

In memoriam: Gáspár Miklós Tamás

Gareth Dale

Gáspár Miklós Tamás (aka TGM, or Gazsi to friends) is being remembered in his many facets: essayist, liberal dissident, Tory anarchist and even in one case as “intellectual rock star.” But I knew him as a communist revolutionary. Almost in the image of protagonists of the Victor Serge novels he had read when young: blazing at the inept and corrupt ruling classes, agitating at rallies, surrounded by papers and books, insatiably curious, and – unlike most rock stars, even of the intellectual sort – blacklisted by employers, hounded by the security services, and struggling to make ends meet. I say “almost” because he grew into this role late in life and because in his world, whether Gheorghiu-Dej’s Romania or Orbán’s Hungary, bands of comrades operating within mass workers’ movements were absent. His arrival at revolutionary Marxism was individual and circuitous.

Tamás was born in mid-century, a historical breakpoint. The insurgent and internationalist struggles of 1917-23 were receding in memory, and “Communist” states were being constructed on the Stalin model. In the earlier era his parents had been incarcerated as communists. They remained party members after the war, yet “Communism” was also their enemy, and the feeling was mutual – most evidently when his father was sacked from his position in the Hungarian State Theatre. His communist parents, Tamás would joke, had given him an impeccably anti-communist education.

Tamás lived across that communist fault-line and also across borders. He was foreign as a Hungarian (in Romania) and as Romanian-born (in Hungary); his identities included half Jewish, lapsed Calvinist, and atheist. His experience of class was multi-layered, with working-class friends, peasant cousins, and his father in a comfortable middle-class position until defenestrated. As a child he devoured books omnivorously, with parents and their milieu providing continual encouragement – and all under a regime that, notwithstanding its thuggery, did foster mass literacy and high culture. These were some ingredients of his

brilliance, but so too was his ability to know intimately a range of ideological camps, having pitched his tent in several.

In 1978 Tamás was booted out of Romania for criticizing the Ceaușescu regime's anti-Magyar policies. This act, though brutish, may have done him a favour as he dodged the worst of the Ceaușescu period and was able, in Budapest, to devote his energies to democratic change: petitioning in solidarity with Charter 77, speaking at rallies, and defying the regime to arrest him for attempting to stand in an election. Even in goulash state capitalism, being a dissident meant job insecurity and occasional violence from the cops. (He was once shielded from a police beating by a fellow activist, Viktor Orbán. It's an image that elicits mixed emotions.)

Such bruises notwithstanding, Budapest was a comparatively pleasant location. Prejudice against the Transylvanian immigrant was milder than the Hungarophobia back home. More importantly, the historical tide seemed to be turning his way at last. The Kádár regime was beginning to sidle towards liberalism. The West was growing closer. Acclaim and reward arrived too, with fellowships at Oxford and Yale, a Readership at the University of Budapest, and election as a liberal to the Hungarian Parliament.

It is testament to Tamás' greatness that the moment that could have launched him to prominence – as politician or intellectual – brought instead deep discomfort. It wasn't the politicking per se, or the hobnobbing in Britain with Tory philosophers and grandees. Such stuff was fun, and he was impeccably prepared for it with his bow tie and pipe, his classical education – however communist its origin – and his surprisingly plummy but delightful RP English (which despite being his third language he commanded far better than they – or for that matter than I). Rather, it was that in his time as liberal parliamentarian serving the democratic transition, two million of Hungary's workers were laid off and he didn't even notice. It's a memory that filled him with shame, and there was worse to come, as Orbán took the country into NATO just in time for its hideous assault on Serbia and steered

Hungary's liberal experiment towards "post-fascism." The shame became his muse, urging on a root-and-branch theoretical renovation. This spiritual and intellectual honesty, and rigour, cannot but impress.

