Ágnes Heller transformed a troubled life: ‘I lived through terrible things. But I had to understand them. [...] Philosophers do not despair.’ Shalini Randeria and Ludger Hagedorn honour her legacy on her birthday.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have just heard Ágnes Heller‘s voice. Tonight is dedicated to the lasting echo of her words and thoughts. It is, therefore, most fitting that my remarks remain with her – this philosopher, public intellectual and citizen of the world from Budapest.

The Holocaust and the Gulag – those 20th-century horrors – shaped her personally and intellectually. In an interview just before her 90th birthday, some six months before she died, she was asked how she could remain so calm in the face of it all. Her answer not only told the story of a long and eventful life but also expressed her view of the world, which can serve as inspiration to us all. She said:

You are right. It was a terrible century and I lived through terrible things. But I had to understand them. And if you want to understand something, then even the most terrible experiences become matters to be studied. Hegel said: ‘When we look at the world rationally, the world looks rationally back.’ That’s not to say that the world is rational but rather that we give it meaning through the way that we look at it. Our own biography is also part of the world. [1]

To understand the world, to anchor ourselves in the world through an understanding of our own biography, not allowing ourselves to be led by fear and stupidity – what better guiding theme could there be for a humanities festival?

This year’s humanities festival is themed ‘Despair and Hope’. Wherever there’s despair, Ágnes Heller allows us to keep hope also firmly in view. Her legacy is hope, the kind that does not lie in false comfort or weak optimism but demands thought and effort towards reshaping the world in its image. ‘Philosophers do not despair’, [2] as Ágnes Heller went on to say in the same interview.
And, as we have known since Socrates’s day, being a philosopher is neither a business nor a profession but, above all, an attitude – an attitude of questioning and being intrepid. Rather than facing despair, the Vienna Humanities Festival 2019 should gather and broadcast visions and ideas for a world worth striving for through this spirit of fearlessness.

It should be the great thinker Ágnes Heller standing before you tonight to open the festival. However, she is made all the more present by our awareness of her absence. Indeed, perhaps what she stood for, what that means for us today and what she identified as Paradox Europa (paradoxical Europe), are more important than her physical presence.

What was it that Ágnes Heller found so paradoxical about Europe that she gave the last book published in her lifetime this name? For her, the answer was clear: Europe has a blind spot precisely where it boasts most loudly of its achievements.

These are achievements from the Enlightenment, which have granted inalienable rights to each individual and therefore made human emancipation possible in Europe. The bearers of this promise of rights are the various nations. And so, from the beginning, there was tension between the universality of human rights and the exclusivity of citizenship rights. While the former belongs to everyone in the world, the latter is only granted to the citizens of a particular nation.

The first European nation, France, ‘la Nation’, was also the first country to guarantee such rights. But which individuals did, and does, its constitution protect? It is a constitution for both ‘human beings’ and ‘citizens’. And therein lies the crux of the matter. From their inception, universal human rights have been linked to national citizenship rights, granted to all citizens of a country regardless of gender, religion or class, but they exclude foreigners and migrants.

This distinction between humans and citizens often doesn’t come into play and even seems trifling. But as soon as things ‘get serious’, as Heller puts it, a conflict arises in which historically ‘humanity has almost always been on the losing side’. [3]

Two perspectives clearly show the serious consequences of this crucial difference. One is the attitude and identity of the individual themselves. When problems arise, which identity proves to be stronger? The exclusive, national identity on which citizenship rights are based or our universal identity as bearers of human rights? History tells us that ever since this tension first arose, it has been resolved all too often and all too firmly in favour of citizenship rights and to the detriment of human rights.

Ágnes Heller does not mean to condemn national identity. She takes a realistic, unsentimental view of the matter – nations are simply a given. Moreover, as human beings, we are not born into ‘the’ world but into a ‘particular’ world with a specific language and community that confers security and belonging. This is what Heller calls the ‘basic anthropological attitude’. [4]

It would be a fool’s errand to deny it or oppose it. But this basic anthropological attitude is expanded and corrected by the moral law of what Heller, in line with Kant (her favourite philosopher), calls the ‘humanity in us’. [5] Like Schiller and Beethoven, anyone
wanting to embrace all men as brothers acquires a broader horizon, which surpasses but can not erase the basic anthropological attitude.

