

Are We at Home in a Liberal Democracy? Metaphorology and Political Philosophy

*Antonio Rivera García*¹

ABSTRACT

Drawing on both Agnes Heller's paper "Where Are we at Home?" and Hans Blumenberg's metaphorology, this article discusses the meaning of the home metaphor as applied to the realm of politics. It examines particularly whether or not liberal democracy can be considered a home. In principle, the article argues that the home metaphor is a better image to think premodern, conservative and communitarian politics. Yet its usage in a liberal context at-tests to some of the profoundest human anxieties.

KEYWORDS

Home metaphor, metaphorology, Heller, Blumenberg, liberal democracy, philosophy of history.

The title of this paper refers to a 1995 article written by Agnes Heller entitled "Where Are we at Home?". I am going to consider what the home metaphor could signify if applied to the area of politics and discuss the doubts that arise when doing so. They are the doubts of a reader of Blumenberg, of somebody who considers rhetoric, metaphorology and the problem of non-conceptuality of great importance.

Above all, Heller's passionate article, in which she distinguishes different kinds of "homes", has led me to ask myself many questions related to politics which I would like to share: is a liberal democracy a home; does it even make sense to think of a liberal democracy as a home; and, wouldn't this metaphor be more suitable to think about communitarian regimes, or to think about conservative or traditionalist attitudes? At first glance this may not be the most

1 Complutense University of Madrid. E-mail: antonio.rivera@pdi.ucm.es. This article is part of the project The Civic Constellation (Spanish National Research Plan, FFI2011-23388).

appropriate metaphor to understand modern politics, much less liberalism or liberal democracy. However, if it is employed in a liberal context, does it not respond to some of our deepest anxieties as human beings? This is what I would like to discuss in the following pages.

METAPHOROLOGY AND THE HOME SPACE

Asking if we are at home in a liberal democracy, or if any political community could be our home, is mere rhetoric if we fail to understand the complexity of the metaphor and interpret the question as a mere investigation into the quality of the political system. On the contrary, I believe that in the cited article Heller employs “home” in a way that is in line with what Blumenberg denominates the *absolute metaphor*. This concept is related to absolute horizons –the world, life, consciousness– that cannot be encompassed or defined by our experience (Blumenberg 1979, 80). Metaphors are sometimes a provisional formulation, an outline or intuition that aspires to be defined and conceptualised later. They can also be, as the author of *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie* explain, “remnants, rudiments in the path from *mythos* to *logos*” (Blumenberg 1998, 10). In this sense, metaphorology is at the service of the history of concepts, although this is not the case that we are examining. Translating the home metaphor into a concept is problematic because it is the type of metaphor that structures the universe (the universe as a city, the legibility of the world, etc.) while representing a vast reality that can never be understood through experience and yet cannot be ignored. Such metaphors are the only ones that allow us to consider the *lifeworld* (*Lebenswelt*) and elevate philosophy to the level of *imprecision* characteristic of our own experiences (Monod 2007, 45-51).

According to Heller, the home is one of the few constants of the human condition, and therefore it is essential to the understanding of our culture. Our cultural products, from myth to contemporary science, work to suppress the estrangement and fear caused by a universe that, prior to the work, was characterised by arbitrariness or contingency and provoked insecurity, which Blumenberg noted was typical of the *absolutism of reality*. To state it with the assistance of the absolute metaphor, culture converts the world into our home.

But now I would like to discuss the complexity, ambiguity and ambivalence of absolute metaphors because, like myths, they can be subject to contradictory interpretations. This occurs with the home metaphor. On the one hand, it alludes to our need for security, for refuge, and this implies that its meaning depends on its opposite, the outside, of something perceived as a threat. However, home can also be used as a pretext by the enemies of freedom. Although the inside implicit in the home is usually associated with se-

curity, it can also be related to confinement, a prison; and while the outside can be considered threatening and dangerous, it can also be identified with freedom. Of course, the question in the title of this text refers to the positive aspect.

According to Heller, familiarity –and remember that the absolute metaphor gives us access to realities that, like the *lifeworld*, resist conceptualisation– is the most decisive constituent of the feeling of “being-at-home”. Philosophy sustains that sensual experience linked to a known, familiar place, a spatial home-experience, cannot be transferred to temporal home-experience. Language –particularly the mother tongue– and customs (*mores*) are the elements most closely tied to familiarity and to a specific space. In this way it is understood that the opposite of the comforting feeling of being at home (*Heim*, in German), is *unheimlich*, literally ‘un-home-ly’ but generally translated as “uncanny”, a concept examined in Freud’s famous article.

