

**The Left and Marxism in Eastern Europe:  
An Interview with Gáspár Miklós Tamás**

Imre Szeman

**Interviewer's Note**

Gáspár Miklós Tamás (b. 1948) has long been one of the most important political voices in Europe. Trained as a philosopher and author of numerous scholarly books and articles, his is a life that has been intimately bound up with the political history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A prominent dissident in the 1980s and a parliamentarian in the first years of the Hungarian government following the end of Communism, Tamás has moved increasingly to the Left over the past two decades. Throughout his life, he has retained an unrelenting commitment to social and political justice, which he pursues both through his theoretical and political writings (he is a regular contributor to the *TLS* and to the most important Hungarian dailies) and his direct involvement in political action — a way of living one's beliefs that should stand as model for the Left today.

Though his work has been translated into numerous languages (including English), his ideas and positions still deserve to be better known in the English-speaking world than they are at present. An interlocutor in recent debates with Slavoj Žižek, and a figure once described as Hungary's Václav Havel, it is likely Tamás's commitment to the politics of a part of the world sometimes off the radar that has made him less of a global public intellectual than one might expect. This interview offers an introduction to and overview of the life of a remarkable thinker and activist; it serves, too, to highlight the ways in which the political and social dramas of a small country like Hungary can offer meaningful and important insights into broader forces shaping the entire globe.

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This interview was conducted in February 2010. All explanatory notes are my own.

### The Left and Marxism in Eastern Europe: An Interview with Gáspár Miklós Tamás

#### Can you tell us about your family background and education?

I spent roughly the first half of my life (from 1948 to 1978) in Transylvania, Romania, in the city of Cluj/Kolozsvár. This may be something incomprehensible for your readers; to wit, a life at the back of beyond which was, at the same time, a life intertwined with the grand drama (and the farce) of the twentieth century. In a way, I was fortunate to be the child of a communist couple — my father was a writer and journalist, my mother a hospital nurse, both from the Hungarian minority there (which in my town was a majority at that time), my mother also Jewish — who both spent long years in prison before 1945. They came from the old underground movement, with habits and convictions pretty atypical for their time and place. My father did housework and looked after me, something absolutely unimaginable for the average man of his generation. My mother was seven years older, and there was between them a camaraderie only known to old-style socialists. Conversation was always “on a high level,” something that was not limited to intellectuals. Some of our acquaintances, committed workers of the old school, would not fritter away their time in discussing the weather or football; they would not stoop to anything inferior to world affairs, art, or space travel. I was raised on Goethe, Walter Scott, Victor Hugo, Tolstoy, Maupassant — and Brahms, Schumann, Mahler. Those were their tastes. When I was ill, my father read to me the long nineteenth-century epics of Vörösmarty and Arany.<sup>1</sup> And wonderful Soviet children’s books. In the midst of dictatorship and upheaval and scarcity, we had an almost Victorian childhood. No “youth culture,” no rock music, no travel — just a lot of books and music lessons and walks in the park.

My parents and most of their friends — tied together by their shared memories of oppression and persecution before the war — had been considerably disappointed in *their* regime by the time I came to think of politics beyond romantic picture books about the October Revolution. As internationalist Bolsheviks and ethnic Hungarians, they were shocked by the unexpected nationalism of the regime: by its mendacity, its economic failure, rule of the secret police, and idiotic censorship, combined with the nauseating sycophancy of the “new culture.” Some of them went to prison again. What is difficult to explain today is that in spite of this they felt part of a huge historical canvas — a history not necessarily with a happy ending —

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and did not believe that they had to renounce the only cause worth living for: the liberation of humankind.

Even if this latest attempt was obviously a total front, they would read their Brecht and Sartre, follow developments in Guatemala and Indonesia, and try to understand what was going on in the Soviet Union — by the 1960s considered an enemy by the Romanian party leadership seeking independence with a chauvinist and anti-minorities coloring — from books now forgotten, such as Konstantin Paustovsky’s fascinating memoirs.<sup>2</sup>

I may have been a provincial — and I was — but life never felt provincial.

I looked upon my parents with some condescension. Their revolutionary world was imaginary. Their Party inaugurated a system that was repressive, dumb, and boring, past any salvaging; it was scary, but it still could not be taken seriously. Its official art and philosophy were ridiculous with its patriotic phrase-mongering. It was all about stupid old power. But what was *not* my parents’ and, in general, the old commie intellectuals’ microcosm — with its universalism and its genuine concern with the downtrodden, their puritanism and altruism, and their passion for learning — was just a second-rate petty bourgeois boys’ life of sports, girls, syrupy Italian pop songs (remember Domenico Modugno and Adriano Celentano?) and pointless small talk, laughing at the expense of our classmates who happened to be fat or who had a slight speech impediment.

School was nothing. Education was at home, at the theater, at the concert hall, at the violin and piano lessons, and then at the public library. I could talk properly only to old — well, much younger than I am now but they seemed to be, and behaved as, old — men and women, who gave me *Wages, Price and Profit* or Goethe’s Italian travels and Dickens and Gottfried Keller and Stendhal for my birthday. I listened to radio plays on the wireless. It was the great season for *Hörspiele* [radio plays], and we could receive by then Radio Budapest, which was not only the center of our national culture but also, somehow, “the West.”

Then I went to university, studied classics and philosophy, married very early, got into political trouble before graduating, became assistant editor at a Hungarian-language literary weekly, published philosophical and literary essays, was subjected to protracted harassment by the secret police, was fired and blacklisted from publishing — but my Descartes book [*Descartes a módszerről*, 1977] came out somehow all the same — and finally was forced out of Romania. I did not want to go to the West, although it would have been easier than Hungary, where my bad reputation preceded me. I was a Hungarian writer and they still had to throw me out of Eastern Europe. “They” still want to, but I don’t think they will finally succeed. But “they”

now are coming closer to that than the combined regimes of Ceaușescu and Kádár ever did. In a few years, I had become an embittered enemy of a system which did not appear to have one single redeeming feature.

