

Words From Budapest

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Your trajectory has been an unusual one: a dissident libertarian philosopher under Communism in both Romania and Hungary, who has emerged as one of the foremost left critics of the capitalist order in eastern Europe, and author of a striking set of essays on the historical and cultural legacies and contemporary dynamics of the region. Could we start by asking about your original personal and intellectual formation, in Gheorghiu-Dej's and Ceaușescu's Romania?

Answering this question borders on the impossible, since the whole context which might explain it has gone. I was born in 1948, in what Hungarians call Kolozsvár and Romanians, Cluj. The principal city of Transylvania, it had been transferred from Hungary to Romania in 1920 by the Treaty of Trianon, awarded back to Horthy's Hungary by Hitler in 1940, and was under direct Nazi occupation from early 1944 until the arrival of Soviet forces, when it was incorporated into Romania again. Both my parents were Communists. They had come back from the War broken and bitter. My father, a Hungarian writer, was dispatched from prison to the front, where he was seriously wounded—he walked on crutches, later with a sturdy walking-stick, which I still have—by those whom he considered his comrades: the Red Army. My mother, ironically, escaped being deported to Auschwitz because she was in jail as a seditious Bolshevik. But her mother and her favourite elder brother were killed. My father's family belonged to the petty nobility, or rather yeomanry, in the mountainous Szekler region of East Transylvania; his father was a tailor in a small town. My mother, seven years older than him, came from an Orthodox Jewish family, a long line of Talmudic scholars. They could not have met anywhere else, only in the movement. The movement—they never spoke of the Party—meant mostly suffering and persecution: arrest, prison, beatings. The suffering was self-explanatory: punishment by an evil society proved the goodness of the Cause. It was a quasi-Gnostic world-view: on the one side there was exploitation, oppression, Hitler and death; on the other, the movement.

Later, when my father was thoroughly disenchanted with the system, I asked him why he still called himself a Communist. He showed me a little plastic—well, I suppose, bakelite—cube, with six little photos glued on its sides: the portraits of some of the best friends of his youth, tortured to death by the royal Hungarian and Romanian secret services, or by the Gestapo in that awful year, 1944. 'Because I cannot explain it to them', he said. It was the perfect Christian idea: bearing witness, martyrdom as the theological guarantee of truth. They were justified by heroic death, and so was the cause. He could not escape it. Keeping faith in the teeth of adverse political experience, the rotting away of the movement, was the only course. Anything else would have been treason. Duplex veritas also: he never denied that 'state socialism' was a failure. His identity and his principles were at loggerheads. Some of his comrades, back from the concentration camps, had been rearrested by the Communist authorities, 'disappeared' without a sound. This destroyed him as an intellectual.

In the absence of revolution, he suddenly found himself with time on his hands, so he had the leisure to be a wonderful parent. He showed me historical Transylvania, limping on mountain paths, propped on his stick before some redoubt or castle, or another ruined medieval church. There aren't many intellectuals today who have working-class friends, but we did. Some of our family were

peasants, in the poorest regions of Europe. I was taught, without great success, to do things in the fields and the garden. But I was taught something else as well: that everything related to us. My memory was trained by listening to the Hungarian programme of the bbc World Service and summarizing the news for my parents; I was seven years old. I still remember the British Cabinets of that era: Selwyn Lloyd, Rab Butler, Maxwell Fyfe and so on (but one admired Herbert Morrison and Barbara Castle). 'We'll Meet Again' and 'The White Cliffs of Dover' with Vera Lynn were felt to be somehow akin to socialist marching songs. The bbc—in contradistinction to Radio Free Europe—had counted as 'anti-fascist' since the War. I had no idea that I was different from other boys; I assumed it was not just a tiny minority who cared about Nehru, Sukarno, Ho Chi Minh and Lumumba—and on the street, strong and swarthy lads were invariably called Tshombe, known from the newsreels.

Internationalism remained an important creed for my parents and their circle of friends—most of them 'illegals' before 1945—as the Party became increasingly nationalist in the sixties and started getting rid of Hungarian, Jewish and—especially—Hungarian-Jewish leaders and activists, who all remembered the Iron Guard tactics of 'Romanianization' from before the War. With them went the important post-War concessions to the Hungarian minority, including an autonomous territory and an independent Hungarian university in Cluj/Kolozsvár.

What kind of a city was Cluj/Kolozsvár, where you grew up?

It was a medieval cathedral town, where the thick city walls are visible to this day, with two major Gothic churches—my favourite is the Farkas utca ('Wolf Street') reformed church; I am a lapsed Calvinist—and the baroque city houses of the Transylvanian aristocracy and the local patricians: the Bánffy palace, the Rhédey house, the Kendeffy house, the Wolphard-Kakas house, the cathedral close to where the university was built in the 1870s. It is, to me, painfully beautiful. It was called 'the city of treasures', but not because of its riches: it was the regional capital of alchemy; it had a history of religious strife and sudden conversions during the Reformation. It was a Hungarian town in the midst of the mostly Romanian countryside and also a bastion of the Left. In 1946, Iron Guard students from the Romanian university murdered two Hungarian Communist workers. The Reds—mostly Hungarians—stormed the university dormitories. The two victims were laid in state on a huge catafalque on Main Square, a mourning crowd of tens of thousands assembled, and that night the Communist leaders made inflammatory, bloodthirsty speeches by candlelight, a sinister and threatening spectacle recounted repeatedly by my elders (I wasn't born yet). The Hungarian university was Communist, the Romanian one was right-wing. Similarly, the two soccer clubs in town were also politically divided: the kmcs (today cfr) was Hungarian and social democratic (it was originally a trade-union sports association), the Universitate was Romanian and Iron Guard. They still hate one another, their past forgotten, though players and supporters are all Romanian now.