If this is the case, is it possible to think of this metaphor without also considering that the feeling of familiarity comes from something as particular as the family, and that home inevitably has a conservative dimension because it is linked to tradition and to that second nature which grows from customs deeply rooted in shared ground? From this perspective, the metaphor would seem more suitable to affirm pre-modern politics, a political philosophy based on the heterogeneity of the elements gathered in that extended home known as a *respublica*. If family, the most natural of homes, cannot be understood without hierarchy, without at least the qualitative difference between parents and children (although the differences in families of the past were starker), how can a democracy, the space of *whoever*, of equals, be considered a home akin to that of the traditional family?

When restricted to the sphere of politics the home metaphor inevitably leads us to the pre-modern era, in which the principal political metaphors were organic. Now then, this entire cultural universe is very far from the political philosophy of Agnes Heller. Her theory of radical needs clashes with the meaning of the home metaphor, with its link to the natural differences that occur within the family. Heller tells us that qualitative radical needs drive people toward ideas and practices that abolish subordination and hierarchy (see Heller 1993). Radical movements, those centred and organised around these needs, represent a minority, but at the same time they respond to values and needs shared by all humanity (Heller 1985, 296), which is not incompatible with the fact that radical needs are plural. For Heller, what is important is that all radical movements exclude from their preferred system of needs those which oppress or defend the use of an individual as a mere tool for another. It is clear that when such needs cannot be satisfied by societies based on subordination and hierarchy they appeal to a radical democracy. In this case, not

only does the home metaphor seem inadequate, but we cannot even be sure that the liberal regime can satisfy the demands of a radical democracy.

Even if we adhere to the strict idea of the political metaphor, concerned with what is the best system for us, some doubt remains as to whether liberal democracy can be our home from the perspective of radical needs. Especially if we take into consideration that politics in contemporary states is unthinkable without the hierarchy –and not only in a political or formal sense– that the concept of representation inevitably introduces, or, to put it another way, that introduces the inevitable *absence* of the people in government institutions. I believe that Heller notes this danger when she fears individuals and institutions that are capable of manipulating the people and attributing to them needs of which they are not even aware (Heller 1985, 294). It would be very difficult for a radical democracy to survive institutions in which only an elite –whether composed of clergy, intellectuals, sociologists or political representatives– is presented as capable of knowing the genuine needs of the people.

THE TEMPORAL HOME: MODERN PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Heller does not settle for that pre-modern dimension of home to which we referred earlier, that which is necessarily tied to space, but rather distinguishes the spatial home-experience from the temporal home-experience. On this she says that post-modern men, our contemporaries, are at home in a time, and not so much in a particular space or place. In reality, it was not even necessary to wait for post-modernity for this to occur. Generally speaking, modernity, which has been fundamentally liberal, as its enemies the reactionaries and traditionalists well know, has made it impossible for a spatial home-experience to exist because it tried to convert the whole world into a home. From this perspective, it is becoming more difficult to conceive of an “outside” or of the possibility of feeling like a stranger in the world. But if everything becomes a home the metaphor no longer has any explicative value. In other words, without an outside the metaphor no longer serves to understand the human experience. The metaphor enters even further into crisis when, in an advanced stage of modernity, the distinction between inside and outside, interior and exterior is questioned (Blumenberg 1989, 665ff.).

Perhaps the best expression of the disproportionate effort to transform the world in our home is found in the novels of Jules Verne, which exalt the progress and positivist science of the nineteenth century. These novels convert every place into a habitable space. Verne even manages to create a ship, the *Nautilus*, which is as safe as our home; it becomes a “perfect cubbyhole” while the sea voyage, the worst crime of man’s hubris for the ancients, is

stripped of its traditional menacing connotations (see Barthes 1973, 65-7). Liberal modernity –as assessed by the anti-liberal Carl Schmitt in his *Land und Meer*– no longer even fears the open space of the ocean, which is the most exposed, the most forlorn.

