Heidegger’s philosophy is above his personality. It is not a philosophy of a petite bourgeoisie, but a philosophy of a thinker. Of course, you can find signs of his political life and political affiliations in it, but it is not the same. We do not know Plato’s political affiliations. Do we know what Plato exactly did in

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the court of Syracuse? How did he speak with the tyrant? We have no idea about that. We know only his writings.

We know very little about most philosophers. We know about the crimes of the contemporary philosophers, about their sins, their misdeeds, but we do not know about previous philosophers because we do not have inside information about their lives. In the ancient world there were anecdotes about philosophers, about certain things they were doing. But they are not real reports—they are inflated or simply invented reports of what they were doing. What Diogenes Laertius wrote about philosophers is either true or untrue, but it is not a document of their lives. We have never documented philosophers' lives before, and I think Heidegger seems to be a really bad person precisely due to the documents he left behind. Not just as a public person, also as a private person. See his letters, look at his personal life: he was really a very ugly man, psychologically and morally. I mean the black books about his private opinions and private relationships.[21] Not very attractive. And now the question is: what does his philosophy have to do with it? Some people say that it changes something, others say that it does not. There is, however, one positive aspect in Heidegger as a teacher. He did not want to have a school. He had so many good students but never wanted his students to imitate his language or to imitate his way of thinking. He had the best students in the twentieth century. All of them were different; all of them used their own language and not the Heideggerian language. I see his merit in this. The same can be said about Lukács, but Lukács as a private person was an extremely decent man, an extremely decent gentleman. He upheld bourgeois norms as far as private life is concerned. But as far as his public life is concerned, I have already told you my opinion about him.

WB: The twentieth century showed us that perhaps not philosophers but philosophy itself can be dangerous.

ÁH: Philosophy is always dangerous, it always used to be dangerous. It was dangerous to tyrants, and it can be a threat to democracy too, can be dangerous to many different kinds of things. It is Hegel who said that philosophy is always dangerous, so I have not invented this sentence. Philosophy is dangerous because philosophers from the very beginning said that some things are opinion and other things are true knowledge. What you believed to be truth is not really truth, and what I present you is really truth. What you believe is only an

21. Heidegger, *Ponderings*.

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opinion, but I know what the truth is. People do not like to hear that. Tyrants, dictators, and even public opinion does not like to be treated as if they had mere opinions, as if what they believed to be right were not really right, while this wise or even crazy person says that they know better. That is why philosophy is dangerous. It upsets the forms of life.

WB: But as you said: every philosophy can be dangerous in the sense that it can be easily misused or even can be used for dangerous aims.

ÁH: Yes, you are right. You mentioned Nazism and Nietzsche, but what about [Richard] Wagner? He was a composer, not a philosopher. But he too could be misused. Not only Karl Marx was misused, but many others were also misused by Bolshevism. In Hungary I can think of great poets who suffered this fate. You can misuse poets; you can misuse philosophers. Natural scientists are less exposed to this danger, but you can do it to them too.

WB: Does this mean that philosophy is nothing special?

ÁH: It is special because philosophy is by definition dangerous, not only via interpretation. There is poetry which is dangerous only if interpreters read it in this or that way. In a way, philosophy offers itself as a kind of ideological interpretation, if you want me to use this word: *ideological interpretation*.

WB: For a very long time you were forbidden from teaching philosophy.

ÁH: I was thrown out of the university in 1957. From that moment until 1990, that is after the system change, I could not even cross the gate of any university in Hungary. So, I was not teaching anything, not just philosophy. After emigration I was hired by the Sociology Department in Melbourne. If you believe that in the Sociology Department you cannot teach philosophy—you are mistaken. That was a different setting in La Trobe, because the Philosophy Department was 100 percent analytic. And Continental philosophy held sway in the Sociology Department. I could start my course on sociology with Greek social thinking. Of course, I was not teaching metaphysics, but I was teaching Aristotle's *Poetics*, *Politics*, and the other things. I could teach Plato, I could teach Kant's political writings or his conception of perpetual peace—everything that Kant wrote that had to do with social reality. But that was undergraduate teaching. I had wonderful students, all of them became professors at universities. You know them: Peter Beilharz, John Rundell, Peter Murphy.

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WB: In Melbourne I also met David Roberts as well as László and Mari Bodi.

ÁH: Yes, David is my colleague and László and Mari are old friends from Hungary.

WB: They organized your arrival to Melbourne, right?