Minorities everywhere in Eastern Europe tended to be on the left, attracted by communist internationalism and by the Comintern opposition to the Versailles and Trianon treaties. In the whole of Romania, the Hungarian university of Cluj/Kolozsvár was the most reliable bastion of Marxism-Leninism—which has not, of course, endeared the official doctrine to Romanians, intellectuals or not. Stalinism is still remembered, rather unfairly, as an epoch of renewed Hungarian domination in Transylvania, the suppression of which made Nicolae Ceaușescu rather popular for a while.

And your upbringing?

It was a strangely Victorian childhood. What passed for 'communism' at the time was a rigidly rationalistic, puritanical, diligent, asexual, disciplined regime, with a penchant for high-mindedness, high culture, self-improvement, rigorous study; everything repressed, quiet and well-mannered, all in the name of Revolution. Reading Raphael Samuel's *Lost World of British Communism*, with all the differences between dominant culture and isolated sub-culture, I recognized the steely grey of the

self-sacrificing, altruistic, egalitarian, unsentimental and unromantic, positivist Bolshevism of our youth, with the subdued, undeclared heroism that was its secret ideal. We Bolshevik children, too, were seen but not heard in our prickly woollen knee-socks and shorts, listening to the grown-ups discoursing about weighty matters. During my long illnesses, I was read interminable nineteenth-century epics by my father and was taught to read everything, if possible, in the original. Every Saturday evening and Sunday morning, we went to symphonic concerts. I played the violin; we all were supposed to read music, understand Latin, read Dante and Milton and Byron and Goethe and Pushkin in our teens. I started on the Critique of Pure Reason at fourteen. I didn't understand it, of course, but I finished it, in the frightful, incomprehensible old Hungarian translation.

There were modest holidays: I remember summer days on the grass in the courtyard, with a basket of apples—I hate apples—reading, reading, reading. In the evenings, my mother would stand in the dark, watching through the slats, waiting for the black car to arrive. When, some fifteen years later, in February of 1974, at half past four in the morning, the secret police finally rang at my door, I was not surprised. We were waiting for that all our lives. It was our regime, it was my parents' party, but it was also our obvious enemy. In the early 1960s when my father was fired as the head of the Hungarian State Theatre in town, but only sent into internal exile, we were relieved. My parents told me in excruciating detail how to behave if I was beaten (I never was), how to breathe—'regular respiration is the most important, think of something formal, recite verses in your head, think of mathematical formulae, anything rhythmic'—they thought it was practical advice, but they only succeeded in frightening me out of my wits.

What was your perception at the time of Hungarian-Romanian relations in Transylvania?

We knew how Romanian peasants had been treated by the Transylvanian Hungarian nobility and the Hungarian state before 1918; how the Romanian national movements—the movements of the ethnic majority in Transylvania—had been dealt with, how their rights had been denied; but we were innocent, as internationalists opposed to discrimination. But was our antipathy to Romanian nationalism totally bereft of suppressed feelings of ethnic pride—the sense that we were 'better', as internationalist Hungarians, than the chauvinist Romanian upstarts and newcomers? I very much doubt it. Nationalism—in this case, 'their' nationalism—was deemed 'primitive', probably an echo of the old contempt of the town for the country. My parents did not speak Romanian (I am fluent). As good internationalists, they read the literature of their country's majority in translation. I once asked my mother, 'How come you speak perfect French but no Romanian?' By then, she had spent some forty years in Romania. She just laughed.

My first oppositional thoughts were rather selfish: how dare the regime disappoint my adored, heroic parents? My first thought about the Party was that they were traitors—come to think of it, that is still what I believe. The ancient contrast between ideal and reality was what shaped our so-called political thoughts. Very un-Marxist. Exaggerated, rigid moralism instead of historical thinking. It has given me a deep, abiding hatred of the regime, so intense and savage that it is hard to describe.

So, with the Hungarian University closed down by the regime, presumably your university education was in Romanian?

No, it was in Hungarian; the two universities were actually merged into one, which is still bi-lingual today. But I spent two years in Bucharest as well, studying Greek which wasn't taught at the time in Kolozsvár.

What drew you to Descartes, the subject of your first book?

My interest was historical and critical: I was concerned with the birth of 'Reason'. It is a text quite similar to Antonio Negri's *Political Descartes* which, alas, I did not know at the time, although his book is better. I was very much taken with the first 'linguistic turn', the Romantic version, like the one to be found in Johann Georg Hamann's critique of Kant. I also wrote on Novalis.

You've mentioned the arrival of the Securitate in February 1974: what sort of activities were you involved in?

It wasn't anything that I did—the regime was too rigid and terrible for real resistance—but what I didn't do: I refused to write some loyal article on Ceaușescu's new 'moral code'. I was promptly denounced and taken to the Securitate headquarters two days later. It was harassment: I was detained a few times in the street, put into the black car and whisked away for a few hours, then released during the night. Sometimes they just let me cool my heels in the bleak corridors.

What made you decide to go to Hungary in 1978, rather than seek asylum in the West?

There were a number of reasons. First, I did not want to go to prison, and in Romania it would have been only a question of time. Second, I was fed up with being a member of a hated and officially persecuted minority in my own native town and longed to be just a Hungarian author in a Hungarian environment, and not to be frowned at if I spoke Hungarian on the bus—though there is no escaping this. As we speak, mutual hatred between Hungarians and Romanians is flaring up again, the conflict fomented, as per usual, by irresponsible right-wing politicians. God, it's boring. But thirdly, there was an opposition taking shape here in Hungary; I thought this would be my intellectual home. And I may have been a little bored by the provinces.