The boomerang now curved back to the left, landing in revolutionary Marxism. By this I mean a Marxism of Marx, particularly his later works, of communism as proletarian self-emancipation, as opposed to the top-down projects of Stalin or social democracy. That these had, in the name of "realism," swapped human liberation for a bit more modernity or social equality and fraternity might seem a plausible trade if it weren't for the fact that, in accepting the capitalist fundamentals (wage labour, absolute property, capital accumulation), any such gains would be transitory. Tamás' reckoning with Stalinism was particularly rich. State capitalism in those mid-century decades of industrial growth saw millions of people flood into an urban modernity for which in a sense they could feel gratitude, almost as if the furniture of their lives had been created by the Communist authorities and not by their own labour; he was fascinated by the system's vaunting of workers in its moral hierarchy even as it suppressed them economically and politically.

As a Marxist in post-fascist Hungary, Tamás found himself a dissident once again. Life could be tough. Although as a public intellectual he could have been more globally prominent had he compromised his politics and had some of his passions – such as Descartes, Novalis – not been rather dry. There was also the withered state of the left and endless battles against racism, homophobia and fascism to be fought again and again, and then in 2010 he was ejected from his job – for much the same politicized reasons as decades previously in "Communist" times. Oxford and Yale were no longer interested and although his friends tried to secure little fixed-term gigs in western universities, we failed. Even an attempt to win him an honorary academic gong at my university fell flat. (The competition from local entrepreneurs, you see, is very strong and we haven't heard of this philosopher and besides, are you sure he's from Transylvania is that even a real place?)

I didn't know Gazsi well but the occasions we'd meet were memorable. I recall one gorgeous afternoon in his flat across the road from the Central European University, wedged with a whisky between towering piles of books – they were strewn around the floors and furniture – and his daughter Hanna barely looking up, so familiar was she with appearances from these foreign-tongued visitors sunk in discussion with her papa. On another occasion we wandered the Budapest streets, Gazsi unstoppable in the stories pouring forth. Each building revealed a historical or architectural secret from a separate century. Or the stories of life and loves – he was a great raconteur. One such narrated his meeting with his second wife, Nina, a BBC journalist who interviewed him in 1983. This was long before mobile phones and so, after they had departed without exchanging addresses, he visited hotel after hotel until eventually at the Gellért he found her. In his final years he could be curmudgeonly but in a soft and precise way. "Damn it all," began a typical email, "I hate abstracts, résumés, outlines & such." Perhaps melancholy and crustiness is a natural attendant of age, but I'm sure, too, it carried an exasperation that a reasonable world remains a distant dream.

Gareth Dale

"Horatio, I am dead;

Thou livest; report me and my cause aright

To the unsatisfied."

It is 1971, and Gáspár Miklós Tamás is a young student in the Faculty of Philosophy, with a mind that's already sending ripples through the department, making his teachers reckon with his abilities. A job at the Uni is promised but never delivered, as ethno-politics, the communist regime, the intricacies of personal feuds and a university fractured along ethnic lines all get in the way, and Tamás is forced to emigrate. Aurel Codoban, a Romanian

philosopher, remembers meeting the young TGM as a colleague. Memory betrays after 50 years, but he still recalls what brought them together: a common admiration for people that carry the spirit of May '68. A certain way of being at home in a milieu of critique and with assuming the burden of political conviction seems to have been the cement of friendship among philosophy students back then, especially for Tamás.

Decades pass, the dark nineties come, with poverty and free-market capitalism washing over Transylvanian lands, and Tamás returns. Más világ klub (Another world club) is a circle of progressive intellectuals who lecture on topics ranging from architecture to genetics, arts and philosophy. Among them, TGM is speaking to a room packed with people enthralled by the force of his words. Más világ shares the space with a little leftist association, Studio Protokoll, where Attila Tordai (today, director of "tranzit.ro Cluj") first encounters Tamás. He knows nothing about this philosopher but sees a room too small for the people gathered there, transfixed. And understands.

In 2003, IDEA journal starts its official collaboration with Tamás, under the directorship of Tim Nădășan. The journal translates many of the texts by the Transylvanian expat, and friendships are born between its editors and Tamás. A protestant outlook and curiosity for all things that promise a future for an Enlightenment ethos unite Tim and Tamás. Three things abide with Tim when it comes to TGM: the good-natured dandyism, his emotional siding with the downtrodden and always with the victims against the aggressors, and the intimate core of Tamás's leftism. "A leftist on the basis of European modernity, a left built on haute bourgeois culture," a man who fulfilled the ideal of a bourgeois becoming revolutionary, in redemption of guilty bourgeois consciences everywhere. And also, Tamás as a lover of all things that life makes so delightful: red wine in the company of peers discussing the fall of empires, the good old Transylvanian meaty dishes, and generosity towards those entrusted with the secret of all that is intimate.

