

Interviews with Professor Ágnes Heller (I)* Budapest, 1ST/2ND July 1981**

Conducted by
Dr. SIMON TORMEY, Lecturer,
School of Politics, University of Nottingham.

Transcribed by
LAURA BRIGGS, Secretary,
School of Politics, University of Nottingham.

A. Early Development and the Origins of the Budapest School

Simon Tormey: I'd like to begin by asking you about your first encounter with philosophy. How did you come to decide that you wanted to do philosophy and what were the practical ramifications of such a choice in the 1940s?

Ágnes Heller: When I started university I wanted to be a scientist and I began by attending classes on the theory of relativity. My boyfriend, who was a philosophy student, asked me to accompany him to philosophy classes which were being given by Lukacs on the development of philosophical culture from Kant to Hegel, and I sat there listening to Lukacs and I understood hardly one single sentence. I had never read anything, but I did understand one thing: that this was the most important thing I had ever heard in my life and so I must understand it. Later on when I read Collingwood's autobiography I learned that he had had a similar experience after reading Kant's ethics.

We are talking about which years?

It was 1947. I was 18 years old. I started in the physics class, but by October I had decided to study philosophy and Lukacs was my teacher. Lukacs was an official philosopher of the Communist Party, but only until 1949. He was attacked by another philosopher and the Party as a right wing deviationist and his freedom became endangered. These were the Stalinist years. Of course before these years Lukacs was immensely popular and literally hundreds of students used to go to his classes. But after 1949 only five people were left including me. That was an important moment for me. It was a choice —though more instinctual than intellectual— because I'd read Zhdanov and I realised that they could not both be right, and I understood one had to make a choice. Lukacs was a wonderful man, Zhdanov wasn't, so the choice wasn't that difficult.

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Wasn't that effectively a political choice given the situation in Hungary at that time?

My life was political from the beginning. I was a Jew and I was brought up at a time of discrimination and, of course, holocaust. My father was a very important person politically; a member of the Hungarian *Burger Party*, though this had no bearing on my choice of career. I learned a great deal from him and he ensured that we knew what was going on. But still I wanted to be a scientist—a good scientist—to show that women are as good as men. I had read the biography of Marie Curie and I was inspired to follow in her footsteps. That was also a political choice. But my interests were in philosophy. It provided answers to my childhood—why did the holocaust happen? etc., and it offered some kind of redemption. I needed some absolutes at that time. And this is also why I joined the Party in 1947, though I lost my membership in 1949. I was a member for only two years, but these two years were significant.

What was the background to your losing membership?

The background was that I believed the slogans. I thought it was a democratic party so I started questioning things and they drew the consequences.

To say you were a communist at that time was to sign up to what? Did it mean a Leninist version of communism or could one still be an idealistic communist?

I hadn't read any Lenin up to then. I never called myself a Marxist-Leninist. Communism meant redemption, the end of wars and exploitation—a kind of absolute utopia, brotherhood and solidarity, that sort of thing.

Had you read much Marx by the time you joined the communist party?

Not at that time. I considered Marx to be an economist, not a philosopher, offering a description of capitalist society. I had read *Capital* for example, but I didn't consider this to be a work of philosophy. However, I saw that things were not in order around me, the situation with the Party, and so on, so I began to be curious about what Marx said. The appearance was there, but not the essence.

What happened in 1949? Why did you leave?

No one «left» the Party. We were expelled from the Party. People who left were immediately imprisoned at that time. In 1948 the new communist regime was established. When I joined in 1947 the Party seemed to be a democratic party. It was one party among many. I voted for the Party in 1947. I could have voted for other parties. I only learned later that it was not at all democratic, but rather Stalinist. If there had been a more radical party I would have voted for that one; the more radical the better. Young people were radical at that time.

Is it at that point that you become an oppositionist?

I was a «deviationist». Up to 1953 you could be a socialist without being a communist.

What happened in '53?

Imre Nagy became Prime Minister. He spoke a different language and during his prime ministership people were let out of prisons and no one was imprisoned. People could speak more freely. You could become a «reform communist». I became sympathetic with reform communism of the sort which was later to appear in Czechoslovakia in 1968, i.e. a form of democratic communism, not the sort of communism found in the USSR.

What did that mean exactly? That you wanted a more open society, a pluralist political system? What about the economy? Did it still imply a commitment to collectivisation?

Not collectivisation. Nagy said that private farms were possible but with the Party owning the means of production. I did not want to have private ownership; but I wanted to have a market, and this was also my idea of reform communism. You should have the market, but collective owners could appear at the market. Collective ownership with market exchange.

This sounds to me like some of the suggestions made by certain anarchist and socialist thinkers of the nineteenth century, many of whom were more interested in the question of ownership of the means of production than the elimination of market exchange. Did you read any of these thinkers?

I started to study these people and also to write a book which was never published on the ethics of the socialist movement in the nineteenth century; but I sympathised most with Otto Bauer. Proudhon, Bakunin and the rest had such a strong streak of anti-liberalism in them; but I did start to study these alternative visions of socialism. Later on I stopped calling myself a communist and called myself a socialist to show my commitment to other forms of life.

When did you rejoin the Party?

I rejoined the Party in 1954 and was expelled again in 1958. That was the end of the Party for me, though this didn't stop them trying to expel me two more times after that.

Some of the things you have written about the Hungarian uprising of 1956 sound like Arendt, i.e. that it was more than a mere political event, but represented something about modern aspirations, about what it means to be politically free. Is it possible to articulate what the '56 uprising means to you?

1956 is still the most important political event in my life because it was a real revolution and because it was the only really socialist revolution in history and that appeals to me. It was a revolution that meant liberation and liberation in the sense of the American Revolution, that is, independence on the one hand and political liberation on the other. It was a «war of independence», but also a matter of establishing democracy and the constitution of liberties. This was a very «American» revolution. My difference with Arendt is that I was never against representation in politics. The members of the workers councils and movements for self-management were never against it, but were for general elections and co-operation. They wanted dual political power representation and participation. They wanted a freely elected parliament and a multi-party system. Arendt argued that you must abandon representation in favour of direct democracy. Unlike Arendt, people in Hungary realised that direct democracy is extremely terroristic. Pure democracy without safeguards is pure terror. They wanted to establish human rights as a counterweight against substantive democracy.

Do you think therefore that Arendt over-romanticises Hungary?

Yes, she was over-romanticising and the problem stems from her wanting to derive absolute theoretical conclusions from the history of ten days. The councils would have shrunk. She was right though about the «Machiavellian moment»; that you need beginnings, and you need moments when the margin becomes the centre. The margin can become the centre for ten days, as in Paris in 1968, but then it returns to the margin. It is important for the historical memory to see that the margin was able to get to the centre. So Arendt had a point, but she drew a very negative consequence out of it. She said that there should not be general elections at all, but rather that people should always be «participants». This is very dangerous.

One of the things you say about Hungary is that it is really the only instance of what you regard as a kind of genuine revolutionary moment. There's also America but it lacks the participatory element. What does that tell us about the political condition? This is the only event of the twentieth century that really manifests a genuine emancipatory energy as you see it. Should we be inspired or depressed by that fact? Can't the margin or periphery hope for something more than 10 days of fame? Is «hum-drum» politics, a politics of who-gets-what the norm?

I don't think it is depressing. If someone falls in love and then it's over is that depressing? Revolution is young love. It always remains beautiful.

I suppose for someone who hasn't been through that experience and who doesn't know what it's like to «act politically», it does seem that modernisation and increasing industrial complexity, militate against any kind of feeling of politics as being «liberating». That is why one might be tempted to romanticise in the Hungarian example. Here we see a moment of great intensity, a moment of great energy for all individuals concerned. I guess the Fall of the Wall had some of that feeling as well for its participants and I suppose it's what some might feel to be attractive about Arendt's political philosophy. What she's trying to do is to bottle some of this liberatory feeling and say «this is what politics really should be about». Yet what you seem to be saying is this is impossible because moments such as Hungary are fleeting and impossible to institutionalise. Is that right?

No. I just would not want to say that the only kind of politics which matters is that which takes place once every ten, twenty or forty years when the margin gets to the centre. You cannot say «this is politics». What is this saying about the concept of the political? In Arendt it is far too narrow. I think the concept of the political is a broad concept covering many different types of movement and types of activity. We cannot say that voting has nothing to do with politics because this is idiotic.

But if voting is the only thing people are doing it seems like a very impoverished experience of the political.

It's wrong to suggest that in modern societies the only political activity people are engaged in is voting. There are always those who do nothing – not even voting; but among those who are voting they do something else. People discuss politics and there is a discourse going on whether it is in the pub or the café. Politics becomes a matter of discussion, a matter of interest. People are interested; they read the papers. Sometimes they organise for single issues. There are many different kinds of politics. I don't think we can say that only acting dramatically is politics. Politics does not end because we are free. Freedom does not found. That is the paradox of modernity.

Was part of the problem with the Hungarian episode then the fact that it didn't have the means of securing its own permanency as a political process because of the difficult situation in Hungary at that time? It wasn't able to create a political system in which some of these energies could be harnessed.

That is also true because the Soviet Army marched in and prevented the process going forward. They could have established certain institutions and that's an issue about which Arendt said something interesting, namely that there is a difference between liberation and the constitution of liberties. In her mind liberation is not important for the constitution of liberties. I disagree with that, because liberation is also very important. Liberation is the experience, but the constitution of liberties is the hard work. It comes after the event. In 1956 we had the experience of liberation, but we never had a chance to establish the constitution of liberties. However, Arendt is right in this: that the constitution is the foundation of something which does not found. Without the constitution of liberties we have no foundation because we cannot found liberty on the existence of God, on metaphysical truths and so on, and because we are constituted as modern subjects without tradition. So we make a foundation for politics which is like a boat; its on the open sea. It can sink and that was the situation in Hungary. When we do this we must be aware that it can sink, but Arendt believes it can only be prevented from sinking if you preserve the enthusiasm of the very beginning. She argues that if everyone remains politically active to the same extent as he or she was at the beginning then you have politics. This is basically something that you cannot ask for in human nature, not just because we have other things to do, but because we are interested in other things. Look into yourself. If you ask me to spend my whole day in meetings, I will tell you that I would

rather go into the desert without water. Even if I knew that my voice is counting and also that the voices of other people are counting, you are alienating yourself in the sense that you are denying yourself the possibility of doing other things. Your life is limited, it is a limited enterprise. You want to do other things: to read books; go to the sea; make love; you want to do other things apart from sitting in councils. So you vote for someone else; you alienate your freedom to someone who has chosen to do this as a profession. Yes, there are times when you want to go to the council, at times of great excitement and intensity. But you overburden human nature if you expect people to want to do this all the time. You cannot. People have lives to live.