I didn't go to the West—although it would have been much simpler as I had an uncle in Paris, a sometime worker at Renault, a member of several groupuscules, then of the PSU—because, as an old-fashioned intellectual, I felt I had some duties here: building an opposition to the regime, doing serious philosophy in my native tongue (my *Descartes* book came out in 1977). Then there was the hope of leading a more normal life, as it seemed to me then. I taught for a spell at the University of Budapest, known as *elte*, but I was fired after publishing an underground pamphlet under my own name, supporting the Polish opposition after General Jaruzelski's coup in December 1981. So much for normal life. I was blacklisted, forbidden to publish, my name disappeared from the press and from professional publications, my passport was confiscated and my telephone cut off—the usual stuff. I was unemployed until I was elected to Parliament in 1989.

Hungary was indeed a country very different from Romania. Hungary and East Germany were the only 'actually existing' socialist countries where there was no lurch towards nationalism, where the anti-fascist tradition was taken seriously—although the great intellectuals of the inter-war extreme right were all rehabilitated and were writing furiously in the so-called Communist journals. Their anti-Western attitudes and 'romantic anti-capitalism' helped: they sincerely preferred the Soviet Union to America, on the usual anti-liberal grounds. But, unlike in Romania, propaganda against our neighbours was not permitted and, unlike in the rest of the Soviet bloc, anti-Semitism was silenced (a policy shared with East Germany and Yugoslavia). It was festering silently, but it could rarely be felt in public life. Nationalism, what there was of it, had a slight oppositional tinge.

How would you characterize the culture of the time?

Everywhere in the Soviet bloc there existed a strange combination of high modernism and—looked at from today, or from the West—an incredible and tradition-laden cult of Letters, of the Arts, of Science and Philosophy. 'Socialist' modernization, apart from putting an end to illiteracy, epidemics and abject poverty, by introducing hygiene and indoor plumbing, heating, old-age pensions, paid

holidays, free health care and free education, cheap public transport, numeracy and so on, also opened lending libraries in every district and all the larger firms. It introduced—for the first time—scholarly and critical editions, and an enormous volume of high-quality mass publishing, social sciences, serious literary and art criticism; dozens of new theatres and museums were opened, hundreds of new cinemas—art film flourished; all extremely high-minded. Millions of people learned to read music and sang in choirs. Philosophy had never been regarded as part of the national culture before 1945. National classics were properly edited and published for the first time. Hundreds of scholars worked on translations. These were extremely bookish nations.

At the same time, as this was a system of state capitalism, tempered and limited by planning both production and redistribution—and steered by very complex mathematics—politics was disproportionately rational or, rather, rationalistic. As a system still based on commodity production, wage labour, money and the separation of the producers from the means of production, class differences and inequality persisted. In this, the Party represented a kind of collective *tribunus plebis*, always adjusting consumption levels, life quality and cultural participation towards equality and maintaining—in a largely, but not exclusively, symbolic fashion—the primacy of the working class. Social mobility was swift and advantages were offered to working-class kids in access to higher education and cadre promotion. Statistics show that even in the 1980s, a crushing majority of leading officials and managers came from proletarian families.

It is a supreme irony that the demands of today's hard right—for an independent Hungarian-language state university in Kolozsvár, a Hungarian Autonomous Region in Transylvania—had been achievements (later suppressed) of the Stalinist era. There were not only privileges for people of proletarian origin, but also for minority cadres. The Leninist programme had encompassed the development of all ethnic cultures: the now warring regional or ethnic elites of the Soviet bloc had been created by the Party. National cultures that like harking back to a fictitious Middle Age had been endowed with a script—then a press, publishing, higher education, theatre—by literate commissars with romantic leanings, who believed in pristine folk cultures in the Urals, far away from decadent St Petersburg. Faust was translated into dozens of languages by poets who were themselves just one generation from general illiteracy. These nations are now watching pop videos on YouTube.

What meaning would you attribute to the 'symbolic primacy' of the working class?

We should not forget that all caste and class systems, whatever their differences, are grounded in a value system extolling the virtues of the spirit over manual work, of the leisured class over those who must earn their keep, of meditation over activity, of things done for their own sake instead of for sheer physical survival. Clergy and aristocracy were not only supposed to rule but also to be superior morally, intellectually and even physically—remember Lord Curzon's surprise at seeing soldiers bathing during the First World War: 'I never knew the working classes had such white skins!' Well, the Party inverted this. 'Actually existing socialism', although it was not socialist, was unique in operating a terrific moral switch by asserting the superiority of manual labour and putting the worker at the pinnacle of the moral hierarchy. It is seldom understood what a tremendous cultural coupure this was. It earned the regime more hatred than anything else; the post-1989 eastern European press is still joking about it, in their sincere contempt (good old class hatred) for grease-smeared yahoos in cloth caps—called here, characteristically, 'Lenin hats'. The very existence of workers reading Brecht and listening to Bartók is denied.

The countervailing cult of the 'intellectual', disguising the new middle class, was supposed to hide class differences through the idea of the selfless service of the mind in realizing a world, to the advantage of manual workers, in which spirit and matter, work and leisure, would merge. Since this was, of course, mostly ideology and nothing more, a great—now forgotten—literature of communist

disillusionment came into being. In general, the most feared opposition to the regime was on the left. The Hungarian Secret Service's anti-Trotskyite sub-division was dissolved only in 1991. There were practically no Trotskyists in Hungary; the Section dealt with any kind of Marxist heresy, but it shows the direction of the leadership's fears.