Not much is known among Hungarian comrades about the kinship of TGM with the Romanian left. It is 2012, and Tamás with Boris Buden helps to launch tranzit.ro Cluj, the laboratory of theoretical Marxism and critical-artistic practice in the capital of Transylvania. “He knew how to come close to you, being able to sympathize with your struggles to pay rent and other types of material deprivation, while also being able to guide you through emotional or intellectual hurdles. He not only supported, but understood what tranzit did,” Tordai recalls. TGM helped to legitimate tranzit.ro Cluj, and the young Romanian comrades recognized him, built upon his theories and joined in his political activism. In 2018, with a discussion of Lukács’ *The Destruction of Reason*, Tamás was the one that closed the old home of tranzit.ro, built at the site where he had worked as editor for a local cultural magazine that in the seventies accommodated Tamás’ communist dissidence. History now came full circle, and cranes and bulldozers of a foundation funded by Orbán’s money and tentacles of power reduced to rubble the stronghold of the Cluj left. Tamás regrouped with us and a few years later was celebrating his 70th birthday seasoned with a roundtable on his book on Post-fascism in the new home of tranzit.ro, located in the heart of the city. This time, tranzit.ro and the young Hungarian left regrouped on the premises of a foundation, Minerva, that Hungarian liberals appropriated for their Hungarian newspaper, Szabadság/Freedom and Minerva archive. They too were waging resistance against illiberalism and authoritarianism, mainly Orbánite, and made accommodating neighbours and hosts for tranzit.

Criticatca, another platform of the Romanian left, was launched in 2011. It hosted many texts and interviews with Tamás. Florin Poenaru, a founding member, had known Tamás from CEU. “I met him there, but I have seen him all over Eastern and Central Europe. I’ve seen him give talks to audiences of 5, and of 100,000. No matter how modest the shoots of a young left in this or that place, Tamás would be there,” Poenaru remembers. His faith and wage on any project on the left, no matter how small or marginal, made him a generous ally, sharing his historical and philosophical knowledge with groups scattered around the Austro-Hungarian hinterlands. His attitude testifies for a sort of revolutionary anti-imperialist revanchism unafraid of long durées.

Although the Uni of Cluj (UBB) never delivered fully on its old promise to grant Tamás the place he fully deserved in local academia, the Department of Sociology invited him to lecture here in 2018-19. “I think not teaching at the local Uni was an old wound for him. He was so warm with our department and he taught this lecture series out of generosity. The classroom was always packed with students. Always.” These are the words of Cristina Raț, director of the Department of Sociology. She had met him long ago, while she was a child in a ethnic-mixed household, hearing his voice on the Hungarian radio posts, during the days of the liberal Gazsi, when his voice resonated with Transylvania’s Hungarian minority struggling under the decaying nationalist Ceaușescu regime.

Finally, it is 2010, evening, in Paris. My Gazsi sits at a cafe table, in corduroy trousers and braces, and the chequered shirt. His back straight, the tweed jacket draped on the chair next to him, smoking a cigar and sipping brandy. He looks at me and at another and tells us: comrades, the general insurrection is just around the corner! History may have proved him wrong, but he wrote and thought about the universal injustices until his last breath. A tough legacy to live up to.

Dana Domsodi

I first met Gáspár Miklós Tamás back in 2006, while working as a newbie at the magazine and publishing house Idea in Cluj. This had been my first paid job, and quite a dream job – not in terms of pay, though – because this was the first and, at that time, still the only independent institution engaged in left-ish critical theory in Romania. Tamás was a regular contributor to the magazine and a good friend of my older colleagues. He dropped by one day and, while all the six or seven of us sat around the big square table covering most of our office, he spontaneously gave us, with his usual lordly charm, a one-hour lecture on the current state of the world, packed with cultural and philosophical insights and references.