Doesn't there come a point where a regime is able to mythologise its revolutionary past to the point where the past is used as a weapon against those attempting to act to pursue radically democratic politics in the here-and-now? The past corrupts the present.

I think that they [the Americans] remained true to the original constitution. If you ask a Frenchman or a Hungarian about what it means to be French or Hungarian you normally get an answer concerning tradition. I don't know how an Englishman would answer this question, but the Americans would certainly answer liberties, rights, equal opportunities. What people believe in does exist. You ask whether there is corruption and one would answer «yes of course», but it's not «against the constitution» because the constitution doesn't have anything to do with this.

Does 1956 still cast a shadow over Hungarian politics?

No. It became a kind of a sacred cow. We all «adore» '56. It became embalmed in the memory of the nation, but no one acts in its name.

No one now refers back to the theories or the ideals of '56?

Just the extreme right, because in Hungary only the extreme right is revolutionary. The other parties are not revolutionary. They say «'56» was good at the time, but we don't need it now. People want peace, well-being and they want to live their lives; and they want to join the EU, NATO etc. '56 is embalmed. It is something which you adore, and which is a national holiday. You look at the revolutionaries in the cemetery, people put wreaths on the graves, but people do not want to go back.

To return back to Hungary in 1958, did you leave the Party of your own accord or were you thrown out?

I was thrown out. The Central Office of Control expelled me from the Party.

Did you have a job at that time? Were you a university lecturer?

I was thrown out of the university system and placed in a high school to teach the Hungarian language. I taught the Hungarian language for five years and during that time I could not publish anything.

Were you still studying with Lukacs? What of the Budapest School?

The Budapest School didn't exist at this time under this name. That was later. From 1947 I was studying with Lukacs at the university, but Lukacs was not teaching any more. In 1956 Lukacs was a member of the Revolutionary Cabinet as the Minister for Culture and afterwards he was deported to Rumania. After coming back he was no longer a party member and could not teach any more. He could not even accept guests. Only a few people remained true to him and visited him, discussing matters with him; but he became a totally private person.

What did «studying with» mean? Did you have reading seminars or was there some other joint activity which embraced a number of students? How did it work?

Before '56 Lukacs was still teaching at the university and he gave lectures and seminars. Lukacs gave some very great seminars, in particular those on Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and Hegel's *Aesthetics*. He had seminars about the analysis of literature, drama, the novel, etc. But after '56 he

never gave another seminar. First and foremost he was not at the university and we were all expelled from our university jobs. I was teaching in a high school and visiting him privately and we had no more seminars because at the time such a gathering would have been regarded as a conspiracy. There was a law in Hungary that if there were more than six people gathered in the same place for any sort of discussion this could be interpreted as hostile to the People's Democracy and hence as incitement which was punishable by law. It was therefore very important whether you were more or less than six persons gathered in one place. So Lukacs never held anything officially. We had private consultations with him in his apartment. I had conversations with him. I visited him every week and we discussed philosophical matters, never political matters. Between 1953 and 1956 we discussed political matters of course, and also sometimes after '56 we discussed political matters, but never before 1953.

So mainly Kant, Hegel. Any other major thinkers?

Kant, Hegel and also aesthetics. He was professor of philosophical culture so there were also classes on drama and the analysis of art.

And still no Marx?

Never ever. No, never in our university.

Was Marx taboo?

To teach Marx was the most dangerous thing you can imagine because you had to teach Marx according to the official version of Marxism given by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism. There was also a department of Marxism-Leninism in every university, and it was their job to teach Marx, not the philosophers. Marxism-Leninism was a «special department». They had three classes: «scientific socialism»; «Marxist economics» and «Marxist philosophy». So they taught Marx but only according to the latest «brochure» sent out from the Soviet Union.

This was a kind of canonical, consistent Marx to be used all the way down through the system as a guide to practice?

Yes, this was a form of religious practice. Lukacs and all these other thinkers whose classes I attended never wanted to teach Marx. Lukacs wrote about Marx, but never taught him. Marx was totally absent in my upbringing. I started to read Marx after 1953, particularly the German edition of the young Marx. Before then Marx was not available. You couldn't go into a library and get it because it was all in closed sections. But between 1953 and 1956 there was a relative liberalisation and so I went to the library and I started to read Marx. But I still did not understand Marx as a philosopher. I became interested in him whilst writing a paper on the ethics of the period of the Second International. I also read some Bauer and Kautsky, but that's it.

Would it therefore be accurate to say that you were a reform communist at this time, but not a «Marxist»?

No, I don't think so. I was not a Marxist in a way because I had no idea about what Marxism is; but if you had asked me if I was a Marxist I would have said «yes, I am a Marxist». The interesting thing is that they [the Party] never believed I was a Marxist. They always said I was neither a communist nor a Marxist, and I realised later that in a way they were right and I was wrong. I suppose I was never really a Marxist in an orthodox sense.

What was the status of Lukacs after 1956? Was he still a public figure?

Not at all. He was not a public intellectual but a very private one sitting at home on his own.

But were people looking at him to pronounce on various matters?

No, how could he? During the uprising he was still a party official and he was asked to keep himself at a distance from Nagy and to criticise him. Lukacs said that he was happy to criticise

Nagy, or at least to discuss with him, but not whilst Nagy was in prison. He had to be freed. That was the last thing he said about it. He was never prepared to support the government after that and so he was incarcerated. He never left his flat except for a walk.

Did he hold court at home? Did people at least visit?

No. At that time it was dangerous. People are not very courageous. His wife was still living with him and a few people used to turn up, but not many, though some of Hungary's most eminent artists and writers would visit Lukacs. Most people did not keep contact with him because they were afraid. When people did visit they tried to visit secretly. Lukacs's apartment was, however, under constant surveillance. I'm sure now that the cleaning lady was a member of the network of informers so there was a close eye on what he was doing. He certainly could not accept many visitors at that time. From 1967 onwards visiting became more possible and also his books were allowed to be sent to Germany to be published. He started to talk again to the foreigners who came to see him, and also to the newspapers, and so on.

So he more or less disappeared from view?

He disappeared from view, absolutely, and also in other countries more than before '56 because between 1949 and '53 he had disappeared from Hungary, but he was still being published in the DDR. After '56 he disappeared from everywhere because they wouldn't even publish him in the DDR either. Nothing was published until the *Aesthetics*. For a long time after that his work was only available in German, not Hungarian. Then there was the period from '57 when he came back from deportation from Romania up to «65/66. This period you can split into two. One was a period of intimidation, of executions, of imprisonment. It was a very dark time. Only very slowly I think from '65 onwards was there some degree of liberalisation, i.e. you could say things without getting involved with the police. This was a lousy time and it lasted until 1964/65. I know from my personal experience what happened here because certain things changed in my personal life as well. In 1961 or '62 my first husband and I had gone together to Lukacs's classes. He then decided to assimilate to the regime and he took up a position in the apparatus so we got divorced because I didn't want to join him in this assimilation process. I then met my second husband and then the story from '62 onwards is the story with my second husband and this is important because he was taken by the police in October or November '64. I know exactly the date because I was breastfeeding my son in July '64 and the police were constantly invading our home for absolutely nothing. That was repeated in '65. The police actually left us alone in '65 and then it became possible to say something slightly more political, but not much more, and also to publish work that had no direct relationship to politics.

This was a gradual thaw?

Gradually people were released from prison. There was a general amnesty and in '67 the regime started to embark on economic reform. The liberalisation of the market, for example, was introduced in January 1968. It was now that we can begin to talk about the Budapest School which is Lukacs's last school —because Lukacs had many schools. He was someone who believed that an idea is important if there are people who take it up and discuss it. He believed you had to have schools, a very old-fashioned idea, but he believed it. He had a school when he was a very young man — 24. At 24 there was already a «Lukacs school» in Hungary and there was also a school in the USSR called the «Movement». But this school, the «Budapest School» was his last and, as he saw it, composed myself, Ferenc Feher, Mihaily Vajda, and Georgy Markus. We were the four philosophers and then there were people attached to us in different disciplines such as sociology. Many of them were younger students for example of Markus who were called «Lukacs's grandchildren». That was the Budapest School and it started only at this time, i.e. 1964.

Feher wrote an article trying to trace the evolution of these various schools and he did mention that a number of others like Sandor Radnoti were also part of the Budapest school, whereas you're saying that this is a very small, clearly delineated group of people.

We have to distinguish Lukacs's students and «the Budapest School». Lukacs of course had a great many students, some studying a lot with him, others less so, across a number of generations. There were many of them, for example, my first husband. Radnoti was a friend of ours, but he was much younger than us. He was a talented high school student and we got to know him well and Ferenc embraced him immediately as a son because he loved to have sons. This friendship remained and I'm still a good friend of Radnoti.

What about Mihail Vajda?

Vajda was my student. He was a student at the Lenin Institute. This is a story I haven't mentioned. It belongs to the period of Imre Nagy and '53-'56 which was a period of thaw. There was a special institution called the Lenin Institute where those considered to be the elite of the Party were educated. Most of them went on to become aspirants in the Soviet Union. They were the cream of the younger Hungarians as far as the Party was concerned. Now the Party at that time thought that there was something missing at the Institute because the students only studied the words of comrade Lenin and Stalin and they wanted to introduce students to some real philosophy, so they asked Lukacs about what they should do in 1955, and he sent me to the Lenin Institute to give a course. Just like a stupid ass I chose «Spinoza's ethics» and I went to the class and no one understood a single word except one person, Vajda. He was the only one who spoke and so I discovered him and then he came to the main university and wrote his university doctorate with me. So from that moment we were good friends. His wife, a sociologist, also joined the circle.

But there was also Maria Markus?

Yes, she is Georgy Markus's wife, also in sociology and now in Sydney.

And wasn't Andras Hegedus a part of the School?

Hegedus indirectly, Hegedus worked together with Maria Markus and he was interested in Lukacs and Lukacs had an interest in his work and in his personality. He was an «external» and not an «internal» person. He was never directly part of it, but expressed some sympathy with certain tendencies represented by the School.

What about later when he came to prominence nationally?