Despite this excessive and frustrated pursuit of the moderns, it is common knowledge that progress has not conquered our anxieties; it has not eliminated the outside. As long as the uncanny exists we will need a home and we will tend to search for or create protected spaces. Despite all that has been discussed thus far, as long as we suffer the experience of the *unheimlich*, which is almost equivalent to saying as long as man is man, the home metaphor will be to a certain degree productive. This presents the problem of whether we are prioritising evil in our ethical and political reflection (see Badiou 2001). From a pragmatic point of view, the starting point for our reflections is decisive; it is quite different to base them on an always latent evil, rather than an emancipatory idea whose chief assumption is the equality of men and, moreover, to fight to verify this principle. Modern philosophy has certainly been quite optimistic and had a positive orientation, in that it believed man could be improved. For moderns the decisive events have been upheavals like the French Revolution of 1789 which were considered, beyond the victims that they caused –think of Kant’s writings– events that caused humanity to progress. However, according to the predominant philosophy of history of our time –if it can still be addressed as such– the fundamental event that divides history into a before and after is Auschwitz, the *Shoah*. Because the basis of our thinking on history is genocide, all historical-political reflections appear contaminated by pure evil, by evil that cannot even be represented.

In relation to the temporal question, Heller points out that the fundamental experience of contingency, particularly the idea of the future opened up as undetermined space, endangers the sensation of familiarity and transforms our world into an uncanny place, *unheimlich* again. All home-experiences are more or less successful attempts of coping with this uncanny lack of meaning derived from the contingency and indifference of the world (*die Gleichgültigkeit der Welt*). In reality, like the home-experience itself, the uncertainty, the contingency, related with time is a constant of the human condition; and this is why the moderns tried with their philosophies of history –and here I assume Blumenberg’s thesis– to respond to the same problems that the prior era resolved with theological knowledge. The moderns continued feeling compelled to give meaning to the world and temporal institutions. Yet, although the questions were similar, the answers could not help but be different because they could no longer turn to a transcendent being.

Heller continues her reflection by stating that any home provided by a universal discourse is situated in time rather than in a specific place because

universal communication abstracts the sensual spatial experience of the participants so that it occurs in an indifferent space. However, by focusing on modern political philosophy we can verify that the duality of the universal and the particular, of the temporal and the spatial, has not been absolute. Modern politics cannot be understood without the duality, today in crisis, of the state and civil society, which in turn is the consequence of an inseparable mixture of the universal and the particular. While the rational modern state supposes a universal that becomes a particular, given that it originally develops in a specific territory, civil society is composed of universalised particulars, that is, by of subjects whose attributes are identified with the universal rights of man and of the citizen.

Heller herself acknowledges that a purely temporal, universal experience is a difficult frontier to breach, since it demands the total abstraction of sensuality and emotionality. Therefore, the temporal home, so as not to become a prison or generate modern pathologies, requires a spatial location. Schiller's letters *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* can be explained within this context. These letters were written as a response to the failure of the French Revolution, that is, as a counterproposal to the attempt to establish a state in which reason was the only and absolute legislator. Aesthetic education taught that neither the particularity of nature should be sacrificed at the altar of universal reason, nor should the human spirit give way to the push of sensibility or the sensuous drive. That is why the German affirmed that "it is the beautiful alone that we enjoy at the same time as individual and as species, i.e., as representative of the species" ("Das Schöne allein genießen wir als Individuum und als Gattung zugleich, d.h. als *Repräsentanten* der Gattung") (Schiller 1875, 370). Heller has a firm grasp on the central problem of the temporal home. She knows that in recent times excessively universal, abstract modern discourses, those belonging to the grand narrative of the philosophy of history, have triggered their opposite, "the regression into the world of body health, biological fraternity, and mere corporeality" (Heller 1995, 7). Yet this is not a purely recent phenomenon; in fact, ever since the French Revolution there has been no shortage of discourses contrary to enlightened universal principles. Such cases have focused on the return to tradition, to a past located in a spatial home created by customs. The instability produced by modernity somewhat explains this reaction. During this historical period, the future determined practically everything and, therefore, produced an imbalance toward expectations (Koselleck 1979, 369). Under these conditions, experience no longer plays as relevant a role as it did in the past.

Finally, the existentialist philosophies of the twentieth century emerged when modern philosophy of history, which had always been situated in the future, had already entered into an irreversible crisis. These movements view

man as lacking essence because his relationship with time is dominated by the future, something that is undefined and incapable of imprinting character. Once the philosophy of history and liberalism arrived at a being with no essence, an alternative soon appeared which defines humanity by its origins, for what it has been, rather than for what it will become.