It was wonderful to be rid of that hellhole, Transylvania. But it is of course my *Heimat*, and in spite of having been persecuted as an ethnic Hungarian, I feel complete solidarity with Romania, a country tortured and humiliated. Ethnic nationalism — at least regarding Hungarians — has since abated, and I have new fraternal relationships with Romanians. I feel at home there again. I even modestly participate in developments there, and this is a source of great happiness.

### What was your experience of intellectual and political life under the regime of János Kádár (leader of Hungary from 1956 to 1988)?

My experiences were bound to be atypical. First, I was a Hungarian émigré (and immigrant, a politically-exiled person) in Hungary, surely something anomalous. At the moment I arrived in Budapest, I joined the “democratic opposition,” the loose dissident network. I already knew its leading lights from previous visits and was always considered their Transylvanian ally. I had to be careful at the beginning until I received my papers, my citizenship, my work permit, and so on, so at first I published in samizdat only pseudonymously, but I came out into the open after the Jaruzelski coup in Poland (December 13, 1981) and was accordingly fired from the philosophy department of Budapest University [*Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem*].

But of course the specific preoccupations of the system’s adversaries should not be generalized. The mainstream culture of these years was a blend of extreme, indeed quite outlandish skepticism, and an efflorescence of creative energy. It was also very conservative politically. All elements of a traditional leftist cast of mind had vanished. The reaction to the ongoing crisis of the regime was not directed against its decadence but against its distant revolutionary origins. A massive hostility against the features of a socialist cultural “hegemony” — commitment, altruism, solidarity with the oppressed, the primacy of the Idea — had been analyzed as parts of the doctrinaire, “totalitarian” mindset, fanaticism, and dogmatism, so much so that the most admired critic of the time told me he hated *Fidelio* as it was “a bloody Bolshevik opera.” The best-loved thinkers of this era were Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Max Weber. When I was still teaching, I taught German romantic philosophy from [Johann Georg] Hamann to Schelling, including Franz von Baader and Novalis. The “communist” party had (?) abandoned “ideology” in favor of “professionalism,” pragmatism, and technocratic verbiage, as it did not need and did not want mobilization.

It must be understood — as I have shown in my essay, “Marx on 1989” (forthcoming in *Angelaki*) — that the Party (the one party with a capital P) in all Soviet-style societies was organized (and this was its hidden, inner principle) not territorially, but in the workplace, thus dissolving the classic social democratic dichotomy between trade unions and the political party, which is, of course, the secret of “reformism”: the inability of social democracy to address power. The Party was present at the point of production (just as its main revolutionary rival, the workers’ councils), unlike bourgeois electoral parties based in constituencies (ridings, electoral districts) that comprise people’s homes — that is, parties which appeal to their supporters and voters as consumers, home-dwellers, and opinion-holders, i.e., private citizens. Although the Party had long given up on socialism, its “deep structure” remained revolutionary since it was still intimately linked to the working class and sustained an egalitarian drive. The party cells in factories were foci of power, social services, education, and militant mobilization: they fought for influence with the technical management. Party secretaries of the large enterprises were the backbone of the regime; higher education, hiring, and promotion quotas favored persons of working-class origin. Patronage exercised by workplace organizations assured for a while a countervailing force, an ever-recurrent trend of strong upward mobility for sectors of the industrial proletariat, against the increasing inequalities of a state capitalist system (a class society, after all) with its inherent hierarchies and undeniable exploitation, oppression, and cultural rigidity. This countervailing force necessitated permanent mobilization, which, in the absence of genuine socialist goals, had to be moral. Well, it was precisely this which had been dispensed with in the 1970s. With the silencing and expulsion of the Lukács School, who engaged in the creation of an East European New Left in 1973 — and the nearly concomitant decomposition of the *Praxis* group in Yugoslavia — the last remnants of Marxist research, critique, and debate had been annihilated.<sup>3</sup>

Instead of mobilization, the Party sought neutralization, and it had begun to define “success” exactly like its Western counterpart, the welfare state: the rise of real wages, economic growth, and the expansion of consumption and consumer choice, leisure, entertainment, and the rest. In this, it offered competition (instead of an alternative) to the West, and lost. It was the Party itself that identified terror campaigns with revolutionary fervor. Since it had identified Stalinism with revolution, de-Stalinization meant inner peace, lack of any ideology and, naturally, market reforms.

But there were quite a number of Hungarian peculiarities. First, the memory of 1956 (centered on the idea of national independence and a competitive electoral democracy) and the quite exceptional magnitude of the

Shoah on Hungarian soil had made the Hungarian Party leadership, like its East German counterpart, extremely cautious in the replacement of Marxism-Leninism with nationalism. The savage nationalism known in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Albania, Russia, China, and Vietnam in the period — which gave each its oppressive edge — was largely absent in Hungary, so there was no official culture with its scary and tedious rituals, which meant fewer taboos, less censorship, more openness, and more fun. Together with higher living standards, the absence of ideological coercion, and a certain undemanding, sly hedonism, Hungary became the envy of the Eastern Bloc. People could travel (I couldn't because I was a dissident, but in the neighboring countries only dissidents traveled — with a one-way ticket to Western exile) and the press was informative and lively (by that time pretty pro-capitalist, extolling discretely the attractions of the West; the media hero was certainly not Brezhnev or Andropov, but first Willy Brandt, and then Mrs. Thatcher).