• Yes, he became Prime Minister. He was the youngest Prime Minister Hungary had had, just 34, I think. He was a nominee of Rakosi and signed the so-called letter or declaration which invited the Soviet army into Hungary. He was one of the signatories. But when he got to the Soviet Union he changed his mind and he came back to Hungary and became the Director of the Institute of Sociology and also an editor of an important Hungarian magazine. Between '65 and '68 he got very much involved in the reform discussions. We were quite close at that time. He visited us, and we visited him. He also liberated me from my high school teaching because he took me at the Institute of Sociology. He was the one who, through his private influence, was able to do something which others were not able to do.

Now you were right about the difficulty of coming to terms with this idea of a «school» because it doesn't mean that much to us. We're used to major intellectual figures of American or British universities having say 15 or 20 research students, but this school doesn't sound like that.

No, it is a totally different thing. For Lukacs a school had to be a small group of young intellectuals, young philosophers who were absolutely each other's equals and who were all independent thinkers. Lukacs was in the centre. We surrounded Lukacs because he was a man of

genius. He was the man who inspired us because he had this very deserved reputation. In spite of this we were all thinking in entirely different ways to each other because the independence of thinking was very important. None of us would have accepted a dictatorial role played by a so-called «master». This was a freely chosen relationship to a person who was in a bad situation and towards whom we felt respect. There were no medals for doing this, only police surveillance. So I think people chose this relationship because they got something out of it. They got some intellectual advantage.

So for you it was interesting because here was a hugely original thinker in his own right?

Yes.

His political convictions and his status as a kind of major figure of kind of Hungarian communist scene was incidental. It was really that he was a great thinker.

No. It was very complicated because it was not incidental and these were the facts. He was an important philosopher. At the same time he in a way went through a very representative development in the communist movement. He still regarded himself as a communist and a socialist and a Marxist and so it would have been entirely out of the question to choose a person merely because of his intellectual superiority without choosing a part of his convictions. Lukacs believed that the Budapest School is about the renaissance of Marxism which meant that we need to go back to the roots, to Marx himself. We have to forget about what Marxism had been after Marx. We had to go back to the roots to start everything afresh, back to the beginning because everything had gone astray, had gone in the wrong direction. Now we, the Budapest School, had to do what no one else had done. We have to go back to Marx and start to develop philosophy in a proper direction. We called ourselves Marxists and socialists and precisely because of this we *were* Marxists and socialists.

It sounds, therefore, like the school had a mission.

Yes, the school had a mission.

And the mission was both theoretical and practical in the sense that if you think that you are resolving the major theoretical and philosophical issues, this will feed through into «praxis».

We believed we had a mission yes, and Lukacs particularly so. Lukacs believed in our mission. He believed more in our mission than we ourselves. We were young and we were not his generation. We had had very superficial contact with the Communist Party, although Vajda and Markus were still members of the Party. I myself was no longer a member, Feher had never been a member of the communist party, so this did not make any difference. What did make the difference is that we were committed to an alternative type of socialism. We knew all about «real socialism» and we knew that this was not socialism. We wanted to find the real Marx because what we saw was not the «real» Marx either. We wanted to juxtapose the real thing to the unreal thing, essence to appearance.

So you wanted to develop a school view on a) Marx and b) politics and c) the world more generally. Was the intention then to write a series of multi-authored works on these problematics?

Yes but the interesting thing was that the «problematic of politics» was left out because that would have been very dangerous and you could not work on politics theoretically. You could work only on epistemology, on philosophy of language, on ethics and these unrelated matters, but not on politics. We had this vision but we had also had the independence of our minds. In fact, we were all doing what we wanted to do. Lukacs never superimposed a task upon us. We had an instinct to choose our own subjects. I myself loved aesthetics because the first time I met Lukacs he was teaching aesthetics. Then I came to the conclusion that I had better leave aesthetics alone because if I did write about it I would be too much under Lukacs's influence because he had opinions about

this. He had no opinions about ethics. He had no opinions about Aristotle. I can be entirely free by working on these topics because Lukacs had never had a judgement or opinion on these authors.

It's noticeable, however, that, there is in some of your works of the late 1960s a tangible Lukacsian influence. Lukacs's appropriation of Hegel, particularly in the Aesthetics comes through in your account of subjectivity, in the notion of the «particular» versus the «unique» being, and so on. It would of course be surprising if this work didn't have a Lukacsian ring to it so there must have been some intellectual overlap between you.

Absolutely. I was the first to read Lukacs's *Aesthetics*. I was very much influenced by bits and pieces of the *Aesthetics*, but not the aesthetical aspects of it. *Everyday Life* was influenced by this work but not by his views on aesthetics. Even after having read *Aesthetics* or the *Ontology of Social Being*, which I did not like, I never wrote anything about aesthetics. I took out the points from the *Aesthetics* on Hegel's *Phenomenology*. All this was extremely important from the beginning, but *Everyday Life* was also deeply influenced by Husserl and by Heidegger, not by Schutz—as you mentioned in your letter—because I had not read any Schutz. When Kurt Wolff first read *Everyday Life* he said that it's a totally Schutziian book and asked why I didn't refer to Schutz. I replied that I could not refer to him because I had no idea that he existed. It's interesting of course to note that the sources for Schutz were the same as those I used, i.e. Husserl, Heidegger and Hegel, so it's not such a great surprise.

Richard Wolin makes the point that these figures are often thought of as quite conservative creatures and he interprets your mission at the time as being the radicalising of phenomenology, a fusing of a radically historicised Marx with a Hegelian account of the development of subjectivity. Is that a fair summary?

That's a fair summary, yes. This was a kind of combination which was in a way original. I described myself as a Marxist, but already at that time I was not an «ist» in the sense that I never took it for granted that the principles of Marxism were right before I checked them. So even in these book, *Everyday Life*, I rejected many of the fundamental ideas of Marx, because I picked my own. I didn't want to develop a new «ism», but a kind of what I call «personal thinking». I started to become a personal thinker—all of us did—while we were still thinking of ourselves as part of an «ism» and as being part of the School.

By «personal thinking» do you mean the same thing as an original thinker, someone who is developing a body of ideas rather than just looking at it rather passively or trying in scholarly fashion to examine their origins?

I talk about personal thinking not original thinking because original thinkers want to immediately establish a school of their own. A personal thinker does not want to establish a school of his or her own. They think «my philosophy belongs to me. It does not belong to another person. It's my personal philosophy». You can be original in different ways. Lukacs was always original and immediately tried to establish a school and this is a very strong desire of original thinkers. They want to establish a school immediately so that their ideas can be mediated to others. Original thinkers believe that they had discovered the truth. As long as you believe that you have discovered the truth you want to have students and schools who will disseminate the truth. But in my view the moment you want to say something original you say it tentatively. You give an answer to the question, but you accept that answer is not final. It's preliminary. You answer questions in a preliminary way. If you answer questions in a preliminarily way it means you can always come back to these answers at a later point to look at them again and to reformulate them differently, though the answers will always be related. I will never write something and say «look that's the final thing,

closed matter, everything will fit into this framework». I am saying «I don't know the truth» – that is personal thinking. I describe or formulate something which I believe is true, but perhaps tomorrow I will modify my position.

But isn't there then a problem with the status of Lukacs within the school because a) he wanted a school, and yet b), as you said, the participants within the school were all considered as equals. Now he's the one who thinks «I need a school». Doesn't that mean that his relationship to the other members like yourself and Feher is always going to be one as a kind of mentor, as a kind of dominant figure within it?

He was much older than we were. He was a dominant figure, but he was also a kind of very funny person and he loved contradiction. On the one hand he believed that he knows the truth, that the world spirit is somewhere dwelling in his mind and we discussed matters with him and we disagree with him. We were always wrong and he was always right. Still, he loved disagreement because that was funny. He loved excitement, real discussion, and people who only interpreted or repeated what he was saying were extremely boring for him, and he hated boredom. You see the situation? On the one hand you were right: he believed that what he said was true. At the same time he wanted us to contradict him for the amusement of the conversation.

Did he think he was learning something from you?

I think he did learn something but that was not «learning».

Was he testing his theories in that sense against your intellect?

Yes, that's closer. He was testing. Yes, we were testing his theories and also his writings.

About the practicalities of the school, what form did your meetings take? Did you have a prepared piece of text, did someone write something?

During the Budapest School period we still visited Lukacs mainly on our own. We discussed our own problems with him, but sometimes, particularly after '68, Lukacs would invite all of us over to his apartment once a month. We sat around the dinner table and ate together, whilst he conducted a discussion on theoretical matters; he was writing up a particular article he was just finishing and he would ask what we thought about it, whether it's right or wrong. We «tested» his ideas as you put it. Normally we, the younger members of the school, got together every week with our families in someone's apartment and we talked about theory and about many other things because we were the closest personal friends. That was a very close friendship which was founded on the basis of ideological, political interests not agreements, interests and absolute trust. We trusted each other 100% and personal inclination —love and friendship— all these things together. We also had excursions together, and the children got to know each other, and they also became friends. They still are friends.

You mentioned that every week there would be some sort of meeting.

Every week there would be meetings and on the weekends there would be excursions together, so we met at least twice a week. If we finished a piece of work we discussed it privately with each other and with every member of the school, so when I wrote something I discussed it with Feher, and Vajda. We also met twice a week with Vajda to discuss and write things together; but this was a very close friendship. At the same time it was a form of intellectual camaraderie. This doesn't mean that we agreed in theoretical matters. We were different not only in our theoretical tastes, but we also diverged in theoretical convictions. There were only a few principles we all accepted, for example, that whatever we believe we are in a very broad sense all socialists and that whatever we believe to be true in philosophy we are in a very broad sense members or participants in the renaissance of Marxism. That was a kind of common conviction.

So the topic of these discussions would be mainly works written by members of the group, or would it be readings from Hegel, Kant or Marx?

No, mainly we discussed each other's writings at that time and some other works only occasionally when they came up in discussion or when someone brought them up, but not systematically.

And the main work which came out of the earlier period was your work on Aristotle's ethics

«Aristotle's Ethics» was written earlier at the same time as my first marriage, i.e. between '58-'59, though it was not published until some time after that. My first book on ethics, *From the Intentions to the Consequences* was also written even earlier in '57. These were my last classes at the university before I was expelled from my job in the University, because I was thrown out of my job.

Am I right in thinking there's no English translation of either of those?

No, this is not in English. They are only in Hungarian and also they were published in the '60s, that is around 8/9 years after I have written them so the publication dates and dates of writing are quite different because books could not be published for a long time after '56. Then in the '60s the first book was *Renaissance Man* and continued with *Everyday Life*. These are the first books of my Budapest School period.