From a less anthropological perspective, thinking of man in terms of his origins rather than his destiny is similar to the Platonic *anamnesis* and even to biblical proto-history as a formal determination of salvation. The model of Western literature itself, typified by the departure and return duality that we find in the nostalgia of Odysseus, is yet another symptom of a being defined by his origins (Blumenberg 1989). Obviously, this description of humanity is closely tied to tradition, which has often served as a departure point that orients and gives an exact course for our existence. Furthermore, I believe that understanding tradition in this manner, as a spatial home which provides an escape from the apprehension caused by the theoretical framework of historical infiniteness, is close to Hannah Arendt's reflection on republican foundation and the concept of *auctoritas* (see Arendt 1961).

THE HOME OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND THE NOSTALGIC REUNION OF OPPOSITES

The final home mentioned by the Hungarian philosopher is related to democratic institutions. As if she were a twentieth-century Tocqueville, Heller speaks about democracy in America, the most successful in her opinion, and indicates that the American home was founded by the Constitution. She adds that a democratic constitution is a home in the same measure that tradition creates a home. Similar to tradition, the Constitution can slowly change over time, that is, it can be amended but not abolished. If it were, Americans would lose their home and be uprooted.

It is true that the United States Constitution is very different than the British Constitution, but Heller's observations on the founding law as a political tradition is very reminiscent of the work of Edmund Burke. This conservative liberal sustained that the British Constitution adopted nature's model of *growth*, of adaptation and continuous reform. This was the basis of the following impression he had of his countrymen: "in what we *improve* we are *never* wholly new, in what we retain we are *never* wholly obsolete" (Burke 2001, 184-5).

Heller's reflections seem even closer to Hannah Arendt and to the exaltation of the US Constitution, endowed with an *auctoritas* that in the era of the Roman Republic was possessed by the Senate (Arendt 1963, 200). In Rome, the Senate was a conservative institution because it had to maintain and even

enhance the political inheritance that had been transmitted from the time of the city's foundation. Something similar occurred with the US Constitution, which founded a new tradition, and with the institutions that are in charge of interpreting it and transmitting it to future generations.

However, the fixation on stability, on the continuity of the legacy transmitted from the foundation, on what truly converts the American democracy into a home, does not have to suffocate the spirit of innovation. Obviously, Jefferson's revolutionary option, which sustained that each generation had the right to its own revolution and that the dead had no rights, was categorically defeated (Jefferson 1944, 676), but that does not mean we should fall into the excesses of *originalism* defended by *strict constructionists*. It is not about sacralising the Constitution as do Berger, Rehnquist and Bork, that is, interpreting it according to *original intent* and opposing its adaptation to the changes experienced by society (Beltrán 1989, 57). With this in mind, we can understand Heller when she quotes Michelman's declaration that American democracy has to be regained every day. Its habitat is experience, the space where political affairs take place, and not abstract or universal principles that, as discussed, are linked to modernity's temporal home-experience. This explains why American democracy never needed a grand narrative, a philosophy of history.

Heller adds that in America consent is valued more highly than dissent, "just as prior to the development of modernity" (Heller 1995, 13). But although the republican tradition is tied to consent, I feel that we cannot simply dismiss the benefits of dissent, of disputability or even emancipatory conflicts. This is Philip Pettit's stance, a neo-republican who over the last few years has insisted that conflict plays a positive role within institutions. Pettit sustains, in contrast to Hannah Arendt and what he refers to as the populist tradition, that political liberty requires not so much consent but rather disputability or dissent. That is to say, democratic self-government depends on the possibility that decisions made by the government or any other representative can be disputed by the people. Thus neo-republicanism is linked to the possibility of altering political decisions as a consequence of a public dispute. Pettit refers to a conflict that takes place within institutional channels and between actors that acknowledge each other (see Pettit 1997), but a dispute carried out as described by Jacques Rancière in his work *La méésentente* could also be democratic (see Rancière 1995); a dispute that at its core is a reconsideration of the class struggle. I am referring specifically to all those conflicts carried out by a group that is not acknowledged by the institutions or by other subjects to be equal to other parts of the community.