My scribbled notes taken after the meeting – I thought this might have been awkward during the lecture, as we were technically just having coffee – must have run something like Chávez-Mészáros-Heller-Lukács-Bolsheviks-fall-of-USSR-Orbán-Hegel-Marx-Rousseau-Iraq etc. In short, I was mesmerized, and I would generally continue to be, in our subsequent meetings ever since.

There is no overstating Tamás' importance for the Romanian left, which started to take shape, after the bleak and vehemently anti-socialist 1990s, at the turn of the millennium. He has been involved in innumerable cultural and civic projects of this emerging scene, from conferences, round tables, seminars and congresses, to virtually all forms of publishing (from books and collective volumes to magazines and critical blogging). As such, he has been a galvanizing and unifying force in this rather small, yet fractious scene, while at the same time serving as banner of legitimacy or source of authority for some of the various factions and groups that inevitably pullulate on the Left. "Yes, but Tamás said ..." has been, on numerous occasions, the formula with which one – and certainly us on the Marxist left – could settle not just the debates with the enemy on the right, but also the occasional quarrels with the "deviationists" in our midst, in their various instantiations as culturalist left, identitarian left, liberal left, communitarian left, reactionary left, idealist left. At tranzit.ro/Cluj, we opened our program and series of conferences with him and Boris Buden, in 2010, on the culture and politics of the recent crisis, and we closed it with him, in 2018, with a day of discussions on „The Destruction of Reason: an Unfinished Project,” with numerous participations at lectures and seminars on Lukács or Marx in between. In brief, he was also our source of authority and legitimacy – of what we assumed to be a historically materialist, rationalist and universalist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist Left. (Not that he was fully aware of what he was being dragged into or in what cultural wars he was being strategically deployed. Neither were we).

But of course one can never be too vigilant, otherwise we might get bored. A few years ago, in an essay on Tamás' influence on the Romanian scene, I was noticing a certain messianic tone in his later writings, which was not necessarily a new phase in his thought, but rather

an intensification of an anarchist-moralist disposition which, it seemed to me, always provided the background of his political and philosophical positions. Now I'm not so sure this – if true – is so unforgivable. Tamás' final years – in Orbán's Hungary, with increased Covid induced isolation, with war raging in nearby Ukraine, and the whole world sleepwalking into climate catastrophe, fascism and war – must have been especially depressing for a Marxist perspective. The temptation to damn all history to hell, and save only the pure utopia, the temptation of a rather eschatological communism, of hope as sublimated despair, must be pretty irresistible in such circumstances. And who could blame it? If history is not on our side – as it seems –, if it's not about changing the world, but merely about saving one's soul and doing least harm, then surely being an idealist anarchist, an atheist saint, is better than being a hardheaded or allegedly "realist" materialist. And not just in terms of personal morality, but even in terms of realism: as things stand, the hardheaded materialist, and even the tame social-democrat reformist, are just as idealist – unrealistic – as Tamás' messianically infused anarchism. So why not go all the way, as he did?

Alex Cistelecan

My generation discovered GMT in the early 2000s, when his texts ruptured the liberal and conservative pieties, larded with casual ethnonationalism, that made up the life of Romanian "postcommunism." Like many Transylvanian Hungarian intellectuals, GMT had been persecuted and forced into emigration by the völkisch-Stalinist contraption that affected to represent socialism in Ceausescu's Romania. Then in the 1990s he suddenly returned, with characteristic aplomb, penning an open letter which took issue for the first time with the nefarious dogmas of the intellectual mainstream. Above all, he opened our eyes to the linkage of the legacy of the Romanian far right to both the authoritarian regime that had died in 1989 and the democratic project that succeeded it.

By the 2010s, GMT was taking the Budapest-Kolozsvár/Cluj train regularly, excited to see the emergence of a new left scene in his birthplace, just as post-fascism was beginning to spread. But in the 2000s he was still a removed and Olympian figure, living in a worldlier world than ours. For his young admirers, the texts published in the Cluj-based Idea review held a cult-like status.

