

GYÖRGY MÁRKUS FAHA

1934–2016

FELLOW · ELECTED 1999



PHOTO: MARIA MÁRKUS

György Márkus, a distinguished philosopher and cultural theorist, died in Sydney on 5 October 2016. Having arrived in Australia in 1978, ‘George’ joined the Department of General Philosophy at the University of Sydney, where over the next two decades he taught across a range of areas including History of Philosophy, Marxism and Critical Theory, and Aesthetics. He retired as Professor of Philosophy in 1998 and was appointed Emeritus Professor.

1934 was not a happy year in which to be born into a Jewish Hungarian family living in Budapest. By 1944, the young György was in hiding with his family, and while his father perished during this period, the son together with his mother survived. By a strange coincidence, young György would in later life teach in the same department of philosophy on the other side of the globe, although not at the same time, as another Hungarian-Jewish boy of the same age who, with his mother, had also managed to hide from the Nazis in Budapest. This was the future Sydney philosopher and libertarian, George Molnar. While Molnar would flee Europe and find himself in Australia as a refugee, György Márkus would remain in Eastern Europe and spend the first part

of his career in Hungary and Russia, until a different form of political oppression forced him to relocate to the West and find his way to the same Sydney philosophy department that Molnar had recently quit.

In the 1950s, Molnar would move within a knock-about bohemian Sydney sub-culture different to the world of European high culture that Márkus would enter after his move to Moscow in 1952 to study philosophy at Lomonsov University (now Lomonsov State University of Moscow). Thinking about the promises and failures of such an enlightened high culture would eventually come to occupy a major part of his life’s work. During the Moscow years he would meet and marry a Polish co-student, Maria, the two relocating back to Budapest after their graduations. Maria soon established a career there as a sociologist, and in 1958, György started teaching philosophy. During this time, György and Maria would have two sons, Gyuri and András. Another Hungarian philosopher of roughly the same generation, but differing philosophical and political alignment, would later relate his impressions of the young Márkus as standing out on account of his highly principled behaviour and intimidating intelligence. From the fact that Márkus would go on to receive the Academy Prize of the Philosophy and Humanities Section of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1966, it might seem that his career would be assured. However his path during the 1960s and 70s turned out to be far from smooth, and in 1973, both György and Maria were forced out of academic employment, and four years later would abandon Hungary for the West.

György’s early path in philosophy had centred on an engagement with directions taken with Anglo-American philosophy in the early twentieth century. In this capacity he translated, and wrote a critical interpretation of, one of the classics of ‘analytic’ philosophy, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* by the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. In 1965, he travelled to the United States on a Ford Foundation Scholarship, encountering some of the leading lights of the analytic movement, Wilfrid Sellars and W.V.O. Quine. György’s real philosophical interests, however, clearly lay elsewhere, and it was this that would bring him into conflict with the authorities.

In the 1960s György and Maria were drawn into a circle around the Marxist philosopher and aesthetic theorist György Lukács, central members of which were Ágnes

Heller and her husband, Ferenc Fehér. A few years older than Márkus and a former doctoral student of Lukács, Heller had a long-standing involvement with politics, and had been expelled from the Communist Party in 1949. Things thawed to a degree when Imre Nagy came to power in 1953 and she was allowed to teach at the University of Budapest from 1955, but the Hungarian revolution of 1956 would disturb the lives and careers of those associated with Lukács, who had briefly been a minister in Nagy's revolutionary government. Nagy attempted to withdraw Hungary from the Warsaw pact, but Lukács, while critical of the Soviet Union, advocated that Hungary remain within it. After the defeat of the revolution, Lukács managed to survive the fate of Nagy and others who were executed. Lukács' relations to communist orthodoxy, however, would remain ambiguous, and Heller was dismissed from teaching in 1958 for her support of her former teacher.

Things again thawed to a degree in the early 1960s, and in 1963 the 'Sociology Research Group' of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was established, Maria becoming assistant director of the Research Group, to which Heller was appointed. The circle met regularly with Lukács, who dubbed it the 'Budapest School', and they soon started to be recognised for their particular humanist and oppositional variety of Marxism. The Budapest School was not tolerated for long, however, and the Prague Spring of 1968 drove them into a more direct confrontation with the regime. Lukács' death in 1971 deprived them of the degree of protection he had been able to offer, and in 1973 the Communist Party officially condemned their work and the members of the group were dismissed from their academic positions.