It was the Party's pride that we had excellent literature, a varied and lively arts scene, and high-quality social sciences. Aestheticism filled the gaping hole where revolutionary dogma lay buried. It was all very nice, but desperately empty. The expression "reforms" had already in 1970s started to mean what it does today: market reforms, anti-egalitarian measures, and a reduction of state interference, redistribution, and planning. That, in contrast to Stalinism (terror and the pains of any accumulation, period), appeared progressive, modern, and liberating. Socialism meant the grey, terrifying, repressive *past*, robbing it from its traditional advantage: the representation of Newness. A true end to hierarchy — that is, the end to all organized society, to all civilization as we knew it — was the great temptation, the great diabolical hope of communism, a future without coerced labor. If communism is not future in some sense, then it is nothing. And this is precisely what it had become in the 1970s and 1980s: nothing.

The Party had merrily acquiesced in this. Its leaders thought they had fulfilled their "progressive" obligations if most people were relatively and comparatively well-fed and if they were on the whole satisfied with television programming. But it was not only they who were annoyed by dissident criticism of the inequalities and human rights violations of their system. Dissidents reproached them for censorship, for the lack of a critical *Öffentlichkeit* [public sphere], for stultifying conformism, and for the lack of genuine and free political self-organization. The Party could recognize the leftist bent of dissident criticism and hated in it the "contestation," the inherent questioning of the legitimacy of their rule on grounds uncomfortably familiar. We dissidents annoyed the hell out of the quite apolitically conservative beneficiaries of our modest consumerism and pragmatism, who

identified social criticism as "leftist," hence "communist," hence virtually and potentially "Stalinist" or "totalitarian." Like conservatives always and everywhere, they hated philosophy or theory of any sort. Good conservatives always prefer *doxa* to *episteme*, which is why all good philosophy is subversive. Dissidents were vaguely on the left ... but they had no power! But what could be the sense of being on the left in these circumstances? The professed aims of the Left could not be taken seriously by adult people who saw "socialism" as an effective trick in getting a lot of power and effectively legitimizing the sacrifices needed for modernization and rapid development.

The lack of cynicism in dissidents, philosophers, sociologists, avant-garde artists, activists, troublemakers, hell-raisers, and whistle-blowers — the deadly earnestness my present readers confront in any Marxist or anarchist meeting in a basement near you — has made us extremely unpopular in middle-class and intellectual milieu desirous of something lighter, more ironical, more melancholic, and more pleasant. Light-hearted sexual license, perfectly compatible with patriarchy and nihilism, is not identical with the serious and high ideal of "free love" between equals, with its necessarily complex rules of engagement; behavior preempting a future emancipation in a still-repressive society can be exploitative. All radicals know how sexual and other emotional predators can exploit the inherent egalitarianism and trusting openness of the milieu. In our case, it was not only emotional parasites of many genders, but also secret agents, *délateurs et mouchards* ("denouncers" and "spies" is too weak: polite English, unlike working-class slang, does not have an authentic police-state vocabulary, you lucky stiffs).

The Party's policy of demobilization was quite successful. As long as the living standards were improving, the populace was quiescent. However, the center of politics shifted from the Party organizations to the network of reformist technocrats in the Finance Ministry, the National Planning Authority, the National Bank, the appointed reform *quangos* [quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations], and the various social-science projects under the aegis of the Academy of Sciences. Through the enforcement of loud manifestations of political loyalty and verbal revolutionary fervor the mainstream was characterized by apolitical, technocratic talk. The regime was more and more dependent on Western loans, and therefore had to make concessions to Western political sensibilities and tastes: it had to go soft on repression, especially on the routine persecution of intellectuals. Not only dissidents, but old-fashioned Marxist-Leninists were reprimanded, downgraded, pensioned off, or fired. The regime wanted to get rid of all manner of politics. After the first wave of pay cuts, the working class started fermenting, so the cautious leadership —

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unlike in other “real socialist” countries — slowed austerity policies through the accumulation of new debt and the brutal reduction of new investments. The Party feared the proletariat and did not want committed socialist intellectuals who might join in eventual protests.

Thus, it had gradually lost everything from its “workerist” legacy and plebeian identity. Little wonder, then, that nobody had lifted a little finger in the defense of “real socialism.” In its effort to satisfy and pacify everybody and reach consensus through enforced and generalized conformism, the successor regime to the October Revolution ceased to represent anybody except the narrow interests and the self-preservation instinct of its bureaucratic-technocratic elites. Its main weapon, the security apparatus, failed to organize — or even to contemplate — resistance to the impending liberal turn; like the leadership itself, it focused only its leading members’ survival and on accommodation with the new dispensation. This is not to say that the Party and the security apparatuses had forgotten or completely relinquished their authoritarian habits and routines, and did not try to control the transition; but on the whole, they did not succeed.

A great deal has been made of the presence of former Party figures at all echelons of the new institutions. Their presence is a fact. But it would be asinine to think that a wholly different system, a wholly different system of governance, has nothing new because some commanding posts are still manned by formerly powerful persons. Anyway, the great winner — in terms of profit — is not the “nomenklatura bourgeoisie,” although most of them are quite wealthy either as highly placed civil servants, or as business people, or as mafiosi, but the transnational corporations and the power networks that can be loosely called “Western.” These corporations were not interested in the re-launch of obsolete rust-belt industries; they have bought state-owned firms for a song, closed them down, and inundated domestic consumer markets with junk from their old suppliers. Where would people fired from their old workplaces find the money to make these consumer markets lucrative? This is not a question contemporary capitalists ask themselves.

