

# Death of a comrade - Peter Gowan: 1946-2009

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With the death of Peter Gowan on 12 June 2009, the international left has lost one of its most astute political analysts, and *New Left Review* the most generous and steadfast of comrades. Peter was a socialist intellectual of the highest calibre, combining enormous energy and independence of mind with a truly collective spirit. A contributor to *NLR* from the 1970s, he joined the editorial committee in 1984; his interventions in the journal constitute a substantial body of analysis in their own right. His work was translated into many languages and he had readers on every continent; unlike some, he was incredibly patient in replying to their e-mails. He loved a good argument, although he was always extremely courteous to his critics. [1] For me the loss is also deeply personal. He was a close friend and comrade since we first met as activists in the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign in 1967. There is little that we did not discuss over the last four decades.

Peter was born in 1946, three years after his sister Philippa. They were war babies in the classic sense: their father, a Canadian officer of Scottish ancestry stationed in wartime London, was already married. Their mother, Jean MacDonald, came from a well-off Glaswegian family who were stunned when she broke her engagement to a local and opted for her mysterious Canadian. The two children were born in her father's house in Glasgow. When it was hurriedly sold after his death, she moved to Belfast and brought up the children as a single parent, with occasional 'unofficial' help from her brothers which paid for Peter's education. Philippa and Peter were never to meet their father, something that undoubtedly left a deep mark on him; he discussed it with me at various times over the years. It was only with the arrival of his own children that the torment over his missing parent lessened, though it never quite disappeared. He himself was a wonderful father to his four sons and spent enormous amounts of time with them and their friends, discussing each and every problem with the same energy that he applied to questions of politics and theory and, in more relaxed moments, to gardening.

Young Gowan was sent to Orwell Park prep school and later to Haileybury College, an institution that had initially been set up in 1806 by the East India Company to educate civil servants destined for the colonies. After 1858 its doors were opened to all, and the school developed a reputation for liberal scholarship. Clement Attlee had been a pupil and a pride in the reforms of his government permeated the school in the 1950s. Peter became a committed supporter of the Labour Party while at Haileybury. It was primarily his sister's influence that pushed him to the left: then a Christian socialist, she was active in CND (led by Canon Collins) and the Anti-Apartheid movement (led by Bishop Ambrose Reeves). At the University of Southampton, as he explains in the interview below, one of his more inspirational lecturers was Miriam Daly, an independentminded Irishwoman who radicalized him further. [2] She encouraged him to study the Russian Revolution and its legacy, which soon became an obsession. Peter was never satisfied until he had read everything he could possibly lay his hands on, and in this case the literature was enormous. He embarked on post-graduate work at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Birmingham, where the staff included the formidable scholar R.W. Davies. But revolution was in the air and he did not finish his PhD; something I never heard him regret.

From 1968 until 1976, Peter was deeply involved as a militant in the International Marxist Group (IMG). What had attracted a number of us to this tiny group was both its considered anti-Stalinism and, more importantly, its intransigent internationalism: it was the British section of the Fourth International, which had activists in every continent, including many who functioned in conditions of clandestinity under the dictatorships of Latin America and Southern Europe, above all Portugal, Greece and Spain. Revolutionary politics was a full-time engagement; if the routines could be tedious, there was much in this existence that was rewarding. Above all, the world political situation demanded intervention: the Vietnamese resistance to the United States, the Cuban Revolution and Che Guevara's odyssey, the eruption of the working class in France, Italy and Britain, with the huge miners' strike that brought down the Conservative government in 1974, the same year that the Portuguese revolution toppled the dictatorship.