Would it be correct to think that Yugoslavia remained a relatively separate universe from the central and eastern European scene of the 70s and 80s, with not that much contact between the two?

It was, of course, separate—in terms of exit visas, for example, it counted as a Western country, although it was much less hostile to the Soviet Union than Ceaușescu's Romania, which was consumed with anti-Communist and anti-Russian hatred, in love with everything that seemed anti-Soviet, from de Gaulle, Begin and Nixon to the Shah of Iran and Brother Number One, Comrade Pol Pot . . .

Ceaușescu was duly honoured at Buckingham Palace—the Order of the Bath.

Indeed. I attended de Gaulle's speech at the University of Bucharest in 1968, in which he was buttering up Ceaușescu and waxing eloquent over *ce petit pays latin*, entouré par Slaves et Magyars—he didn't say *Hongrois*—to thunderous applause; none from me, I'm afraid. But there were contacts with Yugoslavia, certainly. When I was blacklisted in Romania and Hungary, I published my essays in Hungarian-language journals in Yugoslavia—they were excellent. It was much less censored than publishing and the press in either Hungary or Romania, and especially permissive regarding New Left heresies, hysterically feared and hated in the Soviet bloc. By the 1970s, the regime in East Central Europe had stopped pretending that it was in any way Marxist; that was the *damnosa haereditas*, silently repudiated. In my student days, Weber, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Lévi-Strauss were the major thinkers, and the success of analytical philosophy and neo-classical economics was tremendous. The strict division in the countries under German influence between 'science'—including of course the humanities, history, economics, sociology, aesthetics and philosophy—and 'politics', a plague of public life in Eastern Europe, comes from Weber, the undisputed saint and hero of the 1970s, the last decade when East European intellectuals were still reading books. Marxists, like the Lukács school in Hungary—a group I was friendly with, but to which I never belonged—were dissidents of the New Left or the Eurocommunist variety; so, both anti-Soviet and intrinsically questioning the legitimacy and authenticity of the 'socialist system', while the Party was simultaneously affirming the regime's socialist character and not wishing to be reminded of it, under the new market dispensation with its growing inequality and individualism. The famous decision of the Hungarian Central Committee against the disciples of Lukács—Heller, Márkus, Vajda, Kis and others—practically outlawed Marxism for the remainder of the system's life-span. By the time it could have been rehabilitated in 1989, it was dead, and all protagonists were liberals.

In Yugoslavia, it was different. It was a bureaucratic state capitalism like any other, but its leaders were still dreaming about some kind of non-alienated and non-reified order, in spite of the obvious bankruptcy of the 'self-management' adventure, and—in a multi-ethnic and federal state—they fancied themselves internationalists, only to wage a bloody war against one another a few years later. They had become either liberals or bloodthirsty religious Middle Age-fanciers and chauvinists. But before that, they had welcomed Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse to Korčula and Dubrovnik. I first saw the New Left Review in Belgrade in 1979. In general it was simpler to smuggle books than periodicals, as the Hungarian authorities did not know the names; the words 'New Left' were known to customs and border-guard officers, even in English, but there was no problem in importing Franz Marek's left-Eurocommunist *Tagebuch* from Vienna, except if it had the hammer and sickle on the cover. By contrast, Yugoslavia was a 'communist' paradise, with remittance money from the guest

workers sent back from Germany, and it seemed to be closer to a real world with its quarrels, debates and political struggles out in the open, in spite of the repression and the militarism and the *caudillismo* of Tito's ruling clique. But by the 1980s, Hungarian and Romanian intellectuals were rather looking to the West—and, increasingly, to the inter-war, reactionary-corporatist regimes—for their inspiration. It is also very instructive that it is in the Balkans, especially the former Yugoslav republics plus Greece, that there is today a young and vigorous Marxist left, and not Central Europe, the so-called Visegrád countries, where there is nothing comparable, although they are threatened by a vicious and violent, quasi-fascist right. (In the Vojvodina province, hate crime against ethnic Hungarians is a daily occurrence—and neo-Nazi parties are extremely strong in Bulgaria and Greece, using and concomitantly opposing the social protests there.)

How important were Gorbachev's policies as enabling conditions for the advance of democratic forces?

They were important negatively, in the sense that it had become clear that the Red Army wouldn't intervene. At the first major unauthorized demonstration in Budapest in June 1988 where I was to be the main speaker, I was beaten up by riot police and dragged away, but we were freed in two hours. The solemn reburial of Imre Nagy a year later was a state affair, secured by the *ci-devant* Hungarian Secret Services, Army and Police, masquerading as revolution. I was so disgusted I didn't attend. Gorbachev himself was seen as a comic figure: weakness is never forgiven. Anyway, the role of the Soviet Union may have been exaggerated, it wasn't an active presence. I'd never met a live Russian until a dissident conference in Paris in 1989. I have never set foot on Soviet or ex-Soviet territory as we speak: I couldn't get a visa before—now I don't have the money.