Though those two books are radically different from each other.

That's right, because in the case of *Renaissance Man*, though I called myself a Marxist, I was not really interested in developing the analysis in this book. But I became interested in doing so in *Everyday Life*, which though «New Leftist» in tone was written before the New Left emerged. I was a New Leftist before the New Left and in '68 I found that all my ideas are really confirmed, in particular that we do not need a political revolution. What we need is a revolution of life, of «everyday life». Life itself needs to be transcended, that was the important thing. We don't need to «seize power» or have a proletarian revolution, because that's all rubbish. We have to change our lives. That was the New Left agenda in *Everyday Life* and that's why the New Left loves, and still loves, this book. This was the New Left agenda before the New Left even started and I was glad that I had become a New Leftist without knowing anything about this movement. It showed that I had become a different kind of Marxist, that I took seriously the idea of the renaissance of Marxism and that I was not a communist. I was interested in the young Marx, how Marx could be used to develop these new ideas.

Renaissance Man seems odd when set alongside Everyday Life because the latter is implicitly political in tone: it's all about change and transformation, confrontation with reality. Renaissance Man by contrast is scholarly, calm, reflective. It doesn't seem to have a critical point to it. Would that be fair?

You need to reread it. There's a new Hungarian edition with a new preface. I already wrote the new preface to the German edition which was published I think in '82. It's about the renaissance of Marxism. The idea is the parallel with Christianity. The point is that there were few atheists during the Renaissance period, but everyone's Christianity was a different kind of Christianity. This was a parallel phenomenon. It was not a metaphor, exactly, but a metaphor of a kind, that is, that there is a great plurality in Marxism. There were few atheists among us. Very few people wanted to say that Hell made no sense or that it doesn't exist. But our God was very personal and changing and we needed different kinds of ceremonies, practices and so on. So it had some of these qualities.

So did you recognise in the Renaissance the same kind of commitment to the idea of universalism, and to the Promethean idea of a multi-sided individual as you do in Marxism. Was that part of the inspiration for taking the Renaissance as a subject of study?

There were two reasons to take it as a subject of study. Firstly a lot of the beautiful things of the modern world were already there, but the modern world as such had not fully developed. So there

was a kind of a parallelity of metaphor for a world which grows out from capitalism and from modern politics but becomes more human than the forms this world took in the 19th century. On the other hand, there was a simpler reason for my interest in the Renaissance and this was that in 1960 for the first time in my life I got a passport for Western Europe and my first husband's sister who lived in America gave us \$100 to go abroad so we went to Italy for three weeks with \$100. It was an unbelievable experience and I wanted to keep this experience alive in a period when I had not the slightest hope of seeing Italy again. Not the slightest hope. This was the time when the police were coming round continuously and when I was breastfeeding my son. I started to write *Renaissance Man* in the same period, i.e. at a time when I had not the faintest hope that I would ever see these places again. I wanted to keep this memory which would, like the memory of first love, never be repeated alive. Of course now I have been everywhere hundreds of times, but at that time I wanted to keep this experience in my memory. I wanted to think about it. I wanted to re-imagine it. I wanted to be there, and so this book was the expression of this desire to be somewhere where I could never be.

I know Marxists have in the past criticised the products of the Renaissance as being the product of nascent bourgeois ideology and, crudely, of alienation and exploitation. Did any of these notions occur to you?

I did not see it in this light. I saw it in another light and I don't think these categories offer a proper description even now because craftsmanship, the *techne*, was so important in the Renaissance. Also the craftsman had personally seen the results of this work and so they were not yet really alienated to the same extent or in the same way as we find now. The fact that during this period some people were rich and some people were poor was not my problem; it is still not my problem. My question is what are the possibilities of a good life for people who have less than others.

The Renaissance is also of course identified as the epoch which gives rise to liberal man, to the individual, to the idea of the unencumbered self which is very much the theme of your account of modernity, but also a very important constituent of liberal ideology, i.e. that this individual should be the subject of political philosophy. Was there any problem reconciling your love of the Renaissance with your political radicalism?

My main point was about the plurality of concrete images of Man, of forms of life, of ways of living. The Renaissance form of life fascinated me.

I'm just wondering, then, how you viewed the West in the 1960s, I've got a pretty good idea of how you viewed communist society, but what was your view of America, Britain, France and so on? How did you view those «post-Renaissance» societies?

It depends when. For a very long time I regarded America too positively because I was in a communist regime which was vilifying America in a stupid way as the initiator of war when we all knew that the USSR was more aggressive than America. We never believed this image of aggressivity, but rather held a rosy picture of the West in general as a place where everyone is happy and where there is no more conflict and everyone can live a life of his or her own, etc. Of course I repeated that there is alienation in capitalism, but there was alienation in socialism too. There was no difference as far as alienation was concerned, so basically the picture was far more rosy; but that is understandable because, firstly, we had no personal experience of the West. Secondly, we just opposed this world to the communist world and in this respect we were right to idealise this world because it was still far better than ours. We were really angry at leftist visitors, though we sympathised with the left. I really had an absolute sympathy with the New Left but I was sometimes

stupidified at how they had developed such false illusions about our world. I will never forget when Lukacs's German publisher, who was a leftist, visited us and told us that we should visit him in Germany. We said «we have no passports», and he asked us why we didn't have any passports, and we said «because they have taken away our passports». He looked at us and asked «why did you give them your passports. When the police ask me for my drivers licence I always tell them that I've left it at home». Are you crazy? How can you measure a world when you can say «don't give them your passports». So what? So they had a total misunderstanding of this world, of socialism; and they had a greater misunderstanding of socialism than we had of capitalism. They had huge delusions: «OK, communists had a bad period –Stalinism, the Gulag– everything will turn out fine. There is no private property, no private means of protection. We are free. The labourers and the workers own their own factories». They bought all this rubbish. Our idealisation of the West paralleled their idealisation of communism.

So would you now say that your view of the west is less benevolent than it was in the 1960s?

It's just different. Firstly, I realised there is no such thing as «the West». I lived for ten years in Australia and ten years in the United States, in New York, and between the life in New York and the life in Australia, there is very little similarity. So what is «the West»? You believe the West is simply a market society, capitalism or democratic institutions, but the content of life is different. Think about the contrast between Britain and France. In one there is a public role for intellectuals, in the other there isn't. In America there are no intellectuals in this sense at all. We had no experience of these differences so we spoke about «the West» and in a way we were right in speaking about the West because in all these countries there are free elections, there are multi-party systems, you can travel if you have the money to travel, you have a passport. If you reduce everything to the bare minimum, to the basic constituents of the way of life, then we were not so much mistaken in our judgement.

Because the contrast was much greater between central/eastern Europe and everywhere else?

Yes. We lived in countries that were very different to those in the West.

*Just to go back to the Budapest school itself, one of the motifs of *Everyday Life* is the individualistic view of emancipation, a view which regards the reception of art and philosophy as crucial to the development of individual consciousness and action. There is not much discussion of the collective agent or the role of the party or the role of a political movement. Emancipation begins with yourself and with interaction with art and philosophy. Can you expand on that? I think it's a very important theme in your work more generally.*

I think so. I would make a distinction between liberation and emancipation. Liberation is never a singular issue, an issue for the individual. If you want to be liberated from a colonial situation then you cannot do it on your own, that is, there is a collective gesture and collective action here. But I think emancipation is a different issue. When you speak about emancipation I don't believe that the philosophical message of emancipation has relevance for class action and collective action. India could be liberated from colonialism, but it was not emancipated through this action. There are two different things. This is not just about the constitution of liberties. Interestingly, Sartre had an idea about emancipation —which I believe to be totally wrong— but at least he knew that there is a difference between liberation and emancipation because in the case of emancipation you need a reversal of the regard. You have to constitute yourself. You have to reverse the sign, constitute the other and, on his terms, restore thereby dignity through violence. That is the wrong thing, but his view of emancipation isn't. It is about gaining dignity and this is about the reversal of the regard. For me emancipation is an extremely important issue and so is liberation, but they are different. For

example, I don't think that American feminists today are emancipated. Absolutely not, because I think the introduction of women's studies in universities is not emancipation. «Identity politics» is far from being emancipation. I don't think the reversal of violence is your emancipation. I think emancipation is very difficult, very complicated; but it is not individualistic insofar as I don't think that you do it on your own. It has to be an interpersonal thing. There are no emancipatory institutions; there are no emancipatory classes. You cannot say that the proletariat is the agent of emancipation. You can establish a trade union, but that is not emancipation.

In the 60s was your view that revolution was liberation or emancipation?

There are different kind of revolutions. I distinguish between political revolutions and revolutions of everyday life. Everyday life is emancipation, and political revolution is liberation. There are three types of revolution: economic, political and the revolution of everyday life. That was the slogan of *Everyday Life* which meant emancipation is always self-emancipation. Don't attach emancipation to a class or agent and pretend that they will produce it for you. Emancipation is always self-emancipation and this is why Sartre had some interest in this distinction.

This took you away, then, from the Marxist tradition and the view that emancipation is a fusion of individual and collective action and hence that one could not be successful without the other? In other words, it would be a nonsense to speak of someone emancipating him or herself within the confines of a capitalist system.

I don't believe in this any more. I did not believe in it then.

Already by the end of the 1960s?

I had already a kind of philosophy of *Existenz* in my mind. I wrote at that time the preface to Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* in Hungarian and the piece finishes with the sentence «either Kierkegaard or Marx». «Either/Or» that was the thing. Either you believe that everything is emancipation or you have the Kierkegaardian solution which is to think in terms of the categories of existence. That had a deep influence on me.

Did other members of the Budapest School come to a similar conclusion?

I think it influenced Vajda's thinking who was writing about Husserl at that time, but it never had the slightest influence on, say, Markus who was strictly Marxian and who was still thinking in terms of social stratification, in terms of class, etc. I am not rejecting the category of class, because it describes European society quite well through the «50s. I don't negate the sociological value of this concept. I just don't think it is philosophical. I think it describes how a society operates. It describes the function a group occupies in the division of labour. I don't deny it: I just don't think that this has an emancipatory force, just as Marx didn't think categories had an emancipatory force. That's why he contrasts the «class in itself» with the «class for itself». The class had no emancipatory consciousness anyway, only «trade union» consciousness. Who had the emancipatory consciousness? Mr Lenin had it and he said you had to introduce it externally from the intellectuals otherwise the working class would never develop such a consciousness. Lenin said that and he was right because this was not the task of the class.