Throughout all of it, GMT was an itinerant university of his own. His elaborate and gripping essays conjured up lost histories of emancipatory struggles from our part of the world – even as end of history triumphalism suggested such accounts were no longer worth remembering. His scalpel-precise indictments of the succession of calamitous politico-economic regimes that had devastated the region sent us scrambling to read everything in the bibliography. He also did not subordinate lucidity to ideology. A name of the radical left by the 2000s, he shed no tears for the end of the Leninist experience and slammed the temptation of some on the left to invoke anticapitalism in their reluctance to criticize the völkisch anticapitalists trashing liberal rights and cannibalizing parts of the left's economic agenda.

I emigrated in the 2010s and spent too little time with GMT, making use of the brief windows that fast-paced cycles of academic nomadism gave us. But what encounters those were! Blessed with a kaleidoscopic mind, in a short succession of remarks GMT would casually, brilliantly, and with a dose of humour recast your understanding of the latest absurdity of our times with timeless yet explosive connections between, say, the Parisian literary avantgarde of the '20s, Persian Marxism and some dissident wing of socialist economics from Red Vienna, with delicious vignettes thrown in for good measure. In an hour, he would easily posit enough material to start a new book, and he would do it while being an incredibly good listener, too. He was simultaneously your dream professor, raconteur, critical intellectual and master synthesizer.

In so many ways, GMT was the embodiment of a bygone era in the history of Central Europe's anti-authoritarian intellectual left. It was a world for which a highly learned life animated by a responsible social purpose and "skin in the game" was the best possible life. That also meant a certain style. Of the (many) languages he spoke and the many libraries his cavernous mind had processed, he retained their most refined and compelling versions so that, inevitably, after five minutes of conversation with GMT you would become suddenly hungry. Hungry for reading more, for understanding more, for speaking out more and for using it all in a way that mattered for those that society casts aside. Indeed, for an entire generation of Romanian left-leaning intellectuals in their 40s and 50s in particular, the great Hungarian left an indelible, even transformational mark.

Cornel Ban

Much has been said, in the above, of Tamás' role in Hungarian public discourse but I would like to begin with mention of the sheer physical and mental effort that it all required. Behind the prolific output lay stress, and mood-swings. "I am angst-ridden," he would say, while acknowledging its inevitability given that "everything is going to the dogs." He could descend into self-doubt, too. "I am more & more famous (for all the wrong reasons) & less & less effective. Everyone assumes that I have time," he would lament, but "I have practically none. I am showered by requests & demands—and I cannot explain that I'm not a rich Western professor who has secretaries & helpers & so I simply cannot cope."

Gazi's one helper was the elderly cleaning lady who came to his flat every Saturday to assist with chores. When she suddenly was too unwell to come, this spelled domestic disaster. She had been for nearly two decades, "one of the last elements of our strange little home life that still ties me to Hungary, one of the last with whom to talk, heart-to-heart

conversations. She knows everyone around us, & she's of vital importance to Hanna. The best time each week was when she was here, when I'd find true calmness."

When not at home, Gazsi would likely be travelling around Europe. A typical report, this one from a pan-Balkans radical students' meeting, read: "Very serious & high-minded young people. Being loved by my public, shiny eyes... is always a little strange. It lifts me up & then makes me feel terribly lonely." Our Slovak group met him at a similar event, when we organized an anti-fascist mobilization. Tamás accepted the invitation to give a public lecture on post-fascism. (I referred to his lectures as sermons. "That is exactly what they are" he replied, amused.)

The lecture took place in the ceremonial hall at the university and was a huge success; then next day he addressed the public gathering with a charmingly simple yet vigorous call: "... the time has come to say openly that we are socialists; we are feminists; we are in favour of equality; we oppose racism and class inequality; we want a free and equal society – and we are not ashamed of that." What schadenfreude it gave us (and Gazsi) to see the awkward, surprised faces of many participants who had supposed they were taking part in a protest exclusively against blatant neo-Nazi groups, while the words "feminism," "left" or – goddess forbid—"socialism" were simply too big a bite for them. "Oh well," Gazsi would say.

Gazsi was willing to expose everything (including his own previous conclusions) to uncompromising critique. He was at ease in delivering unpopular analysis, standing his ground eloquently. This was the case for example in his opposing the ill-founded smearing of anti-Zionists with anti-semitism simply for their description of Israel's system of ethno-religious supremacy. One Hungarian wrote him from Paris to tell him he's "literally the only non-fascist to have criticized Israel in the Hungarian media."