And then there is a second perspective, the measure of which can perhaps only be truly grasped by someone who, living in a foreign country, depends upon the thin bond of universal humanity. In an interview given this summer (you heard a short excerpt at the beginning), Heller emphatically pointed out how decisive this distinction can be. Some 70% to 90% of French Jews survived the Holocaust precisely because as French citizens they were better protected than those who did not enjoy French citizenship. The latter were almost all handed over to the Nazis. In certain local-historical contexts, the difference between citizenship and humanity can be a matter of life and death.

However, citizenship rights are only effective if the nation in question uses its ability and political will to respect and uphold them. When such respect or protection is not forthcoming, the consequences can be fatal, as an example from Heller’s native Hungary shows: the great majority of the country’s Jews were murdered in spite of their Hungarian citizenship. They fell victim to ethnic nationalism, whereby only certain Hungarians were ‘true’ Hungarians. Others were arbitrarily deprived of their fundamental civil rights.

The paradox in which we are trapped lies precisely in that all of these things are possible in an epoch, and in a Europe, that likes to see itself as the embodiment of universalism and its ideals. Heller expressed this paradox succinctly: ‘There may never have been a time when so many people were murdered because of nationalism, racism and other ideologies as in the 20th century under the universal sun of humanism.’ [6]

Europe is both the embodiment of both an intolerant particularism and a humanist universalism. As this is a real paradox, there can be neither a solution nor resolution to this inner contradiction. However, in Ágnes Heller’s view, being an heir and beneficiary of the Enlightenment not only means implementing the ideas of universal human rights but also connecting them politically with republicanism. And one should ensure that nationalism does not prevail.

This was Heller’s concern for Europe. And it is still very much a concern in these early years of the 21st century, which have by no means dispelled the shadows of its nationalist past. The European nationalisms of our day are presently united against the common enemy they find in Brussels. And yet, if they manage to break the European Union and dispose of their common enemy, then nationalist movements will turn against one another. Ágnes Heller understood this as a real danger for our age.

The prospect of despair looms, of immense despair. But, to return to the humanities festival’s title, we are never entirely without hope - the ideal of universal humanity, once proclaimed to the world, can never completely disappear. As Ágnes Heller put it so beautifully, the idea has settled in and will remain with us as a ‘troublesome bedfellow’. [7] Such a bedfellow cannot be simply turfed out.

And it questions our basic anthropological attitude that we would otherwise happily embrace for the comforting security of its familiarity. The beauty of universal humanity is best expressed in Mozart’s Magic Flute when Sarastro says of Tamino that he is
something more than a prince: namely, a human being. Although the unique, highest quality of human existence can be trampled underfoot in real life, it remains indelible as an ideal.

A powerful motive behind Ágnes Heller’s book *Paradox Europa* is a critical examination of the legacy of 1989, a year that brought high hopes but failed to live up to many an expectation. The memory of this momentous year is also one thematic focus of this year’s humanities festival. Ágnes Heller asks what has become of this new freedom. The third part of her book, entitled *How to lose freedom*, gives an unambiguous idea of her views regarding some of the political developments that followed 1989.

I would like to focus a few remarks now on a fundamental question that Heller raises within this context – what does it mean to gain freedom? I strongly agree with Ágnes Heller’s insistence that history matters! The alleged ‘end of history’, a common diagnosis in 1989-90, was a seriously mistaken view. The global conflicts of recent decades have emphatically shown that we shall never be finished with history. And I would go even further to say that what we are experiencing today in many places is an explicit return or ‘revenge’ of history.

However, postulating that ‘history matters’ is by no means an expression of historical fatalism. According to Heller, it was not written in the stars that Hungary, of all the post-socialist countries, would be the one to take the path that questions liberal principles. And this path was not dictated from the outside – Hungary chose it. There is always a choice in politics. Decisions can be corrected, trends reversed, debates altered.

When Heller writes that ‘liberation is not (yet) freedom’, [8] she rests her argument on two major points of reference: the story from the Book of Exodus about the Israelites who submit to the cult of the Golden Calf and Hannah Arendt’s powerful concept of freedom. Arendt draws a clear distinction between freedom and liberation. While liberation from hardship and oppression is an essential element on the path to freedom, it is not yet freedom itself. For Arendt, freedom was always political. It can only exist if a public political arena is established within which people can meet to speak and act politically as equals. Arendt also expressed scepticism about revolutions, many of which she considered have failed – rather than constituting freedom, they merely substituted one regime for another.