This sounds a lot like Lukacs in the 1960s as well. Had he then given up the idea of the class based classical Marxist revolution by the end of the 1960s?

Lukacs was thinking in the terms of ontology at that time. He wrote this ontology of historical being which is not a «bad» thing to do philosophically. However, it [*The Ontology*] was a very bad book because he took bits and pieces from the Marxian tradition. He started with the analysis of work, moved to reproduction and put in these Marxian brackets alien issues and the whole thing became totally chaotic, so I think it was a terrible catastrophe. We told him it was a bad work which,

now I think it over, was a cruel thing to do to an old man. To tell the old man that his new venture is of no worth was, I think, quite cruel. We were young and we were cruel. However, Lukacs asked us to be sincere and to tell the truth, and it would also have been bad not to tell the truth. It would have been unfair.

I can't imagine that History and Class Consciousness appealed to you as a group of individuals either, so which of the works of Lukacs did you feel some empathy with?

I was left out from this because when I was still a young Marxist I could not read *History and Class Consciousness* because it was not available. There were no copies. Also Lukacs wanted to forget about it. He hated this book. When I did get access to it I disliked it as well. I did not believe in the emancipatory function of the working class so I disliked the whole thing. But of course it is the work of a genius. It is a great book. I only disagree with it absolutely. I consider it a very great book, I still do. I believe that the greatest books of Lukacs were the books of his youth: *Sinn und Form*, *The Theory of the Novel*, and the *Heidelberg Aesthetics*, though this was not published until later, and certainly *History and Class Consciousness*. These were Lukacs's greatest books. Later on, in his so-called orthodox Marxist period, he wrote a few very good essays, for example, those he wrote on the historical novel. This is a beautiful work. His work on Scott was brilliant and made everyone read this author again. *The Young Hegel* is also a good historical work. It is not, however, the work of a genius but that of a good working philosopher. And then came *The Destruction of Reason* which is a total nightmare, and there were other nightmares. And then came *Aesthetics*. In the case of *Aesthetics* it is an overwritten book. He should have written a short book with his main ideas. He put so much stuff in this book which made it almost unreadable. I think he could not bring himself to write a slim book because in a slim book everything has to be logically interconnected and so he put all this cultural stuff into it with a great amount of analysis of works of literature which obscures the fact that there is no real connection between the analysis and the essence of the book. My husband working on the Italian edition of this book found it difficult to abbreviate everything because everything was interconnected to everything else. The book is too much, too bulky.

So the net result of this is that maybe our image of the Budapest school as being the school of Lukacsian Marxism is completely flawed.

Yes. It is not true. Even though we called ourselves Marxists the books we published are not easily described in such terms. For example Vajda's book on fascism, or the book by Markus, Bence and Kis on the possibility of political economy were entirely original. We discussed all these things enthusiastically, but we never paid lip service to Marx for the sake of doing so. We believed that we were going back to «the beginning» but because we had started to think «personally», we forgot about the principles, the foundations, the dogmas, and so our Marxism became entirely out of pattern. A Marxist would not have regarded these as Marxist works.

What brought the school to an end? Was it the politics of the situation in which the Budapest school were operating or was it for philosophical or theoretical reasons?

The story goes as follows: I had a friend involved in film and this friend told me that her father was extremely tolerant, he tolerated everything. But once she came home, she stood before her father and told him that «there is no God» and the father gave her immediately a box on the ear—the first and last time he did. He told her that that this was the one thing you never say: that there is no God, because the father was religious. You can do everything, you can believe that there is no God, but you don't say it. Now Vajda, the romantic among us, told us the following: you can never, ever overcome capitalism, socialism is rubbish and so is Marxism. That was the end of the Budapest School. That was the end, totally the end. That was in 1976. At that time I was writing about

emotions. There was not a word of Marxism in any of this; but I haven't *said* that there is no Marxism, I haven't said that there is no socialism. I wanted to forget about it and do something else, but that position still leaves a school. If, however, you say there is no God then that destroys the foundation on which the school rests. It means there is no «renaissance of Marxism». If you have some minimal common things and there is something we can juxtapose to them, and there is something that we can find in Marx which is of common interest, then maybe. But if you say «nothing can overcome capitalism and socialism is rubbish», then there is no school.

So presumably Vajda in saying that had to be echoing the views of other people in the school in order for the rest of the members of the school to take that as the end.

No, the others don't have to. Because he wanted us all to think everything to the end. We were opportunistic you see. We were opportunistic, all three of us. Because though we did not think any more in Marxist terms and we did not think any more in terms of socialism, we still stuck to our own ideas and we never deconstructed it properly. Although the literature about Budapest School says that Budapest School started the renaissance of Marxism, what did we do? The deconstruction of Marxism. The Budapest school did the deconstruction of Marxism; not rejection, not the pushing away, but the constant systematic deconstruction. At the end of deconstruction you should say «it's no more», but we didn't do that because we didn't feel that that was our task. We deconstructed Marxism, but we wanted to say that somehow it lives on.

Did you arrive at these conclusions at roughly the same time? Did you all suddenly look at each other and think «well we've gone as far as we can with this doctrine and it's not working»?

No, not at all. After the «end of socialism» there remains a kind of socialism. I hadn't rejected this idea. Basically I would say I rejected the idea of a «socialist society» because I think to have «a socialist society» is rubbish. But I do not reject the meaning of socialism even now, I reinterpret it. I say that capitalism is a revolutionary thing. There is a revolution in our daily life, but we cannot live every moment in a hurry. In such a revolution we need «breaks» and socialism is one of the breaks. In the nineteenth century conservatism acted as a break; but we do not have conservatism any more. We never had it in America, and in Europe it barely exists any more, so there is no acting conservatism because people don't want to conserve. However, we still need breaks from the revolution and socialism is this break. In this respect I speak about a pendulum movement between pure capitalism and pure socialism. Neither of them can be achieved because the pendulum moves between the two. I haven't rejected it; I would say it's too radical. I don't think the sentence makes sense [i.e. to talk about a socialist society]. Nothing can «overcome» capitalism. What does «overcome» mean? That's my other point: that I cannot see the future, I have no oracular power. Vajda said there cannot be anything after capitalism, so he believes that he has a privileged access to the future and that's the Marxian idea, i.e. you can have privileged access to the future. You know what is going to happen in the future; you know that you cannot have socialism, so it «must» be capitalism. Now I broke more radically than he did from the Marxist philosophy of history and with the idea that we have a privileged access to the future. I don't think we have it. I cannot say anything about the future either *pro* or *con*. I cannot make categorical utterances about the future because I do not know it. Even now I would not agree with this sentence. Marxism was so radical it didn't make any sense. Marx made sense, but Marxism does not. No «ism» makes sense. The time of «isms» is over.

There is of course a tradition of Marxism which echoes many of these themes, in fact which reaffirms the ethical basis of Marxism and ignores the «historicist» account of how things will develop. Did you find any affinity with revisionist thinkers like Bernstein or Kautsky. Bauer I know you

mentioned, and Luxemburg features in some of your early work. What they are saying is that socialism is a better form of society and hence the issue of the historical process is secondary to the question of the ideals underpinning socialism. Did you consciously think of yourself as being within a tradition of theorising like that, or was your «Marxism» always of the historical materialist variety?

Originally, that is, in the early '60s before the New Left, I was very much in sympathy with Luxemburg, not with Kautsky, because Kautsky I found primitive, but certainly Luxemburg and Bauer. But after '68 I was confronted with an absolutely new type of the left in which the seizure of power and the total transformation of society as far as the social structure is concerned became outdated and so after '68, because of this New Left, my radicalism ceased to be this kind of socialist radicalism of the 19th century, i.e. that we need a total transformation of society because we know that society needs to be transformed. We know that if we collectivise production we will be more humane and better off than we are now and so now I ask «how do you know that please»? There is no one single truth. This system might be better, perhaps.

Someone might say that we would prefer to live in system of associated production where everybody is both owner of their own labour and collective producer.

But if the majority of the population desires it, then it will be done, because living in a democratic society means that if the majority want to do it you can do it; but the majority never wants to do it. That's the problem. The majority are not socialists. The majority votes for the «breaks»; but it's never voted for socialism, not as a «total transformation of society» and «society of associated producers». No one would have voted for this because it's a nightmare. If you read the description Marx gives of the society of associated producers it is beautifully ridiculous. You can get a piece of paper saying how much you've worked, how much you've earned from that, or how much you would have earned had there been money, then you go to the collective shop and take this or that. Why is your life better? It's far worse.

It seems that part of the problem from your point of view with this vision is reconciling this form of associated production with modernity, a point which has of course been made by many economists. Is it that the complexity of modernity makes non-market forms of association and exchange less possible?

Marx knew that. He wrote in the *Grundrisse* that there will be machines to do most of the work and then we will have a great amount of leisure time; but he believed that if there is a great amount of leisure time people will paint pictures, make music, do «critical criticism». He never believed that they would watch TV. There are certain things that go with this anthropological optimism. A lot of people have free time and what do they do with it? They cannot blame the world that they are overworked. What do they do? They sit and watch TV day and night.

Can we go back to the story of your expulsion from Hungary? Why were you expelled?

This is a long story. There was Party resolution against our group in 1973. The Party resolution was as follows: there is a rule in Hungary that there are institutions in which Marxism-Leninism is practised and they said that we are not Marxist-Leninists. We therefore have no place in any scientific institutions in Hungary and should be dismissed from our posts in universities, etc. So then we were thrown out of our jobs and they told us that they were going to offer us alternative jobs —not scientific jobs— under the condition that we participate in a «scientific discussion» about the use of our work. They said that the Party Central Committee would organise, in the name of «science», a discussion about our ideas and said that if we participated in the discussion that we could recant our ideas, and that if we did so they would offer us alternative jobs. We wrote a letter saying that we are not interested. We said that we are very ready to participate in any public

discussion, because a scientific discussion is a public discussion. We said we are not going to participate in any discussion organised by the Party if others do not have free access, or if they cannot hear what we are saying, and if the only people who are allowed to come are selected by the Party. So we refused to go to this kind of discussion. We are ready to participate in a discussion where everyone can participate, where whoever wants to come to the discussion can come, including journals and newspapers; and that means that we do not accept the rules of the game, because the discussion was meant to be an exercise in self-criticism. You get these jobs and you get other jobs under these conditions, and we said «no we don't accept». We say that this period is over, that what you are doing is wrong, we are free citizens and we don't take orders from the Party. So we surrendered our old jobs and were unemployed. This is all very well documented and came to be called the «Philosopher's Trial». Then they wanted to throw us out of Hungary. The then Prime Minister told the Parliament about me and he promised them that he would «take the pen from my hand». That's the Prime Minister of Hungary. So we were thrown out, we could not earn money and we had no funds which was a serious problem. I got a scholarship from Germany which somehow got to Hungary, and I divided it up amongst all of us so that we could at least live. But it was just money from translations. This was a very hard time, particularly for the Markus's because they found it difficult to get their work translated very easily as Maria was Polish. The worst of it was that the secret police informers were everywhere and accompanied us constantly. We could not go hiking without being accompanied by these people. You could not have a telephone conversation. Everything was always taped. Then they started to ring at your door and come in without waiting, asking the most stupid provocative questions. They were not informers. They were agent provocateurs. That was 1973. They couldn't throw us in prison, because that would not have been acceptable. So what could they do? It was not so dangerous but it was extremely unpleasant.