One shouldn't ever forget that the demise of socialism was a tragedy. Even when I was violently opposed to the left, I perceived it as such. Just think. A gospel directed against work, power, procreation, against caring about tomorrow or about death—think of the lilies of the field—signified by the hated Roman symbol of torture and assassination, the cross, ends up being represented by a monarch in Caesar's robes in, of all places, Rome; a prophetic community distinguished by its ban on graven images, represented by the most graven of all images, Michelangelo's Moses. Then again: a creed adamantly for total liberation, for a definitive break with any kind of authority and hierarchy, combined with a hyper-critical high modernism, housed in the symbolic abode of the Czars, the Kremlin (no Marx there, but Ivan the Terrible and Boris Godunov), while the whited sepulchres of the Politburo took the salute of goose-stepping Red Army soldiers, keeping in place a system of prisons, concentration camps and psychiatric hospitals where critical reason was healed with chemicals and electric shocks. Quite enough to make you desperate about humankind. It is difficult to imagine, perhaps, a complete civilization being plagued to this extent by disenchantment and despair, but it is a fact nevertheless. We dissidents may have celebrated a victory, but it had somehow, even then, an aftertaste of defeat, a whiff of the hangover.

How would you contrast the experiences of 1989, across the region?

First of all, it was no accident, as Stalin was so fond of saying, that the regime was ultimately beaten by the Polish workers' movement. *Solidarność* was called a trade union, but how was it set up? It was a network of factory cells, organized not by trade but by region, led by a central body advised by committed intellectuals—entirely reminiscent of the early Communist Parties. It was split, like its enemy and predecessor, into workers' councils and the revolutionary party, which were in the end indistinguishable, just as in Russia, Hungary and Germany between 1917 and 1923. Of course, by the time of *Solidarność* the Party represented market reform, and the workers' demands were for a restoration of the planned and egalitarian welfare state. During the 1980s, the Polish workers' opposition followed its adversary towards the re-establishment of a liberal market capitalism—in the hope of greater liberty—and both were beaten into insignificance in the political context of the new

liberal democracy. In Hungary, pro-market ex-Communists, pro-market liberals and pro-market national conservatives competed for power. The brand-new ideologies all advocated embourgeoisement, the creation of a middle class, allegedly the guarantor of freedom—and now the great and good are wondering why the new middle class is so authoritarian and racist.

There was only one genuine revolution in the region, the Romanian one—it took the Romanian intelligentsia a decade to prove that it was a KGB *coup d'état*, although in the early days of January 1990, I saw the blood on the snow when I could finally return to Kolozsvár/Cluj, the blood of soldiers and workers whom nobody likes to remember. But I do, and I am grateful to them that I could return after a decade and have a moment of delirious happiness that Ceaușescu was gone. It still moves me to tears when I speak of that now. As to the rest, it was a process of decomposition complemented by skulduggery, in which we dissidents were the dupes legitimizing the *Schweinerei* that was going on. Still. Like all revolutions, it was a moment of inspiration, when the people becomes a many-headed genius. You cannot imagine the subtlety and intelligence of the myriad circles, clubs and associations in 1988/89. The average case, though, was one of compromise. The onset of the economic crisis—speeded up but not caused by privatization, deregulation and liberalization—did not at first frighten public opinion. People like Wałęsa, Havel, Kuroń and the rest (myself included) presented their ideals as something Western—a synonym of success—to the extent of cheering on the Gulf War. When the measure of the collapse of a civilization was finally taken—while we old dissidents were still celebrating freedom, but already being accused by the new powers-that-be of being rootless-cosmopolitan 68ers, fornicators, gays, Roma-lovers and, worst of all, fe-mi-nists—then it was too late.

I don't for a moment regret having fought against the 'socialist' regime—mendacious, stupid, brutal, repressive and treacherous—and I do still emotionally identify with the dissidence of those years. But I dislike very much the results of those struggles and, although my part in the events was modest—I was more of an orator in mass meetings than a genuine leader, and then a Member of Parliament for the Free Democratic Alliance (szdsz) from 1989-94—I feel responsible. It is especially humbling that the simplest Trotskyist, council communist or anarcho-syndicalist militant saw much more clearly than famous and brilliant theorists that, however deserved the terminal defeat of the Soviet bloc and of Soviet-style state capitalism had been, however understandable and salutary the sudden East European infatuation with freedom and rights, however promising the fall of the market Stalinist parties, it was at the same time a historical disaster, heralding the demise of working-class power, of adversary culture, the end of two centuries of beneficent fear for the ruling classes. What was a philosophical construction and idealization in Marx's *Capital*—capitalism as a total system, with capital as the only Subject—became a palpable, quotidian reality.

To what extent was your political trajectory a response to the social and political outcomes of the 'transition', and to what extent did it involve a critique of liberalism as such?

This trajectory is really peculiar, as it takes the shape of the flight of the boomerang, from left to right and back again, although I became a Marxist for the first time only in the 2000s. The first half is commonplace enough, a rebellion against dictatorship with the added dimension of ethnic discrimination experienced in Romania. But strangely enough, I was helped in this by my forays in conservative thought. Michael Oakeshott—I met him once and was suitably impressed—and, in particular, Leo Strauss awakened my simmering doubts concerning liberalism before my turn to the left. (Actually, I might write some day an essay to be called 'Leo Strauss for Revolutionaries'.) As in my early youth Nietzsche had aroused my interest in Christianity, so Strauss drew me to Spinoza and Rousseau. Liberalism, as a system of separations and tempered conflict, is incapable of grounding a political order that is eternally in need of motivations for the free acceptance of obligations, also called altruism. Lacking this, it will have to go to amazing lengths in legitimizing coercion and the proffering of the noble lie by learned elites. *Natural Right and History*, the only

book to deal with the tragic cynicism of Weber and the deception of the alleged facts/values dichotomy, opened my eyes to the weakness of a political world-view in need of procedural certainties—sustained in the English-speaking world by an abstract and vacuous normativism wholly ignorant of modern philosophy, with the exception of a misinterpreted and simplified Kant: this is what they call ‘political philosophy’.