Party loyalties never impeded Peter's independence of mind. In 1967 *NLR* inaugurated a debate on 'Trotsky's Marxism' with a powerful critique by Nicolas Krassó, one of the left leaders of the Hungarian uprising of 1956, and a member of the *NLR* editorial committee. The de-Stalinization process in the Soviet Union had semi-rehabilitated Bukharin and other Old Bolsheviks; Trotsky alone remained anathema, and this was the first serious attempt to discuss his legacy within a broader left. Krassó was a former pupil of Lukács, well versed in both the theory and the practice of the official Communist movement. Ernest Mandel despatched a defensive reply. Krassó challenged him once again; Mandel's second reply was more effective. [3] I remember well Peter's first response to the initial exchange. 'I agree with Krassó,' he told me. 'Ernest's response is unconvincing.' He forced me to re-read the Krassó text carefully and, while I could see he had a case, *partiinost* prevented me from admitting it

to anyone except Peter. One outcome was a growing friendship with the Hungarian. In an interview conducted with him shortly before Krassó's death, Peter asked how he would sum up the meaning of the Hungarian revolution. With characteristic wit and mordancy, Krassó replied:

*"I have often remembered the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in the Soviet Union in 1952. Stalin kept silent throughout the Congress till the very end when he made a short speech that covers about two and a half printed pages. He said there were two banners that the progressive bourgeoisie had thrown away and which the working class should pick up—the banners of democracy and national independence. Certainly nobody could doubt that in 1956 the Hungarian workers raised these banners high."* [4]

In February 1968, a group of us in London had decided to launch a new radical newspaper. The poet Christopher Logue was despatched to the Reading Room of the old British Library to research names. He returned with detailed notes on a 19<sup>th</sup>-century paper, *The Black Dwarf*, whose editor Thomas Wooler had been imprisoned for his scathing attacks on the state perpetrators of the Peterloo Massacre. We decided to revive it on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1968. A week later the barricades went up in Paris and one of our correspondents, Eric Hobsbawm, situated them in the continuum of French history. I offered Peter his first job as Distribution Manager of the new *Black Dwarf*. He moved to London immediately, found a squat, and took to his task with gusto, delivering copies of the paper to bookshops in a beat-up van. My fondest memory of him from that period is his returning to our Soho offices at 7 Carlisle Street (a floor below the *New Left Review*) one day and laughing with delight. That issue had carried an acerbic piece by Robin Blackburn defending Herbert Marcuse against Alasdair MacIntyre, who had written an ultra-critical political biography of the us-based German Marxist for Fontana Modern Masters. We found a photograph of Marcuse, his fist raised as he stood on a platform with Black Panther members. The piece was titled: 'MacIntyre, The Game is Up'. Peter had just delivered the issue to Collets, the radical bookstore on Charing Cross Road that took a hundred *Dwarfs* each fortnight. As he was about to leave he saw the great philosopher stride through the door. MacIntyre went straight to the pile, lifted a copy and began to flick through until he came to the offending headline. Peter described watching him as he pored over Blackburn's assault, turned puce, threw the paper back on the pile and walked out. We were thrilled. It was rare to witness the immediate impact of a text on its target.

The end of the revolutionary wave that had begun with the Tet offensive in Vietnam, early in 1968, came with the defeat of an ill-advised ultra-left insurrectionary attempt in Portugal in November 1975. The previous year a movement led by radical army officers, soldiers, workers and peasants had toppled the senile Salazar dictatorship, using the language of socialism and democracy. The attempt to radicalize the outcome had little mass support and was easily suppressed by the Socialist Party and its allies. The debacle in Lisbon ended all hopes for a revolutionary opening in Europe, and the internal culture of the left soon began to display all the classic symptoms of defeat and demoralization:

an unremitting fissiparousness. Peter mostly remained immune to such pettiness. He had started teaching—first at Barking College, then moving to the University of North London, which later metamorphosed into the London Metropolitan—but had remained deeply engaged in solidarity work with left dissidents in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, partly through contacts with the Ukrainian socialist, Bohdan Kravchenko. It was through this circle that he got to know Halya Kowalsky, whom he married in 1973.

## **Eastern Europe**

From the mid-70s Peter was increasingly convinced that the West European left should be intervening more effectively in the underground debates that were taking place in the East. This was the starting point for *Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*, a magazine launched in 1977 with the support of broad sections of the left, including social-democratic and euro-communist mps, and a talented editorial board including Patrick Camiller, Günter Minnerup and Gus Fagan. Halya was an indispensable part of the operation, both politically and technically: 'her integrity, sensitivity and generosity', Peter wrote in *The Global Gamble*, 'have been an inspiration as well as a great support.' Her no-nonsense approach was often brought to bear when Peter let his imagination run away with him. In the early days Halya used to lay out the whole magazine. I retain a warm memory of her walking into the IMG headquarters in Upper Street with her newborn son, Ivan, going straight down to the awful basement where the print-shop was located, parking her baby on the table and sitting down to typeset an entire issue of *Labour Focus*.