Feher was imprisoned though wasn't he?

He was for a few days because he illegally sent a manuscript out of the country on the «aesthetics of the young Lukacs». You could not send out manuscripts without the permission of the Party. That was a work written by Georgy Markus about the young Marx and Ferenc asked someone from Germany—who happened to be an informer—to take this paper out with her. She of course gave it to the secret police people on the border and so he was imprisoned. Those were very unpleasant days. Szelenyi and Konrad were also in prison. We were not afraid of being in prison for three months, but for life, that's different. So there was no big risk involved, and of course the moment people feel there is no great risk, or that they will be imprisoned for only a short time, they start to become active. I haven't spoken about the Korcula Declarations which was another occasion when we were punished in order to show the Soviet Union that dissidents were being dealt with in Hungary, but this was another instance of the same thing. Of course this was held against us later because we already had a record of opposition to the regime, this time over the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and showed that we would talk to the overseas press if we had the chance. For example, Lukacs's step-son, who was in quite a good relationship with the Party at that time, went to Kadar to protest against our dismissal from our jobs. He told Kadar that this was not a political matter, but a matter of culture and that he should not take political measures against us, and Kadar asked him a question: «What about the Korcula Declaration? Wasn't that a political matter?» So that was a very strong factor in the so-called Philosophers Trial.

So following the trial, you were not sentenced, but advised to leave the country?

We were told we were not allowed to leave the country. Our passports were finally confiscated and everything was confiscated. We were not allowed to leave the country. For a long time we did

not want to leave the country either, but then we run out of finances. We all had children, so we started to look for jobs outside the country.

This is in '73, '74?

This was later, in 1975. We started to look for jobs outside the country at that time and then it turned out that we cannot get passports unless we already have jobs. But the job market was bad in the West so we could only get a job under the condition that we could attend an interview. This is «catch 22». You cannot get a passport unless you have a job, but you can't get a job unless you have passports. That was the real catch 22. It was only broken because my friend, Ivan Szelenyi, sent a young scholar, John Carroll, from La Trobe University in Melbourne from Vienna to Budapest to interview me. So I got a job without having been for an interview because they came to interview me. A similar thing happened with Markus and Vajda both of whom took up temporary jobs in Bremen in Germany. So finally in the fall of 1977 we all left Hungary, Markus for good. He is still living in Australia. Vajda temporarily because he came back after a few years to Hungary and, as it turned out, temporarily for me also; but at that time I thought it was for good.

It's difficult to imagine a more different culture, climate, way of life than that of Melbourne. Can you give some impression of what it was like to arrive in Australia and to land in a completely different world. How does that affect your work, your thinking?

First of all, I was happy to see how very kind and nice people were towards us. We also had Hungarian friends who had been living in Australia since 1957 who helped us in everything at the beginning, and helped us through a lot of difficulties. This man I mentioned to you, John Carroll, also helped us a lot and so did many other people as well. We found a friendly environment, but everything else was totally alien, totally absurd. I'd never seen a bank in my life. Having a bank account seemed totally absurd. I didn't understand how I could actually get any dollars in my hand because I didn't know anything about banks or bank cards. I'd never heard about this institution. Also, Melbourne is a big city and a big city without public transport. So how was I going to get to the university? In Budapest I would walk twenty minutes, but here it would mean two and a half to three hours walk in one direction, making six hours altogether. This is hiking. Now, I am a great hiker but not for this reason. Then, how to buy an apartment? I had never bought an apartment. How do you rent something? This is a very primitive. How do you go shopping? All these elemental skills of life were absolutely missing. Then the language. I believed I understood English. That was a total misunderstanding because I could not understand my students and I could not understand my colleagues. There was a staff meeting and people stood up and spoke and I couldn't understand one single word because of the English and also because we were discussing public matters. I didn't understand either of these things, but I was happy anyway to discuss, happy because I don't know. I had never participated in this kind of discussion so everything was really strange. However, the first thing that concerned me was my writing. The first paper I wrote was in German and the second thing I started on was *A Theory of History*. The first chapter I wrote in Hungarian which I then had to translate myself, and I said «stop this, you can't do that, you must write in English, you cannot live in Australia without learning how to write English. You cannot translate your own work and there is no one here who can translate them». We didn't have any money because our salary was small. I know I was a senior lecturer, but my husband had no job and we had a child there, so I had to learn and it was a very slow thing. I got a research assistant who fixed the English for my first book, which was pretty bad.

Is that your first major work of «Australian» theory?

There were two works in that period. *A Theory of History* was the first major work I wrote on my own, and that is the break with the «Grand Narrative». The second, *The Dictatorship over Needs* was a collective work written with Markus and Feher. I wrote the central part of it.

When was Radical Philosophy written?

Radical Philosophy was written in Hungary.

So that comes out in English in 1976 I think.

1976 in English.

So it was written in 1972?

It was written in maybe '72, '73. It was written directly after *The Theory of Needs in Marx* in my «New Left» period – easily recognisable because of the terrible rhetorical style. I hate the style of this book, I really hate it. I think it has a New Leftist rhetoric. The content is not that bad, sometimes I'm satisfied with the content, and many of the ideas which I later developed I wrote in this book. The New Leftist rhetoric I don't like. Friends of mine wanted to republish this book. I never gave them permission to publish it. I wouldn't like to see it republished.

Certainly in the UK Radical Philosophy and The Theory of Needs in Marx are arguably your two best known books.

The Theory of Needs in Marx is a different matter because it doesn't have the same bad rhetoric.

That's presumably because here you are developing concept of radical needs through the teasing out of certain themes in Marx. It's more scholarly.

Actually it has been republished in *The Grandeur and Twilight of Radical Universalism*. I have no problems with the republication of this work.

But Radical Philosophy you don't like ...

No I like the ideas, because in *The Theory of Needs in Marx* I was, as you said, teasing out things in Marx which I hadn't invented, but in the case of *Radical Philosophy* I somehow developed a new philosophy. I developed a personal philosophy which I think is extremely important, far more important than *The Theory of Needs in Marx*, but I don't like the rhetoric.

One of the important motifs in that book is the notion of a «rational utopia», the idea of the full development of a utopia, of a form of life which is also rational. In other words, it is a model which has a basis in certain universal needs, characteristics or values. It's a very foundational work for some of your later thinking as well.

I have no objection against the content of *Radical Philosophy*. I still look with sympathy at the idea of rational utopia, but I would express myself differently. Now you must leave a chair for «the Messiah», for this openness of the future. I think that this still remains with me; the idea that we don't lose this openness. The rhetoric is something else, the style, the declarations, I declare things simply without arguing, without telling a story and without irony, without scepticism. There are too many simple declarations in this book. It is this declaratory/declamatory style which I don't like.

On the other hand, utopianism is often identified as a very important antidote to the rather cynical discourse of some political theorising. I just wondered if you had a view on the value of utopian theorising more generally, or whether you identified with utopian theorists like, for example, William Morris.

I don't identify with any utopians because of my latest philosophical point of view. I say that we are sitting around the table and we need to leave a chair for the Messiah. This chair should not be taken out because it means that we no longer hope that something radically different can happen in the future; but if you describe who is occupying this chair, which is what happens in concrete utopias, then you erect a false Messiah because it cannot be described. Given that we do not see into

the future, utopia cannot be described. The moment you describe it, it is a false utopia. The concrete description of the utopia makes its voice mute.

So you now describe utopia as a form of closure which runs against our contingent human condition. It is a form of totalising discourse, and so we should avoid all forms of utopianising.

We can formulate concrete utopias not in order to close but to open future possibilities. That's why I say that every Messiah is a false Messiah, because if you say that this and this is occupying the chair then you close. Who knows who is going to occupy the chair? We do not have an insight into the future. We only say that we leave the door open. It is possible that something far better and entirely different will happen in the future; but if you say that you know what this thing is then you are lying because you cannot, and this is why I want to leave it open because the moment you describe the utopia you close the door.

But I suppose what people see of value in someone like William Morris for example, is the transformative potential of presenting a utopia to an audience which might not be familiar with the possibilities that are open to it. You need a utopia in order to open people's eyes, in order to show that there are possibilities.

That is a different problem of utopia. Utopia in this respect is a possibility. Utopias normally hold possibilities which are based on a knowledge which is beyond our horizon. But this kind of utopia —relative utopias— are basically showing certain kind of possibilities which are, as Hegel puts it, not abstract, but real possibilities without giving scientific or quasi-scientific support to this possibility. The moment you give a scientific possibility you don't say «perhaps» you can do this —or «if you do x, it's going to be y». These are two different things.

Would you describe Marx as a utopian?

Yes of course. In his young days he was utopian sometimes in a positive way, but then he really believed that he can prove scientifically, economically that the world is in fact going to develop in the direction he says it will develop, and this and this is going to happen, and this is going to lead to a kind of dealienation. He desires utopia. There are two different elements here. On the one hand there is the utopia of the dealienated society. You have this utopia but you bind up this utopia with a concrete social system which is based on the abolition of private property and total abundance which will never be the case. It is based on the end of classes and end of justice. So you end by putting so many concrete things into this utopian issue that you basically close the door rather than open it, because everyone who hates this idea is excluded. If he had learned from Hume that there is never absolute abundance in a modern society, then he would have had to describe a system of justice which of course he does not. For his conception to work you have to imagine a society which is not modern. Now I don't want half the human race to die of undernourishment because you cannot produce on these grounds for these people. So If you think it over you rather close and say forget about all this. I would rather stay with «good» capitalism. At least we survive.