The worldwide disintegration of labor had taken the form of political transition in Eastern Europe. It was the irrefutable end of the proletariat as a political subject, even mythologically, and it was the end of its — surely fraudulent and vacuous — representation. Its end was soon followed by that of its historical rival: social democracy in the Western liberal states. The rise of China has shown that this representation can be continued, and that the name of this continuation is capitalism.

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**Can you remind us about the events of 1988-89 as they unfolded? Westerners will have some idea about the role played in the collapse of Communism by (for example) the lifting of travel restrictions by the Hungarian government in January 1988. They are far less likely to have a sense of the significance of the activities of opposition movements whose activities precipitated the resignation of Kádár in May 1988, the reburial of Imre Nagy in Heroes’ Square, and so on. As you’ve pointed out in your own writing, the West now takes credit for a political change that couldn’t possibly have come about without significant internal opposition. What imperatives drove this opposition? And what expectations did it have for the future of Hungary?**

The “events” as you are calling them by an appositely neutral term, were, however illusory, momentous and quite wonderful. Illusory, as they were grounded on totally unanalyzed and unreflective notions such as “democracy,” by which most people understood political pluralism, basic rights and liberties, and an end to Soviet occupation. They have also involved what we could a little grandiloquently call “the politics of truth,” which is more than the suppression of censorship: it was a call for a merciless exposition of the hidden history of crimes committed by the dictatorship. The effective result of this varies from country to country. Hungary is perhaps the worst culprit. Here not even the secret service files had been made accessible to the public and to research. Parliament has been tergiversating for twenty years now, and the public is apathetic, believing — perhaps rightly — that after two decades of special services treatment the documents will be partial, truncated, maybe even forged.

As to our role in the changes: it was of course not the merit of dissidents that things had changed, but it was certainly our merit that we persisted and were there when the events started happening owing to various circumstances.

The chief honor pertains, of course, to the Polish workers. Even they, after uncovering the astonishing fact that unlike 1953, 1956, 1968, the Soviet Union was not any longer willing to intervene on behalf of its satellite regimes and that the Party did not resist, were surprised that the system (in this case, the simplified French term, *le pouvoir*, makes perfect sense) had to save itself through a recourse to the army, something fundamentally contrary to the essence of a Leninist system. However, even the Polish workers’ movement was quite exhausted by 1989; the Round table talks were felt by many as sign of a defeat.<sup>4</sup> The program of *Solidarność* had changed 180 degrees. An orthodox blend of workers’ councils, self-management (the slogan was a Self-Managing Workers’ Republic), and a robust view of

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equality were turned into a characteristic neoconservative creed. David Ost has shown how belief in Western-style modernity motivated Polish workers' resistance leaders not only to accept, but to promote policies detrimental to themselves, destroying thereby their own movement.<sup>5</sup> In a few years, Polish workers would vote for former "communist" apparatchiki, who later were to be wiped out of Parliament not so much for their neoconservative policies, but for their mind-boggling corruption.

In East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and a few other places, there was genuine elation, caused partly by the incredible ease with which the much-feared dictatorial powers crumbled. I, for one, was happy. I was not a real leader of the movement, but I certainly was its main orator. From 1988 to 1991, I must have given about two hundred speeches. One did not sleep, and one didn't, ever, shut up. It was a rush of liberty and — as always when people are given to understand that they matter — there was an outbreak of collective imagination, intelligence, and inspiration. It was as though we were all speaking in tongues: I remember staying up late in a God-forsaken, poor, and cold Hungarian village discussing Tocqueville, Lord Acton, John Stuart Mill, comparing the U.S. Supreme Court to the German Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe. The very same people are now probably watching tabloid television and talking about soccer. It is a pity — a thousand pities. One could see what people — given motivation and hope — are capable of. This is perhaps the most lasting legacy of 1989: the experience of real masses of people involved in political thinking, from close reasoning to flamboyant passion and, surprisingly, fueled by an unquenchable thirst for facts. Who are we, and what is the point of our existence? This is what nations are thinking about during revolutions. Apart, that is, from falling in and out of love with an astonishing speed. I was faithful to somebody at the time, but I was painfully aware of what was going on around me. Joy.

It is quite terrible to contemplate that all this is lost; even the memory of it is barely shimmering.

The reburial of Imre Nagy is remembered, of course; it is TV footage often repeated. But Imre Nagy and his comrades are not liked at all: they had been Muscovite commies, after all, martyrs or not. At the same time, the traitor and hangman, János Kádár, is considered to have been the greatest Hungarian statesman of the modern age, by people on the Right as well as the Left. In a way, they're right. Kádár was a conservative and nothing else, with a lot of blood on his safe pair of hands; his counter-revolutionary political character is a perfect match for contemporary attitudes. Philistine, safe, authoritarian, caring only about living standards and public order, he is our ideal now. By the time the Committee for Historical Justice had

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organized Nagy's reburial, horse-trading was taking the place of genuine popular action. I vastly preferred the same day a year earlier, in 1988, when we were beaten up and arrested by police for remembering on 16 June the thirtieth anniversary of Nagy's and his comrades' execution.

### Can you tell us about *Beszélő* and the *Social Contract* program?

I was not an editor of *Beszélő*, only a frequent writer for it, nor an author of the *Social Contract* program; moreover, I have criticized the latter in another samizdat publication. It seemed to me insufficiently radical at the time and, especially, it gave very little room to people's spontaneous activity. It was also embarrassingly close at times to the discourse of the Party reformers. All this is insignificant now. The differences between the dominant current within dissidence, "radical reformism," and the others, pale now in significance.

Obviously, dissidence as such was on the whole to the left of its successor organization, the Free Democratic Alliance, that has since lurched towards neoconservative economic policies — urged by many people, including myself then — while remaining radically liberal in trying to preserve its formerly quite radical human rights and civil liberties agenda. But this, as it turned out, did not include trade union rights.

