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# Ellen Meiksins Wood (1942-2016)

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

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**A brilliant Marxist historian and theorist, Ellen Meiksins Wood passed away January 14, after a long battle with cancer. As a friend and colleague Vivek Chibber stated, “Wood was a thinker of extraordinary range, writing with authority on Ancient Greece, early modern political thought, contemporary political theory, Marxism, and the structure and evolution of modern capitalism. But even more importantly, she was one of those few from the New Left who never relented in their commitment to socialist politics.” Ellen Wood is survived by her loving husband Ed Broadbent, a former Canadian MP and leader of the New Democratic Party, as well as two brothers, Peter and Robert Meiksins.**

The following tribute is abridged from a presentation last November by Robert Brenner, an editor of *Against the Current*, longtime co-thinker and close friend of Wood, at an informal conference held by Verso Books to mark the re-publication of three of Ellen's books. The full text will be published on the [Verso website](#).

Ellen's parents lives and politics had an especially big impact on her own political-intellectual formation. Both Ellen's mother and father were from Latvia, where they were leading figures in the Bund, the Jewish Socialist Party. In 1940 they had to flee the country to Paris, then to flee Paris and ultimately France to get away from the invading Nazi forces. Bundist organizations in the United States, apparently in collaboration with the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union and its president David Dubinsky, secured them the precious safe passage through Europe and the U.S. visa to get on a ship from Portugal.

One can get a good idea of what Ellen's family had to go through from the Preface to Arno Mayer's fine book on the Judeocide, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?*, which describes in fascinating detail the harrowing journey his family took to escape the Nazis, ending up on the very same ship by which Ellen's parents got away.

Ellen's family lived for a time on the New York Lower East Side, then epicenter of Jewish working-class radicalism in the country. Ellen's mom went to work for the United Nations Relief Agency, travelling all over Europe for a number of years, aiding displaced persons.

Ellen's dad was a chief interpreter at the United Nations, translating English and French into Russian. He described himself as a Marxist, a Menshevik, and a radical analyst. Ellen has often spoken to me about how much she respected and adored him, and what an influence he had on her political formation. It was no wonder that Ellen, from a very young age, identified herself ever increasingly with working-class politics and organization — trade unions, socialist democracy, internationalism, Marxism.

I first met Ellen when she, along with her husband Neal Wood (1922-2003), also an historian of political theory, invited me to give a talk at the Politics Department at York University in Toronto in 1978. From the time of that visit, Ellen was my friend and, on many fronts, my intellectual and political comrade.

As it turned out, Ellen and I had gone to the same high school together, the infamous Beverly Hills High School, although we barely knew each other there. Beverly Hills High was a quintessential Beverly Hills institution — dominated, as you'd expect, by Hollywood values, conventional attitudes, fancy cars, and beautiful clothes (and there was an oil well, too).

Both Ellen and I had found ourselves alienated, and more than a bit turned off, by the self-defined in-group that

dominated the scene and felt ourselves to be outsiders, though certainly unapologetically so. Still, I have to say that, at the time, Ellen seemed to me as anything but an outsider. She was a very smart, high-powered intellectual; a very cool, very attractive woman, with great cheekbones like Audrey Hepburn – an impressive person even then, although I knew her mainly from afar.

## History of Political Theory

At the time I met them, Ellen and Neal were just embarking on one of their central intellectual-political projects – a historical materialist account of the evolution of political theory, from the ancient world to the present. In 1978 they published their first book on this theme, *Class Ideology and Ancient Political Theory*.

Their aim, there and subsequently, was to provide what they called the historical-social context for understanding the development of political ideas. This might seem rather mundane . . . but only if we fail to take into account that most of the practitioners in the field at the time – and probably even today – understand political philosophy to entail the thinking and rethinking of timeless issues concerning the meaning of the state, freedom, justice, a conversation across time among the greats.

By contrast, Ellen and Neal sought to comprehend the enterprise of political theory – and its history – as involving the attempt to grapple with the specific contradictions and conundrums that were posed by the specific structures and practices, the distinctive class struggles, of particular, historically-developed societies.

This project begins with a series of iconoclastic studies of the political theory of the ancient world, which Ellen argues must be understood in terms what she sees as its dominant social-property relations of peasant and lord, rather than as traditionally by Marxists, of slaves and masters.

Her striking conclusion is that it was the peasants of ancient Greece, in their struggle against the landed aristocrats for political control of the polis, who were responsible for the first, classical statement of real political democracy. Only in these terms of peasant-lord class struggle can we properly understand the lastingly influential, anti-democratic philosophy, articulated by Aristotle and especially Plato.

The project continues in the early modern period, where Ellen and Neal see the rise of agrarian capitalism as the key to understanding classical English political theory from Thomas More onwards. It is only in terms of a deep historical analysis of the rise of the fairly unique system of agrarian capitalist social-property relations in England that we can understand the capitalist aristocracy, the Tudor state, the English landed-class led revolution, the rise of Leveller artisan radicalism, and finally the English revolution of 1688.

Only in terms of the political problems posed by the emergence of these social forces and political processes can we grasp the contributions of the succession of epoch-making political theorists from Hobbes, to Harrington, to Locke.