Finally, Heller indicates that democracy in general or in the abstract is not a home, but one or another democracy could be if, as occurs in America, their

citizens –the founding fathers and mothers of the present– re-found it every day; or, to state it in the terms used by Arendt, if they increase or broaden the democratic legacy they inherit. Heller adds that “if there is such a home, it is spatial, for you cannot carry it on your back, and also temporal, insofar as it lives in the absolute present” (Heller 1995, 14). Our philosophy recognises that the democratic home does not guarantee the end of anti-democratic or even totalitarian mental attitudes. In the American democracy itself there are communities and pressure groups that construct anti-universalistic and exclusive homes. Heller finds the antidote for this intolerance in liberalism, which is not a home of course, but rather a principle, a conviction and an attitude which brings tolerance or respect for the plurality of lifestyles to our home. From this perspective, democracy must be liberal so that the home does not become a prison or a tyranny.

However, Heller herself knows that European liberalism was incapable of avoiding modern tyrannies, the totalitarianism of the twentieth century. The liberal city was not only the tolerant city, but also, as explained by the philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel, a habitat that paradoxically generated new closed and secret spaces. Instead of being a common refuge, in some European states it became a home where closed individual spaces, impenetrable for the other, proliferated. Although the modern big city was no longer surrounded by walls or protected by a locked gate, it continued to be armed against anything that it did not produce or recognise as reality. Noise, for example, shut every citizen up in his cave, in his room, and made public or social relations more difficult in the modern city. This gives the impression –so powerful in Kafka’s novels– of being surrounded everywhere by closed doors (Simmel 1968, 486; Blumenberg 1989, 80-1).

Heller sustains that the introduction of liberalism in the discourse of democracy did not leave our world unscathed. This is true to such an extent that she has to reformulate her initial question, “where are we at home”, and instead ask “where are you at home” or, even better, “where is each individual at home”, because in her opinion it would be nearly impossible for two people to give exactly the same answer. In effect, liberal principles allow each person to answer the question in her own way: homes are built from subjective preference and this makes it possible to avoid the dangers of fundamentalism. If this is the case, we must acknowledge that liberalism has transformed the home metaphor into the opposite of what it originally signified; instead of being primarily a shared space, it is now a space that is freely chosen as one’s own. If this is true, perhaps it makes no sense to use the metaphor to think about politics, to think about the space shared by many or perhaps everyone.

Heller acknowledges of course that homes are not made for solitary beings; that these places are shared and require some assimilation because with-

in them one must be accepted, welcome, or at least tolerated. Our liberal principles, however, ensure that assimilation does not become tyranny. But declaring a liberal democracy as *our* home gives rise to a suspicion that perhaps what we are really trying to do is solve the massive unresolvable problem of modern politics: how to unite opposites or bring harmony to politics and plurality. Heller's final answer to "where are we at home?" is "each of us is in the world of our self-appointed and shared destiny" (Heller 1995, 18); although this answer reveals perhaps a greater fear of totalitarian pathologies derived from excessive unity than of nihilistic pathologies derived from excessive pluralism, it is surely based on a profound need to reconcile the individual and the collective. The fact that she converts liberal democracy into a home doubtlessly alludes to this profound nostalgic desire to harmonise the incompatible and to overcome the hostility inherent between different ways of understanding life. And I believe that no concept is capable of expressing it as well as the *absolute metaphor* of the home.

REFERENCES

- Ackerman, Bruce 1991: *We the People: Foundations*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Arendt, Hannah 1961: *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Viking Press.
- Arendt, Hannah 1963: *On Revolution*. London: Penguin Books.
- Badiou, Alain 2001: *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. London: Verso.
- Barthes, Roland 1973: *Mythologies*. London: Paladin.
- Beltrán, Miguel 1989: *Originalismo e interpretación. Dworkin vs. Bork: una polémica constitucional*. Madrid: Civitas.
- Blumenberg, Hans 1979: *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Blumenberg, Hans 1989: *Höhlenausgänge*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Blumenberg, Hans 1998: *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Burke, Edmund 2001: *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Heller, Agnes 1985: *The Power of Shame: A Rational Perspective*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Heller, Agnes 1993: "A Theory of Needs Revisited", *Thesis Eleven*, 35, 18-35.
- Heller, Agnes 1995: "Where Are We at Home?", *Thesis Eleven*, 41, 1-18.
- Jefferson, Thomas 1944: *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. New York: The Modern Library.

- Koselleck, Reinhart 1979: *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Monod, Jean-Claude 2007: *Hans Blumenberg*. Paris: Belin.
- Pettit, Philip 1997: *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rancière, Jacques 1995: *La Mésentente. Politique et philosophie*. Paris: Galilée.
- Schiller, J. C. F. 1875: *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*. E. Leipzig: B. G. Teubner.
- Simmel, Georg 1968: *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.