### Could you give us an overview of your involvement in Alliance of Free Democrats (*Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége* — or SZDSZ)? What were the political commitments of the party? How did these change in the decade following 1989? What caused you to leave the party in 2001?

My own role was that of an orator, public speaker, and an effective writer for the cause rather than proper leadership work as it was perceived then. Looking back, it appears that my revolutionary temperament was more important than any doctrinaire position I may have embraced at the time. Whatever I might have wanted to do, one was confined to the life-and-death struggle against extreme nationalism and growing racism. The right-wing government of the period had supplied (illegally and secretly) the nascent Croatian separatist armed forces with Kalashnikovs. I spoke against that in Parliament, and I was declared, of course, to be a traitor to the nation. The definition of a good patriot, then, ought to have been to be an anti-Serb chauvinist.

In 1994, I did not stand for Parliament again, resigned my responsibilities in the party as well, went to teach and to do research to the U.S. and Western Europe again (Chicago, *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin*,

Dickinson College, Georgetown, Yale, New School), and started to reconsider my positions. It was not only the abysmal economic and social failure of the East European “regime change” that made me change my mind after having changed the regime, but philosophical difficulties I always had with liberalism. What Habermas calls, following Böckenförde, a problem of the pre-political foundations of a liberal state, gave me a lot of headache. The problem can be solved in the manner of Leo Strauss — a thinker I still admire enormously — in the traditional (albeit radically modernized) theological way only, thereby restricting or annihilating the Enlightenment aspects I was not politically willing to do. You can see that any honest conservative re-foundation of “democratic” society, as in the case of Simone Weil’s London writings (in fact, her testament) will have to ban pluralism and the autonomy of the subject; it would lead to the self-annihilation of the Western liberal state (Simone Weil proposed that after the war, the multi-party system should not be restored and a truth censorship imposed on the media) in spite of both thinkers’ deep commitment against fascism and national socialism. There was no way out towards the Right. In my life, too, the moment had arrived to turn to Marx.

And let it be said quite clearly: I am blaming myself and my friends for having helped to introduce an inhuman, unjust, unfair, inefficient, anti-egalitarian, fraudulent, and hypocritical system that is in no way at all superior to its predecessor, which was awful enough. We’ve been criminally blind and thought, immaturely and selfishly, like many generations of victors before us, that our political success and fame meant a better deal for all. Ridiculous.

**What has happened to the SZDSZ in recent years? At present it is a very weak third party after the MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party, *Magyar Szocialista Párt*) and the Fidesz-KDNP Coalition (Alliance of Young Democrats / *Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége* — Christian Democratic People’s Party / *Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt*), with only eighteen seats (out of a total of 386) in Parliament. Is it a spent force politically?**

It is. It did not make it to the European Parliament in June 2009 and it has practically ceased to exist. It’s an ugly end — corruption scandals and the like. Liberal anti-communism is meaningless. The majority of a “natural” liberal basis (young professionals, civil servants, intellectuals, etc.) is now clustering around the extreme right.

**Can you give me some sense of the current state of Hungarian politics? To an outsider, it is an incredibly confusing political landscape: the**

**MSZP (the former Communists, one has to remember) have pushed a ferociously neoliberal agenda, which in turn has led the right-wing opposition to take up defense of some social programs that the government has attacked, less out of ideological conviction than political opportunism. The typical valences by which we make sense of political systems seem to be deranged — unless, of course, one places virtually all of the current parties in the government on the right-hand side of the spectrum.**

**But I sense that things are even worse than the total absence of a Left might suggest. The dominant attitude of the public in Hungary today seems to be that the entire political system is illegitimate and irredeemably so. Former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány’s (2004-2009) reign was characterized by a series of shocking scandals, including the release in September 2006 of an audio recording from a closed-door meeting in which he is heard admitting that “we have obviously been lying for the last one and a half to two years”; his resignation on March 28, 2009 in response to the collapse of the Hungarian economy — a flight from political responsibility under the guise of taking the blame for the situation — has hurt more than helped. Is there any faith left at all in politics in Hungary?**

No, no such faith is available, but there was not much of it to begin with. The public is bitter, disappointed, and angry. There is fundamental doubt concerning institutions. The Web — this fertile ground for urban legends, superstition, hate propaganda, and sheer lunacy — has almost completely supplanted traditional media, which were in decline anyway, and a both cynical and hysterical unreason reigns supreme. This is not unique to Hungary, as you know.

**What forces have shaped and defined social, cultural, and political life in Hungary since 1989? You wrote in *Magyar Hírlap* in 2006 that “Hungary’s new civic society despises civic democracy.” What did you mean by that?**

Well, this is an instructive case of the semantic, symbolic, and political differences between the Anglophone world and the rest. You can also translate this sentence as “Hungary’s new bourgeois society [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*] despises bourgeois democracy [*bürgerliche Demokratie*].” And this, again, is not exclusively Hungarian: it is valid to the entire ex-Soviet world from Berlin to Vladivostok. First, East Europeans have no respect and no understanding for a bourgeois, liberal, Enlightenment past that was never

entirely theirs. Bourgeois modernity was foreign. It came mostly from the Judeo-German, closed towns. It was defended by imperial and royal absolutism, not by popular movements. Then, modernity was imposed from above by communists kept in power by the new imperial masters, the Soviet Union. And last, it was 1989, which, instead of a new kind of “good society,” proposed the “inevitable”: cuts, cuts, and more cuts. This was the radiant future we promised.