So how does Marx's critique of utopian socialism stand? Is he guilty of doing exactly what he criticised others of doing?

In a way, yes. By the way this is also what Fourier —though Saint-Simon less— gives, which is a «thick» utopianism. But, you see, every thick utopia leads to disappointment. That's why you close rather than open. If you believe in thick utopias it leads inevitably to disappointment —and even despair because you cannot realise it.

So you're basically agreeing with Popper's view of utopias which is that the attempt to realise them in practice is extremely dangerous as it leads to a form of despair which can only find an outlet in the creation of a new human subject.

That is true and that is why I think Marx's concept of utopia led to this despair. It was not necessary to try it out. Maybe you don't try utopia out at all.

Do you think Lenin was a cynic or a utopian?

Lenin was a Machiavellian and a manipulator.

*So *The State and Revolution* was an aberration from his political cynicism and power dealing?*

Very difficult to answer this question. I have no access to Lenin's brain.

It's a question I find difficult. I was hoping you might be able to give me an answer to that!

I can't. I don't have access to his brain. I don't know how his brain works; but I know that he was a fantastically good Machiavellian and a great power machine.

*One of the criticisms which Paul Hollander made in his review of *Radical Philosophy* was the sense in which you were abstracted as an intellectual from any kind of political movement, from any kind of engagement with the political struggles going on around you. Would you accept that as being fair or did you have a sense of which your work as a political function as well as a philosophical one?*

I would think it had a political function as much as a philosophical one. It had. But I was never really involved in daily politics so to speak and I don't think being involved with daily politics and writing good political philosophy is easy to reconcile. It's very difficult.

So the agent of your emancipatory process was always to be the individual reader in that sense, or the individual participant in the philosophical process?

Yes, but I want to return to the individual because being an individual means that you have to have access as an individual to understanding what is right or wrong and thus there remains a need for individual enlightenment, that is, thinking with your own head, with your brain. But there is another aspect of enlightenment—to remain with Kant—to think of the other person's mind too, and to think consistently, and I think all the three things are here involved. If I write something, I offer this to the reader. I offer this not as a truth, but as a service. Take it or leave it according to your need. If you can need it, take it. If you don't need it, leave it, because it's not superimposed upon you. It means that we introduce something into an already ongoing discourse in which it's not just a single person individually thinking over a given question, but many others as well. Think of it like a game in which there are many balls being caught and thrown. What you are doing is introducing another ball into the game to be caught and thrown. This ball is then part of the game, part of the ongoing communication which is also politics. It is not alone on its own because it is not the only truth, but a ball together with other balls which are caught and thrown. It is one among many. Some people are influenced by what you say and even if they are not influenced directly maybe it plays a role in shaping the way a person thinks because we have no idea about the origins of what we say.

Or you've forgotten what you read a year ago.

Yes of course but you see in the back of their mind it is has been thrown as a ball and caught. We introduce ideas, thoughts, options into this ball game.

To imagine that the ball game has an influence on anything therefore presupposes not only a reading public, but also a situation in which ideas are able to have an effect on an on-going discourse. It presupposes that the realm of the political is subject to or responsive towards new ideas. I'm just wondering if you had a view on how valid the metaphor is for discussing, say, the United States or Great Britain where intellectuals have a limited role politically?

It's difficult to say. Nowadays, for example, the discourse is more and more limited to the universities. There is the ball game of the professionals and it's about professionalism and it's about

expertise. You can also throw a new ball into this game, but then it moves in an entirely different circle. I think after 1968 there were some important discourses going on around the world including America. Arendt was living at that time —she had a circle— and there were games at that time where balls were being caught and thrown in a broader public sphere. There were also groups of people meeting each other, not in scholarly conferences, but in meetings where different kinds of people got together to exchange ideas. At Korcula for example, we discussed the left agenda, but there were people coming from America, Europe and England. It was like the East and the West came together for a ball game. The important thing is that these kinds of meeting are possible. Here I am sitting with you, for example. Now in Hungary there is another group —the Khrishna believers— and I said «look why don't you have a summer school. You have a big place with beautiful lawns and tents and you can have access to young people and we can discuss the question Is God dead?». We did it and it was wonderful. A lot of young people came, asked serious questions and we learned a lot because they were not philosophers. They came because they were interested in certain questions: whether it is worthwhile living, what is worthwhile about life and what is the meaning of the whole, what is the modern view of life? We even discussed questions about globalisation, the future of art and so on, totally different issues. You keep people's brains moving, and moving in a direction where there is no direction but just methods to be discussed. I could give lots of other examples of meetings I have attended recently where non-professionals have demonstrated to me a great hunger to discuss and to learn. It is not written in the stars that there are places in the world where you cannot have these discussions because there is no such tradition of doing so. You can establish a tradition — even in Britain or America.

To go back to your Australian experience, you describe A Theory of History as being your break with the grand narrative. Was there any sense in the move to Australia caused that break, or was it already there and moving location made no difference whatsoever to the actual formulation of the new theory?

The draft of the book was already written in Hungary, so I brought it to Australia and wrote it down in English. The start of the first chapter was written in Hungarian and I translated it later into English but when you read my last book in Hungary, *The Theory of Emotion*, it's obvious that Australia made little difference. Australia influenced me in other ways, living in another milieu and first and foremost in my political writing, particularly the works written with Feher. In these writings the fact that I was in Australia was very important. I would not have written them in Hungary. So all our books of «political intervention» were written in Australia.

Presumably this is because you would have been imprisoned for writing those articles and books, all of which were very critical of actually existing socialism.

We were also critical of Western politics. The article on the «peace movements» written in Australia provoked a lot of hostility. I wrote a lot about politics in Australia, much more so than when we moved to New York, and I tell you why. I got this job in '84 and we moved to America in '86. '89 came the change in Eastern Europe and afterwards I never wrote about Eastern Europe. I wrote about the transformation, but later on I thought there are no more theoretical issues here. If I want to intervene, I will intervene as a citizen. Now all my interventions are in the Hungarian newspapers and I do it as a citizen, not as a philosopher.

In Australia you published a lot in Thesis Eleven. Was there a corresponding group? it sounds like there was a school of left radicals who all had a similar agenda, and who wanted to develop a «critical Marxism» or a «post-Marxism».

Yes there was a similar agenda and my husband had an important part in the establishment of the journal. He was a great organiser and he organised the first edition, but there was conflict over this

issue of «Marxism or post-Marxism?». Feher played a very important part in setting the editorial direction and making sure that the journal survived. Yes, it was a group of people who liked each other. We were also friends. It was a second home after the Budapest school. I found a home among these people. I still have many friends there. Yes, it was a very good group and was also an ideological and a personal relationship which meant we were happy to be together. We went on excursions every week. We went to mountains together, the children played together. History repeats itself.

Thinking about some of your political writing at this time, the thrust of many of these works is the desire to develop a notion of «feasible socialism» to go alongside or even displace the rational utopianism which was part of Radical Philosophy. It seems that you began to think about what socialism could be like in the concrete rather than in the abstract – a quite different starting point. It's almost as if having left behind high terrain of the «Marxist Renaissance» you suddenly realise that there are these political issues which one has to pay attention to and which can have some sort of resolution.

That's true and that is how we thought we could assert some kind of influence. So this was a quite different situation given that I never believed that I could have any influence with my books in Hungary. The only influence I could have there was on the secret police. For the first time, therefore, we thought we could influence a world in which we were present. It was a complete change and was felt in the theory as you pointed out.

So were there debates going on in Australia of this nature? Is this partly what prompted your interventions into the realm of deciding exactly how socialism could be advanced? Was it the Australian context which helped you to develop a political philosophy in that sense or was it just that, having given up Marxism, you now thought «well here's a big area which one really has to spend some time looking at»? You have to develop a political theory.

I think it's a matter of talent. As I told you, Feher always had that talent for political philosophy, and was very much interested in it. He thought that we should do political philosophy. He wanted to read together with me because he said that I can offer the theory of political analysis and he could offer the concrete analysis. This is really what happens in these collective works. When you speak about a down to earth analysis that is Feher, not me. When it comes to the generalised ideas which are always present in these works, that's me, not him. To take the example of the article on peace movements. I was in Germany when the first German peace demonstrations occurred. I was invited as a speaker and my first speech was very positive about the movement and the demonstration. Then I listened to the other speeches and said I wanted to speak again because all I had heard was intolerance. When I got back I told Feher that at least in Germany the «peace movement» is not about peace, but about creating a nationalistic movement. The anti-Americanism of the peace movement was an expression of nationalism, and no-one saw it, or realised it. So I came with an observation, and Ferenc read the literature. He told me what was in it and I gave him the general ideas and the theoretical aspect for the article.

A Theory of History is of course the foundation for the work you've been working on since, in other words, that you have these ideas of contingency, the idea of thrownness, and hence of the impossibility of predicting the future. This is obviously a very pivotal work. What were the main influences on that? You mentioned Collingwood earlier.

Yes, Collingwood very much.

What were the other major influences on you at this time?

Heidegger. The whole vocabulary is patterned on Heidegger. I discussed it in the first footnote, i.e. that vocabularies don't mean exactly the same thing. The whole vocabulary and the actual

discussion of temporality and the personal-historical is very similar to that in Heidegger's *Being and Time* which I acknowledged at the outset. There are other thinkers I could name, but none of them had such a major influence on this book. From Collingwood I got basically one sentence, «there can be no progress where there are losses». That sentence was very illuminating.

But isn't that sentence just repeating the underlying principle of Kantian autonomy? Although you haven't mentioned him, Kant is one of these thinkers who seems ever-present in your work from the late 1970s and early 1980s, and is obviously an important source for shaping your thinking about autonomy, symmetric reciprocity, radical tolerance, and so on. These are very clear Kantian themes.

Kant and Hegel always influenced me, and in my political philosophy also Aristotle.

What exactly do you draw from Aristotle?

From Aristotle, the distinction between the good citizen and the good man, for example, is for me a very important distinction for the modern world.

And teleology?