ÁH: No, that is not correct. My stay was organized by Iván Szelényi. Iván was the one who applied for a job for me at La Trobe University. László and Mari were the first who invited us in the evening, and we got [to] know a lot of people through them. They introduced us to cultural life in Melbourne.

WB: I would like to ask you about the uniqueness of the Hungarian Revolution. In what sense was it—as you mentioned many times—a turning point in your life?

ÁH: In fact, the turning point was already in 1953 when I first heard that György Pálffy was rehabilitated. He was sentenced to death in the Rajk trial, and someone told me in a cafe: "Look, Pálffy was rehabilitated." This came as a shock. I ran to Lukács and told him: "Comrade Lukács, Pálffy is rehabilitated. Everything was a lie!" That was 1953. And between 1953 and 1956, I struggled with the idea that everything was a lie and that we needed to do something entirely different—a different, new kind of socialism. The turning point of 1956 was that I started to think that the only solution was a legal democratic state. But between 1953 and 1956, I believed that socialism with a human face is possible. Of course, the terminology was not yet there. I strongly believed that the idea of socialism and even the idea of communism was a good one, only that it was done wrongly, it was done undemocratically, it was not done according to the people's wishes and needs—needs which were so important for me. That is why it was wrong, but the idea itself was right and good. And in 1956, I started to have problems with this. But more importantly, in 1956 I started to criticize my own behavior during Stalinism. I started to ask myself: "Why were you such a coward? You knew that it is wrong, why didn't you speak up?" Then I made a promise to myself that next time I am not going to stay silent; when I see something wrong, I will speak up. I could not entirely live up to my promise. Even in 1956 when I did not speak up, sometimes I felt I was wrong, I felt that I should have spoken up. That was not my feeling at the times of Stalinism. Although even back then I sometimes spoke up, that was because I was terribly naive. That was my time of naivete.

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WB: Could you say more about those three years before the Hungarian Revolution?

ÁH: In Hungary at that time there were groups of people among artists, among philosophers who started to get together and to move in the direction that led to 1956. That means that we started to criticize the Party. We started to say what had been wrong, what was going to be wrong. And there were constant ups and downs. The Writers' Union was in revolt. Among philosophers there also was a revolt. A new development started. The Petőfi Circle organized debates that criticized the system. More and more we criticized the system. It was a movement that was heading toward revolution, although we wanted reforms not revolution. It was up and down, up and down. Imre Nagy was prime minister then; the Russians were dissatisfied, and then Rákosi became prime minister, and then Erno Gerő. Of course, we did not want any of them. Our friend from old times, György Litván, stood up at a meeting, looked at Rákosi, and said: "If Hungarians are to prosper, you must go away, comrade Rákosi! We must do something different. The whole leadership must go away. This is the condition for development. We want new, reformist leadership." People were released from prisons at the time. There were no political prisoners between 1953 and 1956. (It became far worse after 1956.) [In 1953] we could shout, demand, and criticize. People were sympathizing with us. Some of them were Party members. That was a very optimistic time. For example, there was a high Party functionary who wrote a dissertation against some religious person. Previously it would have been impossible for a communist functionary with a dissertation to be rejected by a dissertation committee. But we rejected this dissertation. That was the spring of 1956. Everyone was astonished that this could happen. That was a big difference. But in 1956 the Party was not as strong. They started to weaken because of the pressure from society.

But without 1953 there is no 1956. We needed these years between '53 and '56 to have this revolution. And this revolution had a great impact in Europe. I met Leszek Kołakowski in this period, in the spring of '56. It was a similar time in Poland. Poland was first in 1956, before the Hungarian Revolution. We felt a synchronization. The problem was: there was never any synchronization, we just wanted it. That was the first time we believed in synchronization; the second time was after the Prague Spring. But it never came to the total synchronization of this kind of revolt.

WB: What do you think of Hannah Arendt's interpretation of the Hungarian Revolution?