If his final years knew some troubles, not least when Orbán's war on the CEU robbed him of his job and he had to find temporary refuge at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, it

was also a time of returns to Transylvania. One invitation brought him to Timișoara, where he visited his first wife's house and walked through the park where they had strolled as teenagers; and others were his reconnecting with Cluj. Revisiting the streets of his childhood, with Hanna beside him and immersed in such simple delights as "good food & old town beauty & scented breeze," it all "worked like magic."

But let me finish by conjuring up an ideal day for G.M. Tamás. Thinking and reading, seated in his armchair and the books covering the table, aligned "in chimneys" on the carpet, packed onto the shelves of the hanging bookcase sagging under their weight. "A penny for your thoughts," he would say when I seemed quiet for too long or "not there." From now, it'll be we who address these words to him, to no avail.

Elena Teplanová

I got to know Gazsi personally in the early 2010s – we invited him to Cluj/Kolozsvár as members of a younger generation of Hungarian academics interested in critical theory and the small "work in progress" Hungarian leftist scene from Romania, which began to emerge only after 2010, around the online journal "a szem" [the eye] where he subsequently published some of his significant later essays. I remember his first lecture, in 2014, at the Hungarian Department of Philosophy at Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj, entitled "Is Marxism a Critical Theory?" (no one had lectured there on Marxism since 1990, and Gazsi himself had not been invited back since finishing his studies there in 1972). After he delivered a "tour de force" interpretation of some passages of the Grundrisse – influenced by the ideas of the Critique of Value school – we rushed to tranzit.ro/Cluj, where an event in collaboration with our Romanian comrades was taking place. This would become a routine in the following years, on occasions when he returned to lecture on the Critical Theory and Multicultural Studies MA programme. I can still picture him after these events, in the backyard of

tranzit.ro, always with a smile and one of his indispensable small cigars in hand, caught in a friendly dialogue with someone (everyone), switching with ease between fluently and eloquently spoken languages, always displaying genuine curiosity and empathetic attention towards others. This must have been his true milieu, where he felt most at home intellectually after reconverting to Marxism: young leftist groupuscules in Cluj/Kolozsvár and Budapest, as well as in Belgrade, Sarajevo, Warsaw, Zagreb, etc., where he spent these years as an Eastern European leftist peregrine.

Gazsi's philosophical-theoretical commitment to Marx's communism was unequivocal: he always thought that while the ideal of equality through redistribution (and the praxis of egalitarian struggles) might be – or might have been – the best realistic option among existing alternatives, we should ultimately target the causes of capitalist exploitation and therefore aim towards a classless society based on unalienated labour – in short, for communism, and not just for equality. But since the exploited subject is currently nothing but “a moment of capital, a thing,” the revolutionary proletarian subject is definitively gone, and since overcoming contemporary capitalism, a system of rather abstract social domination, seems currently inconceivable (only direct personal domination has ever been overturned) – is there still something left “to be done”? Gazsi's assumed – and sometimes prophetic – “pessimism of the intellect” has always been the result of painstakingly rigorous philosophical and historical thinking.

In his late writings, and with the rise of post-fascism in Europe and the world, he appeared to grow even more pessimistic about the prospects of socialism, even arriving at a shocking historical thesis: the last century was essentially a battle between fascism and communism (or between capitalism and socialism) and fascist capitalism has definitively won. This must have been the “single catastrophe” (Benjamin) of the 20th century, the end of history itself, and what we see today is only the aftermath, the “pile of debris” accumulated in its wake.

I remember him bursting out more and more frequently, in a sigh of despair, with a hardly translatable Hungarian phrase: “megette a fene az egészét!” (literally: everything was eaten up by a demon or hell; meaning “everything has gone to blazes” or “all is lost”), only at the next moment to throw himself, until the very end, with unrelenting enthusiasm and hope into a new series of political-philosophical engagements: another article or speech at a demonstration in support of struggles against poverty and homelessness, against all kinds of racial or gender discrimination, etc.; several late essays on the “polycrisis” of capitalism, on German idealism; and so on. As if, despite its end, the history of human emancipation could start all over again one day, as if every thought and action of this sort would somehow matter enormously in that utopian or messianic future. In these pessimistic times, maybe only the hope for the “spirit” of communism to survive can strengthen the “optimism of the will.”

