

REVIEW ARTICLE

HELLER ON MARX'S CONCEPT OF NEEDS*

Agnes Heller is one of the most prominent members of a group of Hungarian theorists who were students, associates and friends of Georg Lukács and whose work has a common emphasis on Marxism as a philosophy of praxis rooted in a positive value judgment.¹

Heller's book on Marx's theory of needs, which follows a series of separate essays on related themes (some of which are reprinted in a volume on *The Humanisation of Socialism*),² should be seen in this particular context — as an extension of the argument that recognition of a "normative model" (that of communism) in Marx is necessary both for an understanding of Marx and for the existence of a living Marxism. It is far more than a collection and ordering of Marx's scattered comments on needs; it is, rather, an attempt at "rediscovery of his theory's original meaning."³

Thus, the central point which Heller makes in this book is that the *leitmotif* in Marx's view of needs is the concept of "radical needs." What are radical needs? Consider what they are *not*. They are not the perceived needs of workers for material products. Such material needs certainly exist, but they exist as part of the capitalist structure of needs, a structure produced as an integral part of capitalism. Not only is their "being" part of capitalism, but also their realization. In other words, the struggle of workers to attain their material needs is an affirmation of capital; it does not itself transcend — or contain the possibility of transcending — capitalism. The reason is that these needs reflect the capitalist system.

Only needs which do not belong to capitalism, Heller accordingly argues, can in their realization transcend capitalism. Those needs, designated as *radical needs*, are structural features of societies of associated

* Agnes Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976. \$11.95 (cloth). Pp. 135.

1 Others include Ferenc Feher, Gyorgy Markus and Mihaly Vajda. See Feher *et al.*, "Notes on Lukács' Ontology, *Telus* (Fall 1976).

2 Andras Hegedus *et al.*, *The Humanisation of Socialism: Writings of the Budapest School* (London, 1976).

3 Feher, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

producers. They include the need for community, for human relationships, for labor as an end (life's prime want), for universality, for free time and free activity, and for the development of personality. They are *qualitative* needs — in contrast to the needs for material (quantitative) products, which decline relatively in a society of associated producers (as the need to "possess" disappears).

If radical needs are part of the structure of a society of associated producers, what are they prior to, or outside of, that society? They are needs, Heller argues, which represent "the consciousness of alienation" (p. 94), a consciousness of alienated social and productive relations which is necessarily generated by capitalism. Thus, radical needs (radical in that they go to the root, to human beings) are produced by capitalism as a "collective Ought" which can drive people beyond capitalism toward the realization of a liberated human race. For Heller, this is a goal which is attained not by mere political revolution but only by a true revolution, a revolution in everyday life. Radical needs, thus, point to a utopia — one which Heller describes as a "fertile" utopia when measured against present society. As she says elsewhere about Karel Kosik and also about herself in essays on the future of the family, Agnes Heller writes from the perspective of a communist future.⁴

In interpreting the concept of needs as playing "the hidden but principal role in Marx's economic categories" (p. 27), Heller offers an important alternative to readings of Marx which see the process of change as one of natural laws or as hierarchies of structures independent of the real subjects of the process, determinate human beings. This emphasis on needs of determinate beings (and consequently their strivings to realize their particular needs) allows a focus on class struggle as central to an understanding of the laws of motion of specific societies.

Unfortunately, Heller does not root her analysis of needs in determinate human beings. Consideration of production and relations of production as the point of departure and the dominant moment in the relationship between production and needs, which is *central* to Marx's concept of needs, is missing.⁵ Heller's stress on the primacy of radical needs over quantitative, material needs flows from her conception of a society of associated producers, a conception in which material needs — indeed, the entire realm of material production — are matters appropriate to the realm of necessity, not to the realm of freedom (pp. 34,

4 A. Heller, "On the New Adventures of the Dialectic," *Telos* (Spring 1977); A. Heller, "The Future of Relations Between the Sexes, in Hegedus, *op. cit.*, p. 27; A. Heller and M. Vajda, "Communism and the Family," *ibid.*

5 K. Marx, *Grundrisse* (Middlesex, 1973), pp. 94, 99.

99, 110). Heller thus tends to distort the concept of needs in Marx's work and instead of analyzing the relation between needs and praxis under real conditions, she presents a critique of all that exists as not truly human.