During these years György Márkus had become particularly influential with a younger generation of Hungarian philosophers who provided a type of second generation to the Budapest School, and in particular, with György Bence and János Kis, who worked closely with Márkus on Marx's theory of socialism. Along with the others, Márkus, Bence and Kis were dismissed from their positions in the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and banned from teaching. Without academic employment, and relying on income earned from translation work, and with now even Gjuri and András subject to discrimination in relation to their schooling, the Márkuses together with Heller and Fehér, decided to look to a future elsewhere. In 1977 they left Hungary and by 1978 the four had arrived in Australia. György had been offered an appointment in the Department of General Philosophy, one of the *two* philosophy departments existing then at the University of Sydney half a decade after the fractious original department had split, polarised by differences of philosophical and political commitment. Maria found a home in the progressive Department of Sociology at the University of New South Wales.

Thus commenced the Australian part of the life of this family, and it might be thought that life would proceed relatively smoothly, but trying times for the Márkuses were not over. 'George', as he had now become, was welcomed into the department and would form close friendships with a number of its senior members – John Burnheim and Paul Crittenden especially. But the Department of General Philosophy was itself internally divided by the usual academic differences amplified by the politicised climate of the 1970s. One particularly dogmatic faction, advocating a 'scientific' version of Marxism influenced by the French philosopher Louis Althusser, was committed to combatting the type of 'humanist' variant of Marxism represented by Márkus (Márkus' prodigious knowledge of the classic Marxist texts, however, meant that he was rarely 'taken on' in any overt way.)

The department also still bore the effects of the left libertarian and anarchist views represented by Molnar, who, influenced by the educational experiments of A.S. Neill, had battled against academic orthodoxy, 'the *examined* life is not worth living' being one of the favoured slogans of this charismatic figure. On one occasion a group of younger tutors in the department proposed to overcome the inequalities resulting from *graded papers* by advocating a single grade be assigned to *all* students. This was the type of thing to which Márkus reacted to with true horror, and his opposition prevented any such experiment. For George, such disregard for learning was more a sign of the 'commodification' of education – a betrayal of Enlightenment values rather than a form of enlightened teaching. With the seriousness of his commitment to philosophy and scholarship, George thus shared attitudes with many in the *rival* Sydney philosophy department, the 'Department of Traditional and Modern Philosophy', centred around the highly regarded but polarising figure of David Armstrong. In such ways, George had quickly gained the deep respect of colleagues across both departments. Along with this, soon after his arrival George quickly attracted a range of followers among the postgraduate students, often attracted by his courses and seminars in the history of philosophy in which his learning was encyclopaedic and understanding profound. Among these was John Grumley, who went on to help consolidate the approach of the Budapest School as a presence in Australian academic life.

Undoubtedly the greatest difficulty that the Márkus family had to endure during their life in Sydney resulted when Gyuri, then a postgraduate student in General Philosophy, suffered a catastrophic cerebral haemorrhage brought on by a soccer accident. While for many weeks in a coma, Gyuri eventually recovered to an extent, being left in the need of the constant care of Maria and George. Despite this enormous task to which they tirelessly

devoted their energies, both managed to continue academic careers. After 1989, the changes in Eastern Europe meant that these former dissident intellectuals could now be recognised and in 1990 George was elected to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. This was followed in 1999 by election to the Australian Academy of the Humanities. After retirement from the department as a full professor in 1998, George and Maria, accompanied by Gyuri, were able to undertake some limited travel. Between 2001 and 2003, George gave courses at the Central European University in Budapest, which, founded by George Soros after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, had been dedicated to developing the 'open society' in Hungary.

The first publication to bring György Márkus to an international audience had been his *Marxism and Anthropology* (1978), first published in Hungarian in 1965 and translated later into Spanish, Japanese, Italian, English and German. Another influential book from this period was published in its English version as *Language and Production: A Critique of the Paradigms* (1986). Here the extensive scope of Márkus' grasp of developments in philosophy and the humanities allowed him to engage critically with the variety of ways in which 'language paradigm' had gained ascendancy in twentieth-century humanistic studies. Márkus argued against this linguistic model, advocating a view of culture as a type of *productive process* better understood along Marxist lines. *Dictatorship over Needs: An Analysis of*

Soviet Societies (1983), written together with Fehér and Heller, gave expression to the Budapest School's earlier critique of the life in the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites.

More reflective of the concerns of his Sydney years is *Culture, Science, Society: The Constitution of Cultural Modernity* (2011). George had laboured for decades on a book on the contradictions of European high culture, a dialectic playing out from the late eighteenth century between *enlightenment* and *romantic* movements. This is not it, however, but a collection of exceptionally rich essays, twenty-one in all, which expressed the growing points of the unified account that was never finished.

György Márkus died from cancer in October 2016. His son Gyuri died from the effects of cancer two months after his father and his wife Maria died in September 2017. He is survived by his son András.

George was known as a man of honour, decency and kindness, and as a teacher and intellectual of wide learning and deep intelligence. In Australia in particular he will be remembered for having opened the eyes of many to a European cultural tradition to which he was so committed.

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I am grateful to John Grumley for his helpful assistance with this obituary.