No, that is a metaphysical aspect of Aristotle, and I don't take any metaphysics or theology from Aristotle but only the ethical aspects for example, the concept of *phronesis*, the idea that the decision is not identical with the choice. Here there is something common between Aristotle and Kierkegaard: you «throw» yourself into something. You don't look left and right and then start choosing; you don't let your choice be determined, it just comes. *Phronesis* is commitment. There is a question of responsibility also in Aristotle, that you are responsible for all your actions including the emotional actions as well. Responsibility does not mean only to be responsible for rational actions. That is the notion of «authorship», the relationship of act and authorship, of *hexis* and your action, which stems from this action, of the relationship between *energeia*, *ergon*, *entelechia*. You can say that is also Kantian in the sense of the practical and the pragmatic, and the theoretical. You can say that Kant is an up-dated version of Aristotle, so to speak. You also have teleology only as regards theoretical ideas and not as a matter of reality or real description.

You also take the Aristotelian notion of the distinction between the public and private, between the public and the household, that these two things cannot be conflated with one another, that politics isn't all of life, and thus that there must be a clearly delimited sphere of individual existence. These are also clearly Arendtian themes.

Also Hegel, particularly the distinction between the three ethical powers, state, society and family and the idea that whatever structure they have this ethical power should be different and should have a different structure. Plato as well has an influence on me, the whole concept of Eros and the beautiful. Plato and Aristotle are both important; but then of course they are the founding fathers of philosophy. Also the Socratic image which is always everlasting and then Kierkegaard. Kant in his own right, and certainly Hegel in his own right.

One of the things that struck me about A Theory of History is the very strong connection with the sceptical wing of the liberal tradition. I'm thinking of people like Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, even Leszek Kolakowski, for example, all of whom make a distinction between the philosophy of history and the theory of history which is one of the key points that you are making in the book. The difference between these two modes is the predictive quality of the theory, the fact that you are not closing off future possibilities to individuals, and so on, and yet these kind of individuals are very clearly part of the liberal tradition whereas we are not accustomed to thinking of you in these terms. Do you see yourself as having any affinity with, say, J. S. Mill, Berlin or Popper, or with British liberalism more generally?

I have the greatest affinity with the British tradition, if it is British and not English, but in particular with Hume. He opened my eyes with this sentence, which I have just quoted to you, that we have justice only in times of relative scarcity. You do not have justice in times of abundance. This whole observation forms a central part of *Beyond Justice*, which is a very Humean book. Among the British I think Hume and Adam Smith, but in aesthetics not in economics

Not The Wealth of Nations ... ?

Aesthetics. He was the man who did the most beautiful things before Kant on aesthetics. Burke also on aesthetics.

Not on revolutions ... ?

Not revolutions, no. But aesthetics. J. S. Mill basically not, because I find him decent but boring. I don't like Boring philosophers and to my mind he is boring. Isaiah Berlin I think is a great essayist and his essays are marvellous. He's also to the point and of course everyone takes over the «negative» and «positive» view of liberty, etc. That was the ball he threw into the debate and it was a very interesting contribution; but except for this I found little serious interest in the work of Berlin. Kolakowski was my dear friend and still is, and we had a lengthy correspondence about philosophy and history and so I learned of his scepticism about the philosophy of history before it appeared in writing in the 50s. It was «58-«59 when we had this correspondence about Hegel and «World Spirit».

B. The Fate of Marxism

OK, if I can bring you back to the start and ask you about the fate of Marxism. The fall of the Wall is not only just symbolically important but it is also important in the sense that it marked the end of a chapter in the history of Marxism. Is there any future for Marxism as a doctrine?

Marxism as a doctrine has never had a past because after the works of Marx what happened to be «Marxism» was a constant reinterpretation of his work. It was never one doctrine, there was many entirely different doctrines on which entirely different kinds of politics were based. You spoke about Kautsky, about Lenin, but they were totally hostile to each other. A lot of Marxist ideas are now in Catholicism. For example, I read recently in a Catholic paper that Marx described globalisation and that he has been proved correct. These kinds of things happen all the time. I think that Marx was an extremely significant thinker of the 19th century. He was one of the three most significant thinkers of the 19th century together with Hegel and Nietzsche and they basically left their trace on everything that happens in human minds. The cogito Marx has not lost his importance but Marxism as such has and not just because there is no one doctrine in Marx or because there has never been a homogenous Marxism. There were different tendencies which were called «Marxist» because at that time we liked to call ourselves «ists». The same people would not today call themselves Marxists because now «ism» is out of fashion. We don't like to be called «ists». The only «ism» which exists now is feminism.

And environmentalism?

Yes environmentalism and feminism. These are still kinds of movements which are «ists». They are single issue movements in a way and Marxism was a totalising movement based on a totalising description of the world. There are certain segments of ecologism which are very close to the Domsday scenario and have a totalising, romantic view about the modern world. So I think that you can always return to Marx, in one respect or another. I don't think you can return to the «whole» Marx, and why should we? Marx will perhaps play exactly the same role in the history of thinking

as Spinoza or Leibniz or Plato. There have never been times when we cannot turn back to the ideas of Leibniz or Plato or Aristotle.

But there are no political Platonists or Spinozans.

There can still be Plato or Spinoza, but not in the political sense because no one takes the totality of this thinking as a dogma, as a doctrine. I don't think that the kind of Marxism which played a role on the ground of bad conscience (*mauvaise foi*) or false consciousness has any future role to play. This kind of Marxism where people called themselves Marxists though they were not Marxists is finished. I turn to Marx in the same way that I turn to Plato or Leibniz. Though I never called myself a Kantian or Platonist, I called myself a Marxist although I was doing the same with Marx as I was doing with Kant or Plato. I can't see now why anyone would do this, I can't see why they would call themselves Marxists. We are not living in the world of «isms» and not in the world of Marx-«isms», and what is going to happen in the future? I don't know.

So you'd say Marx now becomes a central figure in the history of philosophy.

Yes

But Marxism as a political movement is completely finished?

Yes, completely finished. In philosophy, in political philosophy, in the history of ideas, Marxism has a place in history because it participates in the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is a historical topic.

So where should left radicals now go to find their inspiration? Where is the reservoir of material which one should point them towards and say look here are some other resources for developing a critical theory of society.

There are many sources and you do not need to pick from one source. It's not eclecticism, that's why I said «personal philosophy». People have a personal vision about this world and this personal vision can continue to find the sources for your needs. You have a need as a theorist. You need the theory and you think about something, or we think about something, and then you develop a further need for a foundation for the kind of things I am thinking about. This foundation is therefore a relative foundation. It is contingent. Marxism proposed to find in the modern world a new absolute foundation, and that you cannot do. We can have relative foundations. You can say these are theoretical and practical needs. I have seen this problem in the world, but I know that the world does not itself throw up problems or solutions. There are no problems here: the world is not a machine and whatever it does throw up cannot be solved. But there are issues which need to be addressed and I need a kind of foundation to address them. Who can offer me something for this foundation? It needs a relative foundation so I dig this foundation, and I know this is now our foundation. I can propose it to others because we can share needs and, if they find it useful we can share the foundation. We can also say with Wittgenstein a «language game». I begin a language game in which we can throw the ball to each other in a way that it meets the need which we want to address. You can have this.

Are you saying as part of that, that there's no possible explanation of how societies work. In other words, along with throwing out the meta-narrative or teleology we should also throw out the idea of any doctrine giving us a clearer explanation of how societies work than any other. Must we say that all explanations, all foundations merely serve needs? Your explanation works as well as mine, because your needs are different to mine.

Of course, this is how our human minds works. Your child is sick, you want an explanation, a theory about the sickness of your child. When the child has a cold we want an explanation for it, and we say this is our explanation. It's not relativism. I think that for the time being this is the best

explanation. This is my conviction. It is not that «this is good and that is good», because I think it doesn't work. Relativism lives together with absolutism. This explanation is as far as I can see, that's what I understand. This is now a fairly good description or explanation of the world. Or I can tell you a story which perhaps illuminates many things better than alternative stories; but perhaps tomorrow I'm going to tell you a different story. You have to be aware that your story is not the final story, your explanation is not the final explanation. This is different from relativism.

Do you think relativism itself is trying to present a final story?

No, it doesn't present a final story, I don't think you present a final story. I think it means you have a strong conviction. A conviction means that I tell you a story and I take responsibility for it, this is my story. This means I take the responsibility for all of you to understand the story and to act on the ground of your understanding. I offer this. But it also means that I have the right and the possibility to take the story or explanation back. I take responsibility. I was the one who offered it, but I leave open the door that something might happen because the world is contingent and so perhaps I will take it back. Things do not last for ever. No explanation is an explanation forever.

Although it was Marx who wrote of «men making their own history» and thus of offering a space to contingent action he of course stands accused by postmodernists in particular of offering a hermetically sealed account of process, of structure. Is this a particular feature of Marxist discourse, or is there something in the ambition to make social science «scientific» that we should be wary of?

He never understood himself as contingent, but as necessary. He explained why it is only in modern society that we have the knowledge to understand how society works because it is only in modern society that relationships are purely and openly economic. That's why we have access to the essence; that's why we can distinguish between essence and appearance. That's why the science of society becomes possible; that's why we can make scientific predictions. To me that's a closure. He explains why he has an absolute access to which no-one else has access and that is the closure which I would like to avoid. I can offer you an explanation without claiming to have privileged access to understanding the world. I can add to it, «perhaps», and that's the good Nietzschean version, «perhaps». Try it out, do it together. Perhaps it works.

Of course Nietzsche's follow up is that what makes things work is less the explanatory force, than the power operating within the discourse.

He has both aspects. He says there are two issues first what it *is* and second what it *does*. Marx says the same thing: when ideology comes to the masses and it becomes a material power and does certain kinds of things, explains certain kinds of things, then it realises itself. There is not much difference there between the radical thinkers of the 19th century.

So is Adam Smith offering a totalising form of discourse?

But you are right, of course. The issue is not Marx, but metaphysics. Marx is here only one among many, including Adam Smith and Hegel. It is also Spinoza and Leibnitz. Absolutely, and you are right.

So metaphysics is the source of the problem?

Yes, metaphysics. Marx is a critic of metaphysics, but he's a metaphysician. Castoriadis in his paper «From Aristotle to Marx, from Marx to Aristotle» describes this very well. Marx is very strictly metaphysical which is why his theory is so beautiful. I'm not against metaphysics because it is a beautiful thing and it's difficult to be against beauty. The first part of *Capital* is so beautiful because everything clicks, everything fits into this system, nothing remains outside. It clicks together. When you do metaphysics you make things fit and of course you try to make them fit as perfectly and as beautifully as you can.

So your scepticism about metaphysical explanations is driven by your view of contingency. Would that be fair?

Yes.

So the fact that we are authors of our own actions and interpreters of those actions means the moment a theoretical system is erected it is undermined by human action?

Yes.