Heller's minimization of the importance of quantitative, material needs and her stress on radical needs in her reconstruction of Marx's theory produce problems with respect to the analysis of capitalism and its transcendence. What can we say about the struggle of workers to satisfy their quantitative needs? Is this a mere economism in which "the exploited classes generally ask for no more than a better satisfaction of the needs assigned them" (p. 97)? As Heller notes, the demand for higher wages does not in itself transcend the capital/wage labor relation. Yet it was Marx's view that this striving for needs which do not themselves go beyond the boundary plays a significant role in the development of the working class itself:

But in reality the proletarians arrive at this unity only through a long process of development in which the appeal to their right [equal enjoyment] also plays a part. Incidentally, this appeal to their right is only a means of making them take shape as "they," as a revolutionary, united mass.⁶

If the struggle for quantitative, material needs plays a part in producing the working class as a "class-for-itself," what part is played by radical needs, which, by definition, transcend capitalism? Are revolutionary workers who attempt to satisfy their material needs (and to "make certain aspects of the ruling class's system of needs realisable for themselves" — *and, who, furthermore, overturn the existing social order to achieve these goals* — the "bearers" of radical needs? No — by Heller's definition.

While Heller recognizes that the attempt to obtain satisfaction of material needs can produce the overturning of a social order (a political revolution), she argues that "needs that transcend the present in this sense" are not radical needs because they transcend only the existing "division" of needs and not the system of needs as a whole (p. 97).

Who, then, are the bearers of radical needs, "which transcend capitalist society and whose bearers are called upon to overthrow capitalism" (p. 58)? For Marx, as Heller notes, it was clearly the working class; but not, it seems, for Heller: "It does not detract from Marx's greatness that the bearers of these radical needs today are not, or rather not exclusively, the working class" (p. 86).

While *The Theory of Need in Marx* is noncommittal on the identification of the bearers of radical needs, elsewhere Heller has been explicit

6 K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology, Collected Works* (New York, 1976), Vol. 5, p. 323.

— they are students, young people, people in communes, who "abandon the refrigerator, car, and prestige-values of their parents"; "it is only people who consciously organise themselves in communities who can carry through the formation of this new structure of needs."⁷ Only in the context of a network of pluralistically developed communal life styles is "the development of the entire spectrum of qualitative-radical needs . . . thinkable."⁸

Heller's inclination to identify students and others who presumably reject material needs as the bearers of radical needs flows from the conception of radical needs as rooted in consumption activity rather than in productive activity. Yet it is possible to identify a need (as Marx repeatedly does) whose realization entails the negation of capitalist relations and at the same time retain Marx's emphasis on productive activity. Such a need, *the need of workers to dominate the conditions and results of their labor*, clearly expresses Marx's view of the relationship between the working class as bearer of "radical" needs and the liberation of all humanity.

With this alternative formulation of a need "whose bearers are called upon to overthrow capitalism," the uncertain relationship between radical needs (as defined by Heller) and the real process of transcending capitalism disappears as a problem. For although Heller urges revolutionaries to place radical needs on the agenda, she admits that history has not answered the question of whether capitalist society *in fact* produces radical needs (p. 95). Indeed, she appears to affirm Marx's view that the abolition of private property (the transcendence of alienation) is possible only after the immediate transcendence of capitalism; at one point she says that historical experience up to the present has demonstrated that radical needs do *not* develop in the masses "without an end to the bourgeois way of life and the bourgeois structure."⁹

While Heller's view of the role of radical needs in the overthrow of capitalism is uncertain, this cannot be said of the importance she attributes to them *after* a political revolution. This indeed is the central point of her argument — the criticism of actually existing socialism from the perspective of the system of needs in a society of associated producers. It is a criticism both of the continued existence of the capitalist structure of needs, of alienate needs, within socialism, and also of perspective, of the "technocratic world-view," which sees its goal mainly as one of increased satisfaction of everyday needs, the needs to possess.¹⁰ In

7 A. Heller, "Theory and Practice From the Point of View of Human Needs," in Hegedus, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

8 Ferenc Feher and A. Heller, "Forms of Equality," *Telus* (Summer 1977), p. 25.

9 A. Heller in Hegedus, *op. cit.*, pp. 57, 73-4.

10 A. Heller in *ibid.*, p. 44.

naming and elevating the concept of radical needs, Heller argues that for socialism to truly liberate itself from its antecedent, it is necessary to struggle against alienation and to create institutions which directly embody the realization of radical needs.