So, when looking at the liberal turn of such formerly socialist luminaries as Jürgen Habermas, becoming little more than pillars of the establishment, I decided to throw out my whole so-called *œuvre*, break with my entire life so far, and go to school again. This has of course liberated my passionate repudiation of the state of affairs we wrought, my sympathy and compassion for people impoverished and made illiterate again by the market turn. I was obliged to recognize that our naive liberalism had delivered a nascent democracy into the hands of irresponsible and hate-filled right-wing politicians, and contributed to the re-establishment of a provincial, deferential and resentful social world, harking back to before 1945. The break was naturally quite painful, as it excluded me from the circle of people I was associated with for decades—the dissidents—so that my friends at the moment are mostly generations younger than I am; wonderful people, but without the shared memories so necessary for true friendships. At the same time, young Romanian leftists made it possible for me to have a consoling shadow existence in Transylvania, and to get rid finally of the feeling that poisoned my youth—the sense that ethnic conflict was irremediable. After a thirty-year absence, for the first time in my life when I give talks and sometimes write for journals in Romanian, I am made to feel welcome in my own land: a source of great delight and maybe undeserved justification.

What was the impact on the rest of the region of the ethnic conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia, and then of the NATO war on Yugoslavia?

At the official level, these things are strictly and rigidly determined by the past, as the ruling class sees it—for example, the two ‘socialist’ countries where there were no Russian occupying troops, Poland and Romania, are the most anti-Russian today, in remembrance of old territorial and ethnic disputes. In the case of Yugoslavia: Germany, Austria and Hungary sided with nato and Catholic Croatia against Greek Orthodox and allegedly ‘Communist’ Serbia; Czechs, Romanians, Greeks and Russians turned against what they saw as ‘the Central Powers’, perceived as Catholic and ‘German’. It warmed up the old prejudice about the Catholic-Orthodox divide as the boundary between ‘Europe’ and the Oriental barbarians, a cliché beloved of Hungarian nationalists and ethnicists. The Hungarian Prime Minister of the time (and of today), Viktor Orbán, called the Hungarians of Serbian Vojvodina ‘a nato minority’; very useful, as you can imagine, under the nato bombs falling on Újvidék/Novi Sad. By presenting Milošević as a ‘Communist’ and as a Russian ally, it was possible to establish the image of the central European left as something Oriental, barbaric, backward and condemned to defeat. (On the other hand, the left as an agent of modernization is concomitantly seen as the proconsulate of Jewish America; it was Jewish England in the 1930s.) Most of the dissidents of 1989—Havel, Kuroń, Michnik and others—fully supported the nato bombing of Belgrade. By that time I was out protesting, and was called the ‘useful idiot’ of Milošević for my pains. I remember a debate with Alain Finkielkraut at the Institut Français in Budapest: he—a supporter of the anti-Semitic, ethnicist Croat leader, Tuđman—was laughing at me for my foolish sentimentalism: ‘Well, people get killed in the cause of liberty and America, do they not?’

In a striking essay written at the time, ‘The Two-Hundred-Years War’, you described a pattern common to the Austro-Hungarian empire, Yugoslavia and the USSR: politics was confined to the centre, while regional elites represented ethnicity without politics; when the centre disappeared, ethnicism—sharply distinguished from nationalism—was the only remaining force. You also predicted that the West would either tolerate extreme ethnic purging in Yugoslavia or construct an empire of its own there—both, as it turned out . . .

A peculiar concern of mine was the fate of ethnic minorities—I was, I am and I remain a Transylvanian Hungarian—and I could see how minorities and majorities alike failed to learn anything from their experience. All they seemed to want was power. To get as far as they possibly could from democratic nationalism—which is a variant of classical republicanism: political equality and self-determination—they engaged in what I called ethnicism: an apolitical, destructive practice, opposed to the idea of citizenship. Transylvanian Hungarians were in the first ranks of the 1989 Romanian revolution, which they were repudiating—as it was ‘foreign’—within a few months, after having been victims of Romanian pogroms. Common citizenship appears as a chimera. Small wonder though: citizenship and civic-democratic nationalism are dependent on the state, annihilated by neo-liberal politics. Nationalism has reunited small principalities in large states—Italy, Germany, Romania, Czecho-Slovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, maybe even Soviet Russia. Ethnicism has destroyed them and created miserable little statelets, provincial and barbarous, dependent on international finance and local mafia for their livelihood. In this respect, Eastern Europe is not variegated. It is an area of fear where a plastic replica of tribalism appears soothing and homey.

It has been argued that the West’s crucial geo-political move after 1989 was to insist on an individual, ‘hub-and-spokes’ relationship with each central European country, breaking the links between them, rather than negotiating with the bloc as a whole. One result was that any dissent from the Washington-Brussels consensus was automatically framed as isolationism, or ‘nationalism’. What do you make of this argument?

There is some truth in it, but the liberal elites needed no encouragement from the West to sever their ties to a Russia seen as embodying terror, backwardness and poverty, nor to become neo-conservatives. It was not only Western pressure, it was also the desires of important groups in Eastern Europe equating freedom with the West, so they volunteered. In vain did I write in the early 1990s that ‘liberty was not a geographical concept’. Becoming ‘Western’ or, later, ‘European’ was the most popular slogan in this period. So, de-industrialization and the selling of almost everything to multinational conglomerates for a song was just the thing, received enthusiastically by people in love with what a great writer of the 1930s Hungarian *völkisch* movement, László Németh, called ‘self-colonization’.

