

Agnes Heller

# The Paradoxes of Modern Democracy

Agnes Heller gave a talk on this topic in October 1998 at the Hannah Arendt Tage Zurich organised by the Verein politikinitiativen, the Chair for Political Philosophy of the University Zurich, and the city administration. Under the title "Democracy – last days?", Agnes Heller debated with Carl Christian von Weizsäcker, Claude Martin (WWF), Roger de Weck (Die Zeit) and others, about whether politics can claim a role which is independent of economics. A full report in German by Zoltan Szankay, "Die Limmat-Brücke über den Atlantik," can be found in *politikinitiativen* No. 17, November 1999.

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**We present a summary of Agnes Heller's lecture; the original text can be accessed on our homepage:**

**<http://www.hannah-arendt-newsletter.de>.**

Agnes Heller, 1929 in Ungarn geboren, hat als wissenschaftliche Assistentin bei Georg Lukacz gearbeitet. Nachdem sie das Land 1977 verlassen musste, lehrte sie an der University of Melbourne in Australien bis sie 1987 an den Hannah Arendt-Lehrstuhl der New School University, New York, berufen wurde. Ihre jüngsten Publikationen: *A Theory of Modernity*, Blackwell Pub. 1999; *An Ethnics of Personality*, Blackwell Pub. 1999.

## abstract

According to Agnes Heller, we should return to the basics of democracy, which consist of unavoidable paradoxes.

The first paradox is the institutionalisation of things which cannot be institutionalised, i.e. the lack of symmetrical reciprocity in a world of functional hierarchies. Three models have been adopted in the attempt to restore this symmetry: direct democracy, the democracy of the small gatherings, and representative democracy. Whereas the first needs too much space, and the second too much time, the third does at least temporarily create this symmetrical reciprocity during periodic elections.

The second paradox is the justification of something for which a justification cannot be provided, as is the case with a constitution. If this is attempted on the basis of natural law then a fundamentalist democracy is the result, whereas to resort like the American Founding Fathers to self-evident truths seems arbitrary. Others argue that we should learn to live with this paradox, such as Rorty (democracy has become a tradition) or Arendt (the self-justification must continually be renewed by actions).

The third paradox is the contradiction between democratic and liberal freedoms, as well as between their formal and substantial use (e.g. between elections and social movements). Without liberalism, democracy would be despotic. Liberty justifies and defines it, while remaining itself indefinable. It must be an element of democratic institutions so that these can allow scope for the alteration and reform of the modern. The liberal freedoms themselves are caught in a paradox between formal procedural justice and material freedoms, between a political and an anthropological understanding of liberty.

It is part of the *Conditio moderna* that liberty is only possible within these paradoxes. If one wishes to avoid fundamentalist or metaphysical solutions, then the only remaining option is a pragmatic approach to liberty. By bringing together liberty and action, Arendt showed the way to a continuous rejuvenation of democracy. From time to time, renewal from the outside is necessary if democratic institutions are to retain their effectiveness.