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ÁH: One aspect of this interpretation was correct, that it was a kind of national rebellion against the nation's oppression. This is correct. But she believed the Hungarian Revolution was about direct democracy, that we wanted to establish direct democracy and not representative democracy. She was wrong in this respect. She misunderstood this because of her political ideas. It is her conception that direct democracy should replace parliamentary democracy, because in parliamentary democracy there is no real action, people act only once every four years. She wanted to promote real action as the essence of politics. This can happen only in the circles of self-government and in the institutions of direct democracy. In Hungary it was a combination of demands. I described it in my article "The Great Republic."[22] It was complex. On the one hand, we really wanted direct democracy, the council system. But simultaneously we wanted the parliamentary system. We wanted a multiparty system. Both were important for the Hungarians. We truly wanted self-government, and we wanted a free market at the same time. A factory should be owned by workers, but all factories should exist on the market. And there should be a free competition on the market. That is why it was a combination of communitarian ideas, representative ideas, and liberal ideas, of common property and economic liberalism. It is a funny mixture, but this kind of combination was in all declarations by workers' councils. We were thinking that we needed communities, we needed communal decision; we were already organized, for instance, in workers councils, but we also needed free elections and [a] multiparty system. And we knew that a factory should be owned by the workers, that is, it should be common property—a socialist idea, but the competition is provided by the market, because without the market there is no liberty.

The time of revolution was unique. We did not wait for the leader to speak. Imre Nagy emerged for a moment, but he was fake, and people were disappointed. We did not want just any leader. We did not want this or that person. We said, "Ruski go home," we wanted a multiparty system, we spoke about issues, not about this man or that man.

WB: You mentioned communitarians and liberals, but you did not take a part in the debate between them during emigration.

ÁH: I did not participate in this discussion because I was not interested enough in America to be enthusiastic about this debate. That was an American debate.

22. Heller, "Great Republic."

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WB: You are critical of Americans. Why?

ÁH: I am critical but I love them! I love the USA. Okay, love is too much, I like it even though there are bad things about it. I see it as the only democracy I have confidence in. You can dislike a state, you can dislike the government, but to repeat myself: it is the only country in which I have confidence in. Because they will be ready, because they used to be ready to defend their own freedom against themselves (Civil War) and against all others who threatened their freedom. I do not know a single European country which has been ready to defend a liberal democratic constitution against any enemy.

WB: Then why you are so critical?

ÁH: What I criticize in America is not the political system but social life—first and foremost, so-called correctness that is the pressure of society. This is a new type of pressure which does not come from political authority but from society itself. I do not like this ideological correctness. It made me nervous, and I think it is totally wrong: an ideologically different correctness that was pushed by society, by my neighbors, by our colleagues. I do not like this political correctness which can be sexual political correctness, racial political correctness. I already told you about my view of feminism. It belongs to the same thing. A society that pressures you to behave like everyone else. And it is not the state which does it, but the society which puts the pressure on you. This is typically American, and I do not like it. I like more liberal freedom. Liberalism not in the economic sense but liberalism in the personal sense. "Leave me in peace!"

WB: Why did you and Fehér decide to go back to Hungary?

ÁH: Because that is our home. It is simple. We left Hungary only because of the regime.

WB: Did you consider yourself foreigners during emigration?

ÁH: No, I felt at home even in New York. I have many friends in America, I taught at the university there for many years, and eventually I also received American citizenship. But my past and the traditions I identified with were different from those of the people I met there. I grew up in a different context. What more can I say? Budapest is my city. I know Budapest well. People

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know each other in Budapest; so many people know me there, so many people address me when I am on the train. I cannot hide in Budapest, and that is a bad thing, but a good thing as well. I am at home there. If I say something, it makes a little difference in Hungary, people listen to me. In America, people listen to me at a philosophical conference, but that is it. And the country is very big. Poland is not as big as America, but far bigger than Hungary. In Hungary, you can get from one border to the other in three hours; you live in a small country, and everything is related to everything else, everyone knows everyone else. Everyone hates or loves everyone else. This is a different kind of thing. Maybe I got used to this.

WB: Do you regret returning to Hungary after the personal attacks on you by the government?

ÁH: I have never regretted anything in my life. How can you regret anything in your life? You are what your life meant you to be. You cannot choose another history. You cannot choose to be someone other than who you are. I cannot regret anything. Obviously, I made bad choices. I do think that the best choice was to leave Hungary for Australia, that was the best choice I made, because my later life was related to this decision. And it was also a good choice to go to America, although it was not my choice, it was Feri's. I regret leaving Australia, but I left America and don't regret it. I returned to Hungary and did not regret it. What can I do? You need to have a particular character to regret certain things. But even nostalgia is not a regret.

WB: Can you describe the situation in Hungary now?