Over the next twenty years, the journal would publish texts from Jacek Kuron, Petr Uhl, Václav Havel, Rudolf Bahro, Roy and Zhores Medvedev, Tamara Deutscher and others, along with documents, debates and analysis from Charter 77, Soviet workers' struggles, East European feminists and greens and, in 1980, the whole run of Solidarnos'c' Strike Bulletins. While it included contributions by and about all trends of the opposition in Eastern Europe, *Labour Focus* was, editorially and ideologically, a consciously socialist journal—and a refutation of the notion that the Western left was complicit in the authoritarian model. It was largely the failure of those regimes to respect workers' social and political rights that led to their downfall, by blocking the possibility of any democratic renewal of socialism. Peter edited it under the pseudonym Oliver MacDonald, his mother's maiden name. He wrote a number of important texts in it during the 1980s—on Poland, Gorbachevism, Soviet secessionism—and even more after America's Cold War victory: on the eu and Eastern Europe, the role of a united Germany and, in 1999, an entire special issue on the nato war on Yugoslavia.

*Labour Focus* had tracked the hollowing out of the Soviet bloc regimes without losing hope that more democratic forms might arise there, on the basis of socialized economies. The transformation of Eastern Europe into satellite states of Washington and the disintegration of the Soviet

Union, pushed into socio-economic free fall by American shock therapy, represented a historic defeat for all those who had hoped that something better might arise from the ashes. Unsurprisingly, a few of the team around *Labour Focus* were unsettled. It was in this period that Peter's steadfastness won the day. We had many discussions on what the impact on friends and colleagues would be. He predicted that the trauma would go deep and many would fall by the wayside. This began to happen as early as 1990, when the United States geared up for the attack on Iraq, having first given Saddam Hussein the green light to go into Kuwait.

Some on the left chose to see the first Gulf War as the indication of a new and refreshing cosmopolitanism: un-backed global justice prevailing over a murderous regime, albeit one armed and equipped by the West for the past ten years. More clear-sightedly, Peter saw the war, which secured a huge new us military presence in the Gulf, as a drive to forward imperial interests, wrapped in a liberal humanitarian flag.

## **Balkan Wars**

Soon after came the break-up of Yugoslavia: first the secession of Slovenia and Croatia, urged on by Germany and Austria; then that of Bosnia, with the encouragement of the United States, leading to the horrors of a three-way civil war, with atrocities committed on all sides; and finally, the nato war on what remained of the old Yugoslav state. A much larger layer of new 'cosmopolitans' now rallied to the nato banner, arguing that this was a war against 'fascism', 'genocide' and 'tyranny'. [5] I have rarely known Peter—an incredibly generous-spirited human being, always ready to see the best in people, including a few who were walking disasters—as angry as he was during the assault on Yugoslavia. He was to write more on this single theme than any other conflict in the past or present: in *NLR*, *Socialist Register* and his 140-page essay 'The Twisted Road to Kosovo' in *Labour Focus*. While the Western media portrayed the events in Yugoslavia as exclusively the outcome of internal forces, 'inflamed nationalists' pushing for disintegration, Gowan pointed to the crucial role played by the Atlantic powers. In 1990, when the vast majority of Yugoslavs opposed any break-up of the country, us policy had insisted on the same 'shock therapy' austerity programme that was being meted out to the ex-Comecon countries. The imf package implemented by the Yugoslav prime minister Ante Markovic', with Jeffrey Sachs's assistance, had been 'a critical turning point in the tragedy', plunging the country into crisis and depriving the federal government of any substance. With the state exchequer reduced to penury, an unpaid soldiery can become a destabilizing factor, as Oliver Cromwell had understood.