This calls to mind Mahatma Gandhi’s famous remark during the Indian anti-colonial movement he led suggesting that nothing would be gained by merely replacing the British ruling class with its Indian equivalent. It was not enough for Gandhi that India gained political independence from colonial rule and its citizens had the right to vote. For him, liberation would only come with the end of social discrimination and economic inequality.

The term he used for freedom – in the sense of genuine independence – was *swaraj*, or ‘self-rule’, which he saw as each individual’s responsibility for themselves, to conquer their own instincts and the endless greed for power and wealth. On this point, Heller and Gandhi are in agreement. Ágnes Heller also saw an insatiable greed for money, power and fame as one of the reasons why so many moments of liberation ultimately result in a return to oppression. But, as with human rights, there is an unalterable constant at work
here too: even if revolution leads to new tyranny, the desire for freedom remains. And, with it, the belief persists that only a life without hardship and fear is a life that is truly free.

In also quoting Kant, as it happens, Arendt says that such knowledge ‘can never forget itself’. [9] It is perhaps this emphatic notion of political freedom that unites Arendt and Heller above all else. And, despite their scepticism about revolution, or at least about historical revolutions, it would be wrong to underestimate how radical and even revolutionary their own demands for political freedom still are.

I would like to conclude with Ágnes Heller’s remarks on Paradox Europa and supplement her reflections by taking a look at the continent itself. To my mind, the West’s self-image is based on a further paradox: Europe sees itself as unique in its historical development and considers its experiences universal, even universalizable. Instead of locating its own trajectory of modernity within a global historical context, Europe tends to view its own historical development as sui generis. However, it is very important to understand the relationship between Europe and the non-European world as a ‘shared history’, a history that at once connects and divides as I have argued elsewhere. [10]

Last but not least, this realization enables the insight that Europe has never possessed a pure identity developed in abstraction from centuries of contact with other regions and religions. Just as no European nation can lay claim to a pure and unbroken historical continuity either. Despite all claims to ethnic homogeneity and continuity, the very composition of the populations of European nation-states have been in a constant state of flux, just as their borders have been constantly redrawn. Some nations were imperial powers, others were part of empires until 1914. Ágnes Heller highlights 1914 as the year of Europe’s ‘original sin’. It brought forth two world wars, two totalitarian states, Auschwitz, the Gulag, several dictatorships and it cost around 100 million lives.

But imperialism and colonialism have not only left their mark in the Global South even after formal decolonization - they are also constitutive elements of European modernity. Historical and contemporary economic and cultural ties that link Europe to the non-European world allow us to think in terms of connections rather than differences. Such a perspective, which I have termed ‘entangled histories’ [11], helps us to recognize that the Paradox Europa, which Ágnes Heller spoke of, also marked the relationship between European imperial powers and the non-European world: while boasting of their liberalism and republicanism, great European nations built their colonial regimes on violence, racism and exploitation.

Ágnes Heller was one of the most important witnesses to the totalitarian 20th century, who bore its historical weight. Nevertheless, even in old age, she chose to live her life in the present rather than the past, enabling and welcoming opportunities for change, something that is an inspiration for all of us.

Today, we are faced with many forms of despair in Europe and throughout the world: burgeoning nationalism, the threat of climate crisis, economic anxieties, the steady dismantling of liberal democratic principles and institutions, the marginalization of human rights. As a thinker and as a human being, the philosopher Ágnes Heller was distinguished by her fearlessness and courage to speak out and act. Let us follow her lead.
and have the courage to hope, and to avert impending despair.

It is in this spirit that I invite you to this year’s humanities festival, to join us in focusing our gaze on hope.

This address was co-authored by Shalini Randeria and Ludger Hagedorn, and delivered by Shalini Randeria at the opening of the Vienna Humanities Festival, Volkstheater, Vienna, on 26 September 2019.

Footnotes

1. Á. Heller, 'Wie können Menschen so etwas tun?', interview with Paul Ingendaay, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 1 August 2019.

2. ibid.


4. ibid., p. 11.


7. ibid. p. 11.

8. ibid., p. 33.


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