ÁH: The situation in Hungary is terrible because the prime minister, Viktor Orbán, is a dictator, although Hungary is not a dictatorship. Orbán has a dictatorial personality. In Hungary nothing happens now which was not invented by him. Everything that he has in his mind should become a fact, should become reality. No one else has anything to say about what happens in Hungary. The entire media are absolutely controlled by the government. Almost all newspapers, certainly state-owned media, all radio stations, all television stations from dawn to dusk do the government's propaganda. The exception[s] are some private media, but even two of the private ones are controlled by the Fidesz [Orbán's party] or by the state. There is no separation of powers. The executive branch, the legislative branch—all the powers are in one person's hands. Orbán

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is the prime minister; the second greatest power in Hungary is the president of the state, and this office is held by a friend of his youth, a comrade. The same can be said about the president of Parliament—also a friend of his youth. The current head of the highest court is a wife of the best friend of his youth. Everything is in the family. And this family is creating an oligarchy. They operate with populist rhetoric, but they create their own oligarchy. That is the opposite of the typical oligarchic situation, when the oligarchy elects the government. Here the government creates the new oligarchy. In the former times communists spoke about the national bourgeoisie, and now Orbán's party creates the national bourgeoisie, of course in its own way. This national bourgeoisie does not depend on ideas or money, but it depends on the government.

There is a very interesting structure in Hungarian society nowadays. Very little personal freedom remains, but we still have the right to travel freely across the borders. A half million Hungarians left Hungary in the last four years, among them many young people, far more than after the revolution of 1956. The fact that many young people want to live outside their country is the dark side of this situation. Our children want to go away—this is a problem. Because we are members of the European Union [EU], we cannot close the borders. We cannot do two things: one is to close the border, and the second is implement capital punishment. In one of his last speeches, Orbán said there are arguments in favor of capital punishment, but I think that he cannot introduce capital punishment inside of the EU, and without capital punishment and without closed borders you cannot really introduce a dictatorship because people always have one option left, they can leave. And if they are courageous, they can say also no because nothing can happen to them. People are so apathetic; apathy is so strong. In addition, the opposition is so weak and divided. They cannot promise the population that they will do something instead of this government, because they have no ideas. There are a few decent people in the opposition whom I personally like, but they have no talent for politics, and for politics you also need some talent. In the last election, for example, Orbán received as many votes as Angela Merkel in Germany. Merkel had to form a coalition with the Social Democratic Party; with the same percentage of votes, Orbán has the majority in Parliament. That is the electoral law.

WB: Would you agree that nowadays the very idea of an open society has ceased to exist and is replaced by projects of closed societies?

ÁH: That is an exaggeration because the idea of an open society does exist and will not be lost. What you mean is that the practice of the closed society is now

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present in almost all of Europe and also in America, but not entirely so because in America, society has never been completely closed. It remains an open society even with [Donald] Trump. And I don't think Britain will lose the characteristic of an open society because it is sort of its tradition, nor is it entirely lost in Western Europe either. Where the open society is practically lost is in Eastern Europe first and foremost. So, there are two different kinds of things: whether the practice of open society is limited and whether the idea of the open society exists or not.

I repeat that in Eastern Europe it has lost its relevance. When our leaders speak about illiberal societies, the description itself shows us that we do not support or, rather, these governments do not support the practice or even the idea of an open society. There are countries where the idea is still alive, but there are also movements which claim that this idea is outdated, and they want to establish a different kind of Europe. And this different kind of Europe is not based on the open society but—once again—it does not mean that the idea is lost.

WB: We are also seeing a resurgence of radical movements, especially in our part of Europe.

ÁH: We can observe dissatisfaction in part of the European population because European societies were accustomed to so-called progress after the collapse of the Soviet Union and in Western Europe even earlier. There was a belief that every generation lives better than the former generation. We always get wealthier and wealthier, we have bigger and bigger houses. That was the image the Western societies had about themselves. Then came the problem: it has not happened and does not happen anymore. In addition, Europe does not reproduce itself. There are less and less children, hence less of a workforce. In other words, there are a lot of problems to which these right-wing movements, these populist movements provide an answer.

WB: Radical universalism is now being replaced by radical particularism. Is it a coincidence that a contemporary victory of radical movements took place in the postcommunist part of Europe?