Second, we have compromised the idea of freedom for a lifetime by calling an end to egalitarian state redistribution to be tantamount to liberty. It seemed that oligarchic rule, fake electoralism, a yellow press, a precipitous decline in culture and education, a revival of authoritarianism and racism/ethnicism, misogyny, and homophobia were lesser evils — like the Stalinists used to say, “transitory phenomena” to be cured by “market spontaneity” and the creativity of capital. The myth of “civil society” can be very pernicious as it presupposes a society based on voluntary acts of contractual equity, forgetting that the main example of this is the labor contract. The hidden hypothesis here is that labor is contractual like any other act of exchange; hence exploitation is an expression of freedom.

Who can badmouth East Europeans, new to market capitalism of the last variety, if they do not believe in all this nonsense? Why should they?

**What forms of alternative politics or social movements exist in Hungary at the present time? In 2007, a colleague and I conducted a series of interviews with university students in Budapest that probed in part their view of political possibilities in the present and in the future. All expressed extreme cynicism about politics; all seemed resigned to life under neoliberalism, especially in a small state like Hungary, which (they felt) had little economic and political autonomy; and none had any sense of the activities or even existence of alternative political movements. Are these students blind to new political developments or is there currently a political vacuum on the left?**

This is indeed so. But this does not mean that we should allow this situation to persist. There are promising beginnings of a *New New Left* in Eastern Europe, at least intellectually; Hungary is a temporary exception. But it is coming here, too.

**One of the exciting developments of recent years has been the creation of the Green Left (*Zöld Baloldal*) in Hungary. You were leading the list of candidates for this party in the June 2009 European Parliamentary elections. Can you talk about your shift from the SZDSZ to the Green Left? And what are your hopes for the party?**

Since you’ve asked this question, a court decision has prevented us from standing in spite of initial media successes and good reactions to our initiative. The appeals are running in the courts, but the European elections are over. The party will try to participate in the national elections in April 2010, but I won’t be a candidate this time.

This group is a coalition of various left *groupuscules*, including unreconstructed old-style communists, Greens, some people from the minuscule far left, social democrats, sections of the anti-globalization movement (also very small), pacifists, feminists — the usual suspects. We have no money and help from abroad is forbidden, although we have the moral support of the European Left Party, led by *Die Linke* in Germany and the *Parti Communiste Français* (though the latter are not exactly my favorites). I am not sure we’ll be able to stand. The conditions are forbidding: we need to gather tens of thousands of supporting signatures in an atmosphere of generalized fear. Also, I have doubts about some components of the movement. I accept being the public face of these groups, and I am formally the chairman of its advisory committee, but there is no great activity to see.

Last summer was exhilarating. We gave a sign that the Left is here and won’t go away just like that, so we weren’t wasting our time. This national election will result in a triumph of the nationalist Right, including the fascists — the “Jobbik” party, meaning loosely “the better part,”<sup>6</sup> openly siding with paramilitary and sometimes with terrorist organizations, allegedly engaging in racial killings of Roma and attempts on the life of socialist and liberal politicians. The charges are now being investigated by the public prosecutor; the main suspect now in preliminary custody will be an “independent” candidate supported by this party.

**You now describe yourself as a Marxist, with plans for a Marxist theory group in Hungary in addition to your ongoing work as a writer and political commentator from the Left. Why Marx now? In Central and Eastern Europe after 1989, Marxist ideas and theories were hard-pressed to survive their connection to state socialism and the elimination of courses in Marxist-Leninism in universities. Even though the economic collapse has discredited neoliberal ideology — at least its most**

extreme variants — Marxism in the region is still linked with totalitarianism.

Indeed, as you know, there are ongoing attempts to formalize the connection between communism and fascism as little more than variations on the same totalitarian theme. Budapest's Terror House Museum makes no distinction between Bela Kun's 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic, Admiral Horthy's regency, fascism, and post-War communism — it's all just "terror" by comparison to liberal capitalism. The "Prague Declaration" announced by the Czech Senate in June 2008 calls for the European Parliament to recognize communism and Nazism as aspects of Europe's totalitarian legacy. In Hungary, the Supreme Court has recently rescinded the sentence of one of the police officers who shot and killed communist and anti-fascist Endre Ságvári in 1944 — a purely symbolic move whose implications for the Left are chilling.

What work do you hope that Marx and Marxism can do in this context?

To all this we may add that the Romanian Parliament has promulgated a solemn statement, based on a report by a committee appointed by the Romanian president, chaired by Vladimir Tismăneanu, professor of government at the University of Maryland, which states that communism is a crime against humanity or some such thing. (Professor Tismăneanu — witness his articles and interviews in the Romanian press — believes that people such as Slavoj Žižek or myself are a major danger to human freedom.) Similar decisions by the Polish Supreme Court are forthcoming. In Hungary, the hammer and sickle, the red star, the swastika, and the arrow-cross (the coat-of-arms of the Hungarian Nazis) are all banned as "totalitarian symbols." The European Court of Human Rights has exempted the red star and the hammer and sickle from the Hungarian ban, but the Hungarian state refused to comply.

Still, after all this, when a few of us have announced our allegiance — which, of course, includes a repudiation of "real socialism" of all stripes — our audiences weren't on the whole upset, but rather incredulous! Not so much for the apparent reason of the folly of joining the defeated (I, for one, feel defeated in my former avatar of an Old Whig, but certainly not as a revolutionary socialist) or of confessing to a belief compromised by the terrible things done in its name, but for the mere implausibility of having social and political principles of any kind at all! Most people don't regard Marxism as criminal, but as naïve. But this is people's opinion of liberalism or Christianity as well. Any view seemingly contradicting individual or collective selfishness or self-regard seems incredible. As I personally cannot

be accused of any collusion with the former regime (except, rarely and absurdly, by very young Nazi slanderers who cannot spell "Capital") and as I have no reason for apologia in this respect, critics are content to call me out of date, as they fail to follow intellectual fashions that have reverted to the pre-1989 normality in the West: radical chic is on the left again. All this does not prevent the radical right to bay for my blood, but they have been doing this since I was a rather conservative liberal. This has nothing to do with my substantive view; nobody who is not an ethnicist can be exempt. It is even a smidgen nicer to be a Marxist than a liberal: at least I am not considered to be sold out to *foreign* capital, although I can still be slandered as being soft on Jews.