Peter was sharply critical of the German initiatives that had exacerbated the crisis and led directly to the declaration of Croatian independence. [6] He saw the us drive—for the 'self-determination' of a 'Bosnian nation' that did not exist, politically or constitutionally, and which would inevitably pit Bosnian Serbs and Croats against Bosnian Muslims—as aimed at seizing the leadership of the Yugoslav crisis from Bonn. Rather than

protecting the population, Washington's overriding pre-occupation was to ensure that Western Europe remained subordinate to its direction—not at all evident in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, with NATO apparently redundant and a huge new German sphere of influence opening up in Central Europe, potentially stretching from the Mediterranean to the Baltic. He fiercely condemned a 'system of Western power-politics' which could 'casually and costlessly make a major contribution to plunging Yugoslavia into turmoil and wars, use these wars to further their geopolitical ends, and then to seek to make political capital out of war crimes tribunal judgements of perpetrators of atrocities, while themselves refusing all responsibility.' [7] A Western policy that put the human security of the Balkan people first would have taken an entirely different route: a development-oriented framework for the whole region. In recent years he would talk of the squalid un protectorates that littered the Balkans and compare them to what might have been. Instead, social destruction on a massive scale had been the price of a historic political victory for American leadership, with European public opinion won over to the use of NATO as a 'humanitarian' force in us wars of choice and to the legitimacy of bombarding non-aggressor states.

### **'Globalization'**

From 1990, Peter's work focused increasingly on analysing the strategic goals of the American and European elites as they collaborated to restructure the post-Cold War world. His starting point, as always, was that, since policy-making in state executives and multilateral institutions is largely closed to public scrutiny, to understand how state power is being wielded, and to what ends, requires delving into the detail of backstage negotiations and 'mapping back' onto the *cui bono* of policy outcomes. He insisted, too, on the highly political nature of financial and economic institutions, and the statecraft they entailed. His 1999 book *The Global Gamble* took issue with notions that 'globalization' was the outcome of organic economic processes, and set out a compelling case for viewing the transformation of the world economy in the 1990s as crucially driven by the highly political moves of operatives of the 'Dollar-Wall Street Regime' in Washington and New York. Talk of a 'global financial market' obscured the fact that, since the 1980s, the vast bulk of international financial activity has been centred in Wall Street or its 'satellite', the City of London. "Those who believe the adjective "American" is redundant", he argued, should ask themselves what difference it would make if the international financial system were dominated by markets and operators in China, let alone Iran.

*The Global Gamble* traced the origins of the Dollar-Wall Street Regime to the restructuring of the international monetary system by the Nixon administration in the 1970s, motivated by the onset of the 'long downturn' in the productive sector and a privileging of finance-capital interests. The post-Bretton Woods switch from gold to dollar-based floating exchange rates provided an immensely powerful mechanism through which Washington and the us-led international financial institutions could

effect changes in the global economic environment. The crises created by the resulting volatility in currency swings and capital flows were used in turn by the imf to restructure other national economies along neoliberal lines. For Gowan, 'neoliberalism' was not simply a free-market ideology but a social engineering project. Externally, it involved opening a state's political economy to products and financial flows from the core countries, under the name of globalization. Internally, it meant the remaking of the state's domestic social relations 'in favour of creditor and rentier interests, with the subordination of productive sectors to financial sectors, and a drive to shift wealth, power and security away from the bulk of the working population'. The trend of privileging 'the interests of rentiers and speculators over the functional requirements of productive investment' led to a hypertrophied expansion of derivatives trading. Presciently, he judged the 'gamble of globalization' as 'destabilizing—and probably economically unviable', bringing 'chronic financial instability' and 'locking the economy's fate into the performance of securities markets'. Yet economic weakness was combined with 'extraordinary political success': the United States had faced no significant threat or challenger. [8]

In contrast to the passive or subjectless formulations—'war broke out'—of mainstream analyses, Gowan's writing always emphasized the role of human agents: strategic policy elites, high state functionaries, military planners, actively pursuing particular class or national interests. If his approach runs the risk of overstating intentionality and understating structure, as was sometimes suggested in nlr internal discussions, in this depoliticized age the over-correction is an invaluable one. His work was always addressed to an audience of potential activists, movers and shakers in a project of world reform. He wrote to reveal—to denaturalize—the workings of contemporary capitalist power, to help a democratic public 'exercise its responsibility to influence the behaviour of states in which we are living'. He was an organic intellectual of the left, in the classical Gramscian sense—though alas, functioning in a locale where there was no mass socialist party.