ÁH: Europe consists of nation-states. That was the development after World War I. And since then, nation-states belong to nations—it is the main identity of a population. We do not have another main identity. Maybe in Poland you are

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also Catholic, but in Hungary that is not an identity. We are just Hungarians, Czechs are Czechs, Slovaks are Slovaks, Romanians are Romanians—this is the identity, the only source of pride, the only source of being happy. There is very little to be proud about in these countries. Winning a football match, for example, or a gold medal in Olympic games—everyone is very happy because the nation is our identity. And these kinds of populist movements rely upon this identity. No other identity compares to it in strength.

We do not have a European identity. When you ask a child what it means to be European, the child will not understand the question. But if you ask a child in Poland what does it mean to be Polish, that child will understand the question and will be able to answer it. This means that Europe never entered the essence of consciousness, that it was never a useful identity-constructing concept. Of course, you can travel to different places and do not need a visa, but that is not enough to be a constitutive idea to form an identity. The European bureaucracy is also responsible for this, because it believes that everything is going so smoothly, and we will be richer and live better each and every day. I was speaking at the fiftieth anniversary of the Treaty of Rome (1958), and I said at that time: "Please forget about this—a crisis is coming." Maybe a crisis that will be centered in the periphery. They spoke about the EU as if it were a divine plan. You cannot lose because it is written in the stars, so to speak. People were neglecting the conflicts, the possible conflicts that will probably knock at our door. Maybe this neglect continues; I do not know whether people notice that we can be in the abyss unless they care to avoid the abyss. I do not know whether the thought that we could avoid the abyss is planted in the heads of these bureaucrats. I will say the following: World War I could have been easily avoided, all historians know that. The Versailles and Trianon peace treaties could have been very easily avoided, everyone knows that. The same goes for Hitler's war, World War II. The question is: why were they not avoided? Because people are blind. And I think we have to warn people about this blindness.

And, yes, in some way it is not surprising that we are talking about Eastern and Central Europe, because there was no democratic experience here. In Poland it was a little better than in Hungary in this respect. People had not contributed to the liberation of this place, at least in Hungary. In Hungary I always said we received freedom as a birthday present, and for everything you ought to pay. You receive nothing as a present—we have to pay for everything. And now comes the time to pay, because the Soviet Union collapsed, and we did nothing for freedom at the time when we received it. We did not understand that it was a very great moment—we received the present but had to do

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something to deserve it. We have done very little to deserve it. So the chickens come home to roost. In Eastern Europe we had no democratic tradition, and none of our leaders made the slightest effort to include the population in a democratic development.

WB: But on the other hand, it was Feher who wrote that the denizens of this part of Europe during the communist period were like “guinea pigs” and because of that they became hostile to any kind of radicalism.

ÁH: Yes, it was hostility against radicalism because Eastern European countries survived two totalitarian states. One could think that this experience of being victims of two totalitarian powers is a learning process, and that we will avoid it. Up to a degree this was right, because at this moment more than 70 percent of the Hungarian population supports the EU, and I think even far more do so in Western Europe. Something was done but not enough to recognize the devil when the devil wears a different mask. They recognize totalitarianism as it was experienced, but they do not perceive new forms of this kind of danger. People learned that this is a danger when there is a single-party system, but now they do not notice what is going to happen, because there are other parties, there is opposition, there is a Parliament, we can choose members of Parliament. . . .

WB: Maybe this revival of political radicalism is somehow connected with the fact that after the Soviet system collapsed, we did not deal with our past enough.

ÁH: You are right, but it is not just we, Eastern Europeans. Europe has not dealt with its past. Europe speaks about European values, that we have to stick with European values and forget about the twentieth century. Twentieth-century Europeans murdered hundreds of thousands of Europeans. Where were European values? Where was democracy in twentieth-century Europe? In very few places and for a very short time. So, Europe does not face its own past. The Germans faced their Nazi past, they did, but they did not face the past of the earlier twentieth century: World War I. And this problem is going back to the more distant past which we do not face. And of course we lie about the past. Recently Hungary celebrated the revolution of 1956. Everything was a lie: a falsification of history as a kind of national program. It is not just that we do not look the past in the face, we totally falsify it. The Hungarian government

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falsified the past just as once upon a time comrade Stalin rewrote the participants of the Bolshevik revolution. They skip those they don't like and take those they like. They mostly like them because they are dead. They cannot answer. This like the history of [Leon] Trotsky, who disappeared from the heroes of the revolution. Imre Nagy and his whole government disappeared because they used to be communists. They disappeared entirely from the memory of the revolution. But this is what is done all the time.

WB: Who is now a hero of the Hungarian Revolution?

