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FESTSCHRIFT FOR MARIA MARKUS: The Decent Society

Craig Browne and Jocelyn Pixley (eds)

Introduction

Maria Markus is one of Australia's and Hungary's national treasures, as is also said of her husband, Gyorgy Markus.

This special edition of *Thesis Eleven* celebrates Maria Markus's work and her abiding influence on several generations of sociologists and leading scholars. Her breadth of intellectual influences start with her overwhelming range in social theory and political and economic sociology. Many have been her devoted students and now regard her as our colleague, friend and hero. This collection of papers and other contributions, such as generous dialogue and refereeing, from her former students and colleagues are a small effort to demonstrate our enormous respect for her work and to acknowledge our freely-assumed obligations to continue Maria's commitment to the decent society.

Maria's own influence on the *Festschrift* only goes as far as asking that we write around a favourite theme of hers, **The Decent Society**. Decent and civil society are enduring concepts, which involve contributions to discussions of public/private, and all are subject to contemporary attention. The importance of this theme since post-communism is obvious (for example Jeffrey Alexander and Charles Taylor are only two of many who have devoted works to civil society in recent times). Moreover, many contemporary debates on decent/civil society are at an impasse: as evident in debates over the incessant rise of impersonal forms of interaction; human rights; respect versus humiliation. Maria's 2001 work, which emphasises decent institutions (drawing on Avishai Margalit 1996), represents a fresh way to address these themes.

The key differences between Markus's conception of the decent society and that of Margalit, as she says in her paper 'Decent Society and/or Civil Society?' (*Social Research*, 2001), are first, he has a minimalist criterion. Second, this criterion is primarily based on negative preconditions (namely the avoidance of humiliation). That means the positive potential of civil society to constitute decent institutions is lacking. Markus modestly claims that these differences are only a matter of emphasis, in that, as she said to us, she has borrowed his concept and adjusted it to her objectives. Markus does agree with him though, for different reasons, about keeping the notion of decent society relatively 'empty' so that its content can be fleshed out in light of particular contexts and circumstances. In this regard, she stresses the 'utopian' element of 'decent society' in a way that goes beyond Margalit. As she told us:

The greatest difference, I think, is between the contexts in which each of us investigates the concept. Since my question is about the relationship between civil society and decent society, I clearly attempt to adapt the concept to societies with at least residual forms of civil society. This is the main reason why the minimalist understanding of decency – important as it is (I consider it to be the absolute bottom line for the decent society) – is for me insufficient. What is at stake in my analysis is the creation and maintenance of the conditions of **dignified, humanly meaningful** life for all its members. Decency here is thus understood as the 'morality of engagement with others'. On the level of recognition – intimately related to the concept of decent society – it includes a self-conceptualisation as a person entitled to the participation in the process of discursive will formation. This aspect of decent society is left out from Margalit's considerations altogether. How the decent institutions are established as decent ones, also does not enter his considerations. For me it returns to the issue of civil society and forms the basis of

the interconnection of the two (of the 'and' not 'or') in the title of the paper (March 21, 2009).

Markus reads Margalit's book as shaped by his reflections on Israeli and Palestinian politics, whereas Maria's vision originates from a different experience.

Furthermore, and critically, Markus studied the Solidarity movement in Poland, her birthplace, both the rise of a vigorous civil society in a specific context, a 'protomodel' with absolutely no 'institutional-legal support' (Markus 2001: 1014) and its partial decline into post-communist stratification, to give us a major breakthrough out of these theoretical impasses. For Markus, both decent society and civil society are necessary:

... a decent society as a normative-regulative ideal and civil society as a way to realize this "utopian horizon" in a modern liberal democratic society as fully as possible (2001:1028).

Ivan Szelenyi, who begins our celebration, gives the history of Maria's influence on Hungarian and European sociology. Markus was part of the odyssey of the Budapest School to Australia, and which was so important to the establishment of this journal, *Thesis Eleven*. She saw Australia as a politically benign (and we think, relatively decent) context, although it took some time to suggest that few Australians would know about the horrors of the *nomenclatura*, since such terms were barely known here.

Szelenyi's story – of her move from philosophy to sociology, her crucial influence on Hungarian sociology in the 1960s and her fundamental bravery when the Party removed the Budapest School from their academic positions and degrees – obviously turns to us for a further story about her influence on the English-speaking world after her arrival in Australia. Our story starts with how her theoretical and concrete concerns have been amplified through her students. The **deepest gift** of the work of Maria Markus, we claim, is how she, quite exceptionally, founded a sociological circle inspired by her work. Her significance, in influencing such a large number of students, is due to her impressive theoretical scope and, in the sense of actually creating that rare idea of a community of scholars, because Maria Markus has always **cared** to make sure that we find her concepts useful for our own work. We also describe her circle as one founded on the notion that academics, or anyone, must freely choose their intellectual development and normative positions: so it is, as usual with her, a **democratic subversion** of the commonly-held idea of intellectual influence, through Markus practicing her own concepts. Of course we must be open to new and many older and enduring ideas, yet in our choices we must gain independence, spread our wings.

As a further reason for the absolute necessity of holding a *Festschrift* for her, many of us know her famous diagrams: complex and finally resembling an Ian Fairweather painting after an hour of to-and-fro debate; depictions of abstract concepts and their relationships. On a more frivolous note, Maria's English accent remains a fabulous, endearing mixture of broad Australian and upper class, 'county' British, *even though* she tells the great joke about the war-time British officer, and the Australian diggers who misinterpret (subversively?) pronunciations of 'to die' and 'today': 'Men, you have come here to die.' 'No sir, we came yesterday.'

Maria Markus brought European sociology to Australia in a scholarly sense that we regard as unparalleled. C. Wright Mills, Talcott Parsons and Alvin Gouldner were her early American specialities, if just a fragment of her impressive *oeuvre* covering philosophy and sociological theory, particularly Habermas and Arendt on the public sphere, feminism and industry, and non-positivist empirical work, especially from the Polish research of Thomas and Znaniecki. Australians simply do not receive that high level of education, other than those lucky few, her own undergraduate and many successful PhD students in this country or who work elsewhere. That is why we were so pleased that the *Thesis Eleven* editors, with Peter Beilharz our generous advisor, were so enthusiastic to publish this celebration as a Special Edition. We would like to publish later a longer volume of keen contributors. The papers here draw on the theme decent society in as much as it is relevant to each author's current or recent research work. We hope generational differences shine through as important indicators of Maria's scope and depth in her contemporary analysis. The collection includes Markus's paper 'Friends and Lovers', which complements her 'Decent Society' 2001 paper.

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Sydney
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