Tall and broad-chested, with a full-bodied laugh, Peter was a strong man who could have had another twenty years if he had not been struck down at the age of 63 by mesothelioma, an asbestos-related cancer impossible to detect before the final implosion (probably contracted in the ramshackle postwar building that housed Barking Tech). On holiday in Canada in the summer of 2008, the month before he was diagnosed, he was running six miles a day. He faced up to his death with extraordinary calm, good cheer and courage. His last essay, 'Crisis in the Heartland' in *NLR* 55, written after his first course of chemo, is a bravado analysis of the 2008 meltdown, ending with a call for a public-utility credit system. He retained his full intellectual powers to the end, and in the final weeks recorded a long set of interviews with Michael Newman and Marko Bojcun, his colleagues and friends at the London Metropolitan University, from which we are proud to publish extracts below. A Leninist to the last, he planned his funeral in meticulous detail with his family, and went out to Country Joe's Vietnam Song—'Gimme an F!'

'I'm so glad I'm a materialist,' he told me, as he lay dying. No nonsense to believe in. We all have to go sometime, and the only difference was that he knew when. It was too soon—he had books to write and promises to keep; but death held no fears. In the last phone conversation I had with him we talked about Afghanistan, comparing the current war to its equally appalling predecessors. I read him a verse from a Kipling poem, reflecting the mood in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when Winston Churchill had been a young officer in the region:

*When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,  
And the women come out to cut up what remains,  
Just roll to your rifle, and blow out your brains.  
And go to your God like a soldier.*

Peter roared with delight. It is a sound I will treasure.

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## P.S.

\* From the New Left Review n° 59, September-October 2009.

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## Footnotes

[1] See his debate with the staunch Blairite *FT* columnist John Lloyd in *NLR* 1/216, March-April 1996.

[2] Daly, whose own father had fought with Michael Collins in the civil war, later returned to Ireland and joined a republican socialist group. She was shot dead by Loyalists in 1980, with the collusion of British Intelligence, according to some. Gowan wrote a moving obituary of her in *Socialist Challenge*.

[3] See Nicolas Krassó, 'Trotsky's Marxism', *NLR* 1/44, July-Aug 1967; Mandel's reply in *NLR* 1/47, Jan-Feb 1968; Krassó's response in *NLR* 1/48, Mar-Apr 1968; and Mandel's rejoinder in *NLR* 1/56, July-Aug 1969.

[4] 'Hungary 1956: A Participant's Account', in Ali, ed., *The Stalinist Legacy: Its Impact on 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Politics*, Harmondsworth 1984.

[5] There were a few tragi-comic interludes, as one-time defenders of the uniqueness of the Yugoslav state tired of using Lenin's texts on national self-determination to defend their own slide and sought comfort at soirées attended by Lady Thatcher—a staunch supporter of bombing Serbia—before moving into the embrace of the us security establishment. Quite a few were to support the war on Iraq in 2003.

[6] His view was confirmed by the SPD leader, Oskar Lafontaine at a May Day 1999 speech in Saarbrücken, a few weeks after he resigned as Finance Minister: 'I often hear it said that Germany shouldn't go its own way, but I must remind you that at the very beginning of all this, Germany did indeed go its own way in pushing through the official recognition of the independence of Yugoslavia's constituent republics, against the resistance of Paris, London and Washington . . . Freedom and self-determination are not compatible with national exclusion and ethnic exclusion.'

Freedom and self-determination are only imaginable when they are linked to solidarity and human fellowship. That's why it was wrong to give recognition to this small-state nonsense (Kleinstaaterei) based on ethnic differences. It was also a mistake when NATO bombardment made it possible for Croatia to drive the Serbs from Krajina': Ali, ed., *Masters of the Universe: NATO's Balkan Crusade*, London 2000.

[7] 'The NATO Powers and the Balkan Tragedy', *NLR* 1/234, March–April 1999.

[8] *The Global Gamble: Washington's Faustian Bid for World Dominance*, London and New York 1999, pp. vii–xi.