What have been the longer-term effects?

Apart from the abject impoverishment of the region, the transformation of Eastern Europe into an economic black hole, galloping unemployment and Third World-type inequalities, it has made ethnicism—not nationalism, as it lacks the civic dimension—appear as the only systemic opposition. So ethnicism has attracted, alas, the rebellious spirits who rightly resent the neo-imperialism of multinationals and international organizations, from nato to the imf to the who, and who think that liberal capitalism is merely a disguise for foreign subjection and exploitation.

How would you assess the role of the EU in the region?

The whole thing has been a flop. The eu is regarded here as no more than a bunch of unlovely foreigners, with highfalutin’ constitutional rhetoric masking iron-hard Western egotism. The shrinking liberal minority regards it as a possible safeguard against murderous crowds, a quintessential ‘liberalism of fear’ that bodes ill. The eu has intervened in a salutary fashion in the interest of press freedom or gender equality, but nobody seems to believe in the selflessness of its motives. But then it was never popular. People are unwilling to believe in a freedom that always seems to be accompanied by cuts and more cuts.

How would you periodize Eastern Europe’s quarter-century since 1989?

First, the moment of independence and freedom: liberal effervescence. Second, privatization and the dismantling of the remains of the 'socialist' welfare state, along with the realignment of the former 'communist' state parties, which enthusiastically accepted the neo-liberal agenda as befits their positivist, progressivist and modernizing tradition. Third, a right-wing corporatist backlash against this, largely unsuccessful, with the result: disappointment and rage. Fourth, the frittering away of constitutional systems, civil rights, pluralism and toleration that yielded, in the case of Hungary, a stiff, nationalist order and, in the rest of the Soviet-bloc countries, chaos.

Chaos could suggest a complete breakdown of social order—is that what you perceive?

By chaos I mean the breakdown of the customary loyalties, sympathies and beliefs that would support the assumption of some sort of common good, and which have been replaced not so much by a new rebellious creed as by prejudices, superstitions and whisperings about occult powers; everybody for him- or herself; the reign of suspicion; the feeling that we are finished, but that at the same time the whole thing is a joke; advanced ill-humour; a ferocious rejection of anything that smacks of the supra-individual; hatred of all politics; contempt for law; hatred of everybody and self-hatred—a closed horizon.

In several instances, the ground for the resurgent right in central Europe was cleared by the understandable electoral annihilation of centre-left governments—that of Leszek Miller in Poland (2001-05) or Gyurcsány in Hungary (2004-09)—led by born-again former Communists. Elected on promises of restoring social stability and solidarity after the ravages of shock therapy, in office they proved thoroughly corrupt and cynical, while continuing the remorseless neo-liberal policies. What responsibility do these centre-left parties—and the measures dictated by 'convergence criteria' more generally—bear for the rise of the virulent right?

Please don't forget that these people have never been communists of any description. They were modernizers who felt shackled by the Soviet Union's military might and were always less critical of Western liberal capitalism than the dissidents. They were opposed to Solidarność because to them it seemed to mean disorder, because it was proletarian and because it was Catholic and naively patriotic. It was not only the spd's Helmut Schmidt who swore by Karl Popper: these people had never been the enemies of 'the open society', in the sense of the circulation of capital and individual liberties, as long as these did not amount to popular power. Reason and progress—the most powerful strand of the workers' movement since Saint-Simon, in which *Capital* was viewed as esoteric matter, while leaders and theorists preferred the late Engels's positivism and empiricism—reason and progress now pointed towards Wall Street and the City of London. It is not true that so-called left parties in Eastern Europe promised more social justice than their so-called right-wing rivals; they were always—since 1981 at the latest—associated with cuts and balanced budgets. So no surprise there. With the interesting exception of the Hungarian socialists, they are also blatantly nationalistic—see today the likes of Robert Fico, Ivica Dačić, Victor Ponta, Sergei Stanishev, Miloš Zeman and the rest.

The centre-left parties have been in favour of shock therapy from the beginning. They sometimes attack their right-wing competitors for not being orthodox enough in following the prescriptions of the Washington Consensus. This is why former dissidents such as Adam Michnik could support a 'left' that was, and is, impeccably neo-liberal, a synonym to my former comrades-in-arms for a commitment to freedom and pluralism. The official centre-left in Eastern Europe is closer in spirit to the Western political mainstream than is the official East European right. It may sometimes protest about authoritarian developments in Poland or Hungary, but it introduces or implements them elsewhere. If this is treason, it happened more than thirty years ago. We know from Ernest Mandel's book *From Stalinism to Eurocommunism* that it was not Margaret Thatcher but Enrico Berlinguer,

Secretary-General of the Italian Communist Party, who first extolled the unparalleled virtues of austerity—in 1973! There is nothing to be hoped for from these parties and the subservient trade unions sometimes associated with them—while Solidarność has dwindled to a small revivalist sect, ready to support Genghis Khan.

In a major 2000 essay, 'On Post-Fascism', you analysed a confluence of forces that served to limit effective citizenship under liberal capitalism, despite the expansion of formally democratic processes. Has the experience of the past decade altered the picture?