**Which traditions of Marxism are you drawing on? Are there any contemporary writers or theories which you find especially useful, compelling, or relevant?**

Several. Even when I was ideologically very remote from Marxism, I did not stop reading some of its literature. I was quite influenced by the early and middle work of Cornelius Castoriadis — I also knew him, an astonishing man — and Karl Korsch. Although I was personally close at one time to many people from the Lukács School, it is only now that I have read him with sustained attention. (His pupils have gone in the opposite direction, e.g., my erstwhile friend Agnes Heller has become a conservative with an increasingly strong Judaic interest, and a cold warrior *après coup*, who is bizarrely accusing her old friend and colleague, István Mészáros, author of *Beyond Capital* and guru to Hugo Chávez, of having been expelled from Canada as a Soviet agent — Mészáros is an 1956 political émigré, an emeritus professor at Sussex University with impeccable anti-Stalinist credentials.) I am an avid reader of *operaismo* and of pre-*Empire* Negri, and also at the opposite end, the *Wertkritik* school, in my view the best heirs to Critical Theory (Hans-Georg Backhaus, Helmut Reichelt, Michael Heinrich, but also the unruly genius, Robert Kurz, and the "cult" periodicals of this tendency, *Krisis*, *Streifzüge*, *Exit!*) as well as authors like Robert Brenner, Ellen Meiksins Wood, David Harvey, Michael Lebowitz, and various Marxists working in England too numerous to mention. The greatest impact came, however, from Moishe Postone's *magnum opus*. These choices may seem eclectic, but I don't belong to any of these currents. I am working on my own stuff and I am learning from all of them.

Your writing over the past decade has perceptively examined the rise of right-wing populism in Eastern Europe and Hungary. This is a development that has been relatively under-reported in the West; it has taken Berlusconi's anti-Roma policies to raise greater awareness about the rise in violence towards Roma throughout Europe and in the post-Soviet region in particular. The most obvious form of right-wing populism lies in the revival of xenophobia and ultranationalism in the region (for instance, it is now common to see t-shirts and bumper stickers with maps of Hungary prior to the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, even around Budapest). But you've pointed to other, somewhat subtler forms, too: Gyurcsány's proposal in 2008 for a "work test" for the unemployed, which was intended to establish who is competent to work, and which is just the tip of the iceberg of an ongoing withdrawal of the rights of citizenships and the rise of fascism in the region.

What accounts for this right-wing populism? In what ways do the failed promise of post-Soviet democratic renewal and the twenty-year drama of neoliberal economics contribute to its rise? (That is: in what important ways is this populism different than early forms in the region?) How and where do you see it expressing itself? What needs to be done to arrest it?

What you call right-wing populism, I think, erroneously, I call post-fascism (see my "On Post-Fascism" in *Boston Review*, Summer 2000). There are, of course, important differences between post-fascism and "classical" national socialism — the former is not militaristic, it is not "totalitarian," and so on — but the parallels are striking, too. That the enemy is both bourgeois liberalism and Marxism (which for the far Right means all varieties of the Left, from social democrats to anarcho-syndicalists, a usage inherited by the North American mainstream press which is in the habit of calling "Marxist" any peasant jacquerie in the Himalayas if they're hoisting a red flag) is certainly telling, i.e., they are still romantically (and insincerely) opposed to all forms of modernity and are daydreaming about caste society, sacred kingdoms, the superiority of the warrior to "his" woman, racial purity, the cleansing properties of mother earth, and the like. As I am writing these responses, the phone rang, and a friend reported that posters with the likeness of Socialist Party candidates have been decorated with Stars of David of the prescribed (by the Gestapo) "canary yellow" hue, but then my own posters were so decorated in 1990 — I was elected, however. This time, the affair is much more serious. The common element between "communism" and "liberalism" is the fantasy figure of the Jew (the candidates in question are reliable Gentiles) embodying mediation and universalism. Jews as physical persons

are less threatened, though, than the Roma who are victims of racial killings and open discriminatory practices everywhere in Europe. (Also the Canadian government is restricting travel — demanding visas — from countries that the Roma are trying to flee.)

The reasons for this are crystal clear.

With the development of technology and the participation of the new industrial powers (China, India, and Brazil) in the international division of labor, with the increasing intensity and speed of work, with the lengthening of labor time in the global rust belt, the workforce is everywhere becoming "precarious" and unemployment is a universal fact of life for huge masses of people. Concomitantly, improving health stretches life expectancy to unprecedented heights. Health insurance, social services, and central state redistribution of resources are becoming ever more important, frequently the only reasonable source of livelihood for entire regions, social strata, and various populations and generations. There is a grim competition for state resources.

Mainly, the competing groups are the struggling and endangered middle class and the poorest underclass or, in global terms, the crisis-ridden North and the famished South. No capitalist state can afford to satisfy both. In keeping with the fundamental character of liberal societies, the transformation of Western liberal societies into white middle-class fortresses needs legitimation.