ÁH: The young boys who were fighting at Corvin Square with weapons. Very young people, some of them heroic, some of them wanted the adventure. But all the others who were imprisoned—imprisoned writers for instance—are no longer among the heroes of the revolution. History is being entirely rewritten. You know about the famous monument to German occupation in the Szabadság Square. That is typical. Everything that happened in Hungary was due to the Germans. The German eagle was in a way hurting the Hungarian archangel Gabriel; that is the statue's message and a total falsification of history. Hungarians had nothing to do with "the final solution"? That is totally ridiculous. The Germans did everything. . . . It is just not true.

WB: Is the radicalization of particularities just a part of the general tendency of our postmodern modernity? We were witnesses of Brexit, Trump's victory, et cetera. . . .

ÁH: Brexit was something different. Despite Brexit Britain remains an open society, which for the British is a kind of traditional thing, and no Brexit can change it. Brexit was a peaceful process, although I heard about a violence against minorities. Some radicals want them out. They believe that foreigners take the jobs of the British labor force. They take their money, get their apartments and the houses instead of them and so on. But that is entirely different from what is going on in Central Europe. Again, you have to remember tradition, which is extremely important in the development of society. Eastern European countries share something—not everything but something. They were under Soviet occupation, and with the sole exception of the Czech Republic there never was democracy in these countries. People were not used to it, people were not practicing it. And this is the common feature. Therefore there is obviously something in common in historical experiences of these

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countries that is different from the historical experiences of the so-called West. This experience of Eastern European countries is also the one of East Germany. The extremist movements in Germany are stronger in the eastern part, which was also under Soviet occupation and shared the fate of our countries. When you speak about German radical right movements, they all come from East Germany because they have the same tradition as us. So, yes, there is the difference of Eastern Europe. I think this past plays a role in the development of the present. And people need to be aware of this, it is just a fact.

My criticism of our former democratic governments is that they have never noticed the danger. They have not noticed that the past indeed plays a role in the present. The people are accustomed to the idea that some leaders will take responsibility instead of them. They will do everything to ask favors from the government. The government will do for them what they want the government to do for them. If people stick to the rights of obligation, the attitude will not change in this part of the world. And the problem is that the attitude has not changed, and the former, more democratic governments have a share of responsibility for not noticing that a change of attitude is of major importance. That is what differentiates our countries from Western Europe. It looks different in Germany, which is an open society, and Germany learned the most about its own history. But what about France? The extreme rightist movements were always present in France. But in a way they were never good to "open hand."[23] The German occupation is not an example—that was a collaboration with Germans. But the French never voted for a dictator like the Germans, the Italians, and so many other nations—like the Hungarians, and in a way, like the Poles and others. The French never did that. In spite of Marine Le Pen, traditional French conservatism, which is a kind of liberal-democratic conservatism, will steer France out of this most dangerous situation. I am not sure about Austria. Although Austria was only partially occupied by Russia until 1956 and was never a totalitarian state, somehow, may I say, the whole Austrian-Hungarian monarchy has a common past. A common past of submission and nationalism. Therefore I am not sure about Austria.

WB: Would you agree that there is a crisis of liberal-democratic values in the West?

ÁH: Liberal-democratic values are always in crisis because they cannot be taken for granted, and every day we have to work on their maintenance. Liberal

23. It is not clear what Heller means by *open hand*.

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democracy is called a formal democracy, and this kind of democracy is always in crisis, because it has no foundation. Liberal democracy is not "a natural thing." Monarchy is natural. That is a family, that is a whole country as a family. Liberal democracy is not natural. It is not based on something traditional. It is, in a way, what we create it to be, and the creation has to be re-created each and every day. Without this constant re-creation, it will not survive. It will not naturally remain as it is. It has to be rebuilt. This is the specificity of liberal democracy.

Ágnes Heller (1929–2019) was a Hungarian philosopher, a disciple of György Lukács, a leading figure of the Budapest School, and an oppositionist and dissident in communist Hungary. Forced into exile in 1977, she went to Melbourne (La Trobe University) and then to New York, where she held the position of Hannah Arendt Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research. She returned to Budapest after the collapse of the communist system in Central and Eastern Europe.

Waldemar Bulira is a Polish historian of ideas and philosopher of politics at Maria Curie-Sklodowska University in Lublin and is the author of books and articles on the critical theory of the Budapest School as well as a translator and coeditor of Polish editions of books by Ágnes Heller.

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