Even if one accepts the basic point that Marx envisioned a new set of needs within communism and recognizes the importance of the "ruthless criticism of all that exists" (as Marx advocated), it does not follow that Heller's indictment of the defects of socialism is satisfactory. Writing from the vantage point of a communist future, a society of associated producers, she tends to blur the essential distinction between capitalism and socialism, and between the lower and upper phases of communism.

A central problem in *The Theory of Need in Marx* is that Heller's concept of the capitalist structure of needs is faulty. The capitalist structure of needs, properly defined (in a manner which permits a relation between the system of needs and the system of labor), necessarily includes the needs for objects of productive consumption as well as for those of individual consumption. It must encompass the *need of capital for surplus value* in addition to the need of workers (and capitalists) to possess use-values. Indeed, it is this former need, the need of capital to grow, which is the distinctive characteristic of the capitalist structure of needs; its existence and the associated praxis, the drive to accumulate, produce the non-realization of the needs of workers, as Marx's study of capitalism demonstrated. The capitalist structure of needs, properly defined, thus includes the needs of capital, the needs of workers, and the relation between the two; it reflects the relations of capitalist production within the sphere of needs. By limiting her definition to one aspect (the need to possess material objects), by reducing the whole structure to the "need for possession" (p. 96), Heller has obscured the *differentia specifica* of the capitalist structure of needs.

Since Heller clearly does not describe socialism as characterized by the need for surplus value as its dominating principle, it is entirely inappropriate for her to describe the structure of needs within socialism as capitalist. Even given the continued desire to possess material objects, a structure of needs which does not contain the need of capital for surplus value transcends capitalism and the capitalist structure of needs. The true object of Heller's critique thus is not capitalism in any sense — but its immediate negation, the "lower phase" of communism.

However, Heller does not attempt to examine, on the basis of Marx's comments, the model of the lower phase of communism — its structure of needs and the relationship between that structure and the sphere of production; rather, her purpose is to delineate the features of a society of associated producers, "the first non-alienated society, 'the

realm of freedom," from the perspective of the theory of needs (pp. 97, 100). Focusing only on an aspect of the "higher phase" of communism, she does not explore the transition from the lower to the higher phase of communism and the role of needs (radical or otherwise) in that transition. Indeed, she disavows any attempt at considering transition (p. 100); but this disclaimer is unsatisfactory, given her very concept of radical needs as needs whose bearers are called upon to overthrow "capitalism."

Implicitly, Heller's argument is that radical needs develop within the lower phase of communism and, as such, become the basis for a movement to a society of associated producers. But why do radical needs develop here? Is this due to the success of the lower phase which, no longer constrained by the needs of capital, expands productive forces and productivity, permitting a relative "saturation" of material needs? Heller would deny this, arguing that the focus of the "technocratic world-view" on increased satisfaction of everyday needs cannot provide the basis for a natural transition because alienated production produces new needs to possess (p. 52).

Is it, then, that radical needs become more *intense* in this lower phase? To answer this (and, indeed, to choose between possible explanations for a growth in radical needs) requires consideration of the nature of relations of production in the lower phase of communism. Heller's failure to explore this aspect means that she does not see Marx's analysis as the *real basis* for the development of radical needs in the lower phase of communism.

Ultimately, Heller's failure to root her analysis in production indicates that, despite genuflection to this concept, her analysis starts from consumption rather than production, from human essence rather than real living conditions of determinate human beings. Thus, Heller writes as a "true socialist" — and what is lost is Marx's emphasis on the real conditions that transform utopias into genuine movements for social change.¹¹

Despite this general criticism, it is essential to point out that there is much that is worthwhile in this short, provocative and often infuriating book which we have not considered in this attempt to deal with the main tendency in Heller's argument. Her discussion of social needs, of the relation of interests and needs, and in particular her conception of the "realm of freedom," are all issues which could be explored at length. And that is a testimonial to the potential wealth of *The Theory of Need in Marx*. For in addressing herself directly to the question of needs, Heller introduces concepts (such as that of the capitalist struc-

11 Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*. "True Socialism," *passim*, but especially p. 518.

ture of needs and of radical needs) which, explored from the perspective of productive activity, are potentially very fruitful. In short, this is a book worth struggling through, one which opens rather than closes the consideration of the theory of need in Marx.

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