This legitimation is offered by various stratagems of "re-moralizing" politics, that is, of stigmatizing underclass, precarious, immigrant, and other ethnic minority populations as "undeserving poor," people abusing the social welfare system, work-shy, criminal, etc. Contemporary racism and "welfare chauvinism" is everywhere. The latter is typified by the Tea Party movement in the United States, where middle-class audiences and opinion groups are vociferously rejecting help for those (including other middle-class subgroups) that are outside the health benefit/insurance system. These are tacitly acknowledged as being black or Latino/a, allegedly protected in a partisan manner by a black president. Ronald Reagan's white working-class and lower-middle-class voters may be back. According to Karl Kautsky — in a brilliant essay unearthed by the London periodical *Historical Materialism* (easily a competitor to Grünberg's *Archiv*) — the answer to Werner Sombart's famous question as to why there is no socialism in the United States is blacks. This situation is now extended to the whole white world. The class struggle is foiled by the ethnic conflict, clearly exacerbated by deliberate and well-aimed political action — in Western Europe chiefly against Muslim immigrants, in Eastern Europe against the Roma plus Northern Caucasus ethnics and Kosovar Albanian migrants. Nor are

traditional enmities neglected: ethnic Hungarian minorities in Slovakia and the Ukraine are prevented from freely using their mother tongue in shameless violation of their constitutions and of international and European law.

The Left is everywhere faced with an intractable dilemma: how to achieve a political situation wherein the blue-collar workers of the global rust belt, the precarious sub-proletarians, the civil servants of various kinds, the students, and the ethnic minorities (including the migrants) are able to make common cause and turn against the system instead of turning against one another? This recipe has not been found. The post-Trotskyite Socialist Workers' Party in Britain and the *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste* (ex-*Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire*) in France are forging alliances with Muslims — but with those attacked by the other members of the Left for neglecting the plight of oppressed Muslim women and so on. Basically, the mainstream Left is increasingly using veiled racist (properly speaking) ethnicist/culturalist arguments. One of the two co-sponsors of the draft bill banning the Islamic veil in public places at the National Assembly in France is a communist. The other is, of course, a Gaullist. The far Left, though, is increasingly identified with ethnic issues and it is gradually slipping towards the ineffectual liberal rhetoric of human rights. The result is naturally the triumph of the likes of Sarkozy and Berlusconi and some of their even worse colleagues in Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, the Netherlands, and everywhere in Eastern Europe.

The social/ethnic discrimination has its secondary uses as well. It legitimizes a return to the police state that was hardly a real danger for majorities in the West. But it is now. Prisons chock-a-block with mainly ethnic sub-proletarians are not any longer a peculiarity of the United States. Left-wing radicalism is beaten by the wave of social and racial exclusion (and in some places by fascist activism) and so is the hope of egalitarian or socialist transformation.

The necessary fusion of the various sectors of the oppressed is — again or, if you wish, eternally — the problem of emancipation and, what is the same thing, of anti-capitalist combat, and this need a renewal of radical political philosophy — *beyond* the already quite considerable results it has achieved, but which have failed to help to overcome this largest of obstacles.

### **What comes next for you — politically and theoretically?**

I think this flows from my previous response. It is increasingly necessary to create a theory that can overcome the perennial temptation of Rousseauian egalitarianism with its ineluctable aporias around the General Will, but which is nevertheless able to offer a normative view of communist society without

utopianism. In the absence of that, the Left will be necessarily led back to a political practice aimed at a homogeneous society created against personal autonomy in order to get rid of the mortal sin of exclusion, humiliation, and injustice. If we have learned one thing from the twentieth century, it is that this is neither feasible nor desirable.

Nor is it tolerable that we should acquiesce in what I have called in a Paris conference (*Puissance[s] du communisme*, in the memory of our friend, recently deceased, Daniel Bensaïd, theoretician of the LCR/NPA and many other lives besides, at the *Université de Paris-8, Vincennes Saint-Denis*) *une civilisation de merde*. This is not to be borne any more.

For this, I feel we need a renewed interpretation of the state and of law, of labor and money, of justice and legitimacy. Most of the prevailing theories concerning these are tailored to suit the needs of liberal class societies that clearly are in a deep — and by no means only economic — crisis. This is work enough. I'll try at least to start it, and of course I am not the only one (far from it!) to be willing to engage in it. The results will have to come, since they are sorely needed.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mihály Vörösmarty (1800-1855), one of the most important Hungarian dramatists and poets of the nineteenth century, and poet and writer János Arany (1817-1882), famous for his epic trilogy on the life of legendary nobleman Miklós Toldi.

<sup>2</sup> Konstantin Paustovsky (1892-1968), a once-prominent Soviet writer nominated for the 1965 Nobel Prize for literature — a prize that ultimately went to Mikhail Sholokhov.

<sup>3</sup> The reference here is to the group of scholars associated with Lukács, typically referred to as the Budapest School, which included Agnes Heller, Ferenc Fehér, György Márkus, and Mihály Vajda, among others. See Ferenc Fehér and Agnes Heller, eds., *Reconstructing Aesthetics: Writings of the Budapest School* (New York: Blackwell, 1986) and András Hegedűs, ed., *The Humanisation of Socialism: Writings of the Budapest School* (London: Allison and Busby, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> The reference here is to talks that took place from February 6 to April 4, 1989, in Warsaw, between the Jaruzelski government and the Solidarity trade union; they were initiated by the government to offset the widespread social unrest that had developed in Poland due to the activities of Solidarity and a generalized and intractable economic crisis in the country. Amongst the outcomes of these talks was the legitimization of Solidarity as a political party and an elected Presidency and Senate. It was this that allowed Solidarity to win a landslide in the election of June 1989.

<sup>5</sup> See David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> In Hungarian, “*jobb*” means both “right” and “better.” “*Jobbik*” is a play on words: the party claims through its name to be both the best party and the one farthest to the right. The word is also used in a familiar expression: “*előveszi a jobbik eszét*” or “to begin to see the light.”