Not much. In the conditions of deregulated, neo-liberal global capitalism there are not only growing migrant populations but many other categories of people who are estranged, for one reason or another, from traditional nation-states which can no longer supply legal protection, on the one hand, or patriotism, on the other. If citizenship is not in the process of becoming a universal condition—expanding, as it did from 1789 onwards—then it will lose its sense. If it is available only to the officially registered, sedentary white populations of the Western nation-states, it will lead to authoritarian regimes based on racial and moral panic. If equality only obtains among the relatively privileged 'civic nations' in a dwindling number of still stable bourgeois states, then citizenship becomes a distinction instead of the universal condition promised by the French Revolution. If anti-immigrant xenophobia, anti-Islamic hate-mongering, anti-Roma hysteria and the like prevail, its symbolic and police order can only be sustained by tyranny seemingly propped up by 'the people', meaning this time the well-to-do whites and those who aspire to become such. Europe may become a larger Rhodesia any time now.

How could we install a system of universal citizenship? The price to be paid is to dismantle the contemporary version of pseudo-liberal capitalism; no multiculturalism can do justice to this problem. But the white majorities are increasingly desperate. Before 1989, I was afraid only of the secret police. But today I may face the wrath of my own people as I am seen to be on the side of the Roma, of the immigrants, of the gays and so on—so, unlike at any other time in history, equality is perceived to be inimical to the interests of the majority. People are not interested in our opposition to the Wall Street regime, as soon as we defend the darkies. Both are foreign. The left is, again, seen as a Jewish cabal, representing the Other. Under the pretext of equality, the left is felt to attack, again, the local, the traditional, the intimate, the home-grown. Like global capitalism, communism is seen as insensitive to the Home. Yes, it is, as it is concerned about the homeless.

What intellectual resources from the past would you consider of particular value today?

It was not Marx, Engels and the Second International, but the founders of the Comintern—Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Bukharin—and a few others, like the Austro-Marxists around Otto Bauer and the Dutch-German Left-Communist opposition, who were the first to be sincerely internationalist and anti-racist. It was they who took up the cause of the oppressed peoples of the periphery and the semi-periphery, of the 'coloured nations', who seriously opposed imperialism—still seen by Marx to have possessed a mission civilisatrice in India and similar benighted places at the back of beyond. Whatever happened to the idea of international solidarity, friendship between the peoples, self-determination, of being on the side of the poor, or the notion of the 'weakest link'? There is a welcome tendency now among the young left in the region to develop forms of anti-national co-operation between various foci of resistance in East European countries, to oppose the pressure of global capitalist strategies still located mostly in the West. In the gatherings I attend in Zagreb and in Belgrade, the daughters and sons of Croatian and Serbian nationalists, who once drunk on each other's blood, are resuscitating the first condition of any anti-systemic opposition, called in good German Fundamentalopposition: disbelieve the classifying principles of the enemy. And they are doing it together. When rebels in the eighteenth century started disbelieving the inherent superiority of Norman blood or the ineffable blessedness of the bishops, they began to overcome the

differentiations imposed from above that caused them to be obedient, the bowing to spiritual and moral superiority that is always necessary to preserve the ascendancy of the few over the many in any caste or class society. The contemporary trick of the rulers is 'culture'.

The dominant system shamelessly identified with Western excellence—diligence, thrift, frugality, patience, discipline, hard work, self-improvement, elegance: all this comes in a slick aesthetic garb—looks down upon 'the East' and 'the South' as unruly, lazy, a slave to Bacchus and to desire, racist, xenophobic and so on. It is a variation on the great old theme of the inferior being creatures of the heart and of corporeality, as opposed to reason, the prerogative of the mighty throughout the ages. Women were supposed to be creatures of sentiment and irresistible sexuality, Jews and now Muslims were and are presented as driven by envy, resentment, passion and by the absence of a well-tempered 'sense of reality', which always means a conservative attachment to the *ancien régime*. The inferior—proletarian, female, coloured or Semitic—is always somehow equated with the body; demands for social justice are always motivated by need. The superior is equated either with the fiery soul—warriors, or Sombart's heroic entrepreneurs—or with the ice-cold spirit: priests, scholars, bankers, administrators. The poor, including poor regions and poor nations, by the sheer fact that they wish for more and for better, are presented as growing up in a culture of dependence—on hand-outs from the rich—and of theft: that is, attempts to expropriate, and to realize social justice by making their own what rightfully belongs to others. The weight of such cultural classifications is enormous: redistribution is regarded as charity and confiscation of property that can be effected only by a tyrannical state; hence all egalitarian movements imply an end to freedom.

What is striking is that all these 'cultural' classifications are increasingly biologized and moralized. The East European establishment wants to prove that we are deserving poor—see Viktor Orbán's 'work-based society', which will finally vanquish the accursed welfare state, a base and cunning communist stratagem if ever there was one—who might be permitted a little slack, as we are straining every nerve to be like everyone else and proud of it (in Orbán's case, very proud, all in the spirit of the Holy Crown of St Stephen). So we should stop being lazy bums who complain too much; low wages are the proper punishment for our moral imperfection. And if some 'cultures' uniformly fail to perform, there must be some genetic imperfection as well, must there not? This classically colonial view of 'cultural' differences is nothing new; in the European case it can dispense with military might, unlike in 1914, but it is otherwise the same. The countervailing force the Eastern peoples built—Bolshevism—failed, or was defeated, or both. You'll be told that the reconstruction of a new East European left will be born in a culture of resentment, caused by the lack of a deeply ingrained democratic culture such as one can admire in the unceasing grandeur of the Mother of Parliaments. Well, there is a lot to resent. But as capital has no nationality, nor can the anti-capitalist movement have such. Truly egalitarian tendencies—not to speak of truly communist currents—will not aim at differentiation and diversity, although their starting point is exactly this. Class, race and cultural differences are those they must want to obliterate. *Vive la différence?* No. *Vive la Commune!*

G. M. Tamás

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