In undertaking her famous critiques of contemporary postmodern theorizing, especially its voluntarism and reformism, Ellen as always brought to bear her understanding of its social-historical context – specifically, how capitalism works today. The ultimate point of Ellen's theoretical-historical analysis was that capitalism and democracy are incompatible, that democracy can only be realized as workers' self-organized socialism.

# Separation of Political and Economic

At virtually the same time as Ellen was making her first contributions as an historian of political theory, she was also debuting as a social-political theorist in her own right, seeking to fundamentally recast the then prevailing forms of historical materialism.

In her path-breaking article on "The Separation of the Economic and Political in Capitalism," published in *New Left Review* (May-June 1981), Ellen argued that Marxism could not realize its enormous potential as a tool for understanding society and politics historically, so long as it remained hobbled by an ultimate commitment to an economic, indeed technological, determinism.

Here Ellen's main target was the then most rigorous available version of Marxist theory, which had been put forward by Gerald Cohen in his celebrated work *Karl Marx's Theory of History*. Ellen argues that the fundamental weakness of Cohen's account is to be found in his very point of departure, which is that the productive forces inevitably advance...and bring about the rise of relations of production that nurture the forces of production's further development.

Wood's point is that, on the contrary, the only way to found a viable historical materialism is to understand the causal chain the other way round, viewing historically developed social-property relations or relations of production as determining the material development of the forces of production.

For Wood, the approach of the Marxist historian Guy Bois was emblematic of the orthodoxy she was attempting to counter. Bois crafted the term "political Marxism" to criticize my own work and that of co-thinkers like Ellen in the name of his own version of economic determinism.

Political Marxism, he argued, "amounts to a voluntarist vision of history in which the class struggle is divorced from all objective contingencies, and doesn't take account of the place of laws of development under each mode of production" — i.e. the tendency for the rate of profit to fall under capitalism and for the rate of rent to fall under feudalism (in Bois's own work).

Ellen responded by accepting Bois's challenge. If Bois wants to characterize our approach as "political Marxism," she said, that's his prerogative. What is actually at stake is recognizing the systematically different ways in which "the economic" and "the political" interconnect in pre-capitalist and capitalist societies respectively, and the profound implications of this difference for the structure and developmental patterns of each type of social system.

As Ellen goes on to point out, pre-capitalist modes of production are founded for the most part, as Marxists have long realized, on "peasant possession," a set of property relations or relations of production in which the direct producers hold the their full means of subsistence, primarily embodied in their plots of land.

This possession makes it possible for peasant families to reproduce themselves economically in an independent fashion, but what makes peasant possession possible is peasants' organization into political communities, constituted to defend individual members' holdings by carrying out collectively the political functions of justice and police.

It is because peasants' possession is sustained politically that lords' own reproduction must be similarly so. The latter can only reproduce themselves economically as individual lords by taking part of the peasants' product by force as feudal rent. But lords, too, have organized themselves into political communities, which stand behind and support

each of their members in their exactions from the peasants.

The bottom line, argues Ellen, is that in understanding pre-capitalist societies like feudalism, you can if you wish follow Bois in arguing that the forms through which economic reproduction takes place are determining of how the society works. But you can do this only if you realize first that these “economic” forms are themselves politically constituted.

Capitalism, Ellen argued, is just the opposite. Its emergence depended on the separation of the direct producers from their possession of the means of subsistence, and of the rulers from their capacity to take by extra-economic coercion — both resulting from the defeat and destruction of the political communities that formerly defended and reduced these contending forces.

The outcome was a completely different system, in which neither of the main social forces, neither capitalists nor workers, could any longer depend on political-coercive arrangements, backed up by political communities. Instead they had to buy on the market everything they needed, and this meant they had to sell some product competitively if they were to survive.

Capitalists had to specialize, invest their surpluses, and innovate to cut costs so as to ensure profits. Workers had to sell the one product in their possession, their labor power, to the capitalists, opening the way to their exploitation. Individual economic reproduction thus took place without the need to recur to political action, at least in the first instance.

Where “the political” re-emerged, of course, was in connection with the state, which had “only” to defend the existing distribution of property to make possible the economic reproduction of both capitalists and workers. But much of Ellen’s work was devoted to fleshing out the consequences for politics of a system where the class struggle was carried out, at least in the first instance or much of the time, in an economic realm separated from the state which nonetheless guaranteed the exploitative system operative there.

“The Separation of the Economic and Political,” in other words, only laid out a problematic that Ellen would spend an entire career unravelling and demystifying.

## Politics

It is critical not to leave the impression that Ellen was just a Marxist intellectual, however brilliant, concerned only with theory and ideas. What is in the end perhaps most striking is that, while realizing a truly formidable series of important intellectual projects, she was putting political functioning at the center of her life.

In the 1980s she worked on the *New Left Review* as a very active member of its editorial board, as well as an advisory editor of *Against the Current*. In the 1990s, she became editor of *Monthly Review*. All the while, her directly political interventions came as fast and furiously as her theoretical conquests.

Ellen was, first and last, a socialist devoted to the self-emancipation of the working class, and she would have been more than content to be remembered that way.

[Against the Current](#)