Attila Szigeti

I first came across Gazsi’s work in the early 2000s. For someone like myself, a left-leaning student with Hungarian origins seeking to make sense of Eastern Europe’s transition, his essays, op-eds and speeches provided a much-needed, revolutionary Marxist critique not only of the “simple” capitalism that emerged in the region after 1989 but also of what had preceded it.

Turn-of-the-century Hungary was a contradictory place. On the surface, the transition appeared a success. While political debates in Budapest’s famous neo-Gothic parliament were often heated, there was a broad consensus on key issues. Communism and the “East” were passé, capitalism and the “West” were in vogue. Beneath the surface, however, the depressing reality: soaring inequality and poverty, and stark disparities along lines of region, ethnicity and gender. This met with little response from left intellectuals or unions, and the

Hungarian Socialist Party had embraced neoliberalism. The little opposition that existed to neoliberalism came from the virulently anti-Roma, anti-Semitic, and revisionist far-right.

This was the landscape in which Tamás' writings on the transition emerged. Understanding the transition required an accounting with the order whence it emerged, a self-styled "socialism" but with unmistakably capitalist fundamentals: wage labour, capital accumulation, brutal repression of workers' resistance, state-sponsored nationalism, patriarchal family values and institutionalized discrimination of ethnic and sexual minorities.

Though an uncompromising critic of state capitalism, Tamás conceded that these regimes had overseen remarkable levels of urbanization, secularization, and the emergence of welfare states (to which many workers still look back with a sense of nostalgia). However, once growth began to dwindle, the nomenklatura found it difficult to uphold this social contract. Faced with the prospect of losing their rule they abandoned the command economy and the rhetoric of working-class dictatorship and internationalism in favour of the market and liberal democracy. The paradoxical outcome, Tamás argued, was that "[i]n Eastern Europe, capitalism without a bourgeoisie was replaced by capitalism without a bourgeoisie."

Tamás' writings on "post-fascism" and "ethnicism" were especially seminal. As early as 2000, when pundits in the West were still exalting Blair and Clinton's "Third Way," he warned of the emergence of a regressive array of ideas, policies, and state practices that he labelled "post-fascist." In Tamás' words, "post-fascism finds its niche easily in the new world of global capitalism without upsetting the dominant political forms of electoral democracy and representative government. It does what I consider to be central to all varieties of fascism, including the post-totalitarian version. Sans Führer, sans one-party rule, sans SA or SS, post-fascism reverses the Enlightenment tendency to assimilate citizenship to the human condition."

It was not only universal citizenship that was being abandoned. Class conflict, too, was being “ethnicised” and “racialized,” erecting a barrier between the established and secure working class and lower middle class of the metropolis and the immigrant of the periphery, with the latter being depicted as a problem of “security” and “crime.”

Following Orbán’s return to power in 2010, Gazsi’s admonitions turned into brutal reality. While the Orbán regime embraced ethnicist ideas and practices, he was fired from his position in the Hungarian Academy of Science, ostensibly on the grounds that he did not hold any foreign-language diploma. The decision was clearly politically tainted: in addition to Hungarian and Romanian, Gazsi was fluent in English, German, French and Italian, and also knew Spanish, ancient Greek and Latin. And since he had been unemployed for ten years (also for political reasons) during the Kádár regime, his pension was slashed to a pittance. However, instead of retiring from the public sphere to begrudge his personal fate, Gazsi resisted the return of fascism, homophobia, and racism with an exemplary civil courage, reproaching politicians and pundits right, left, and centre when they failed to stand up against the new right.

I was not close to Gazsi, but I’ll never forget our first meeting. It was in 2011, he had invited me to his flat across the road from the CEU. Wearing a tank top with braces, he served each of us a big glass of vodka (neat!), which we slowly consumed in his impressive library while discussing Hungarian history and politics. On my way home that evening, I felt an enormous sense of gratefulness for having had the chance to meet the greatest Hungarian intellectual of our time. Gazsi’s death is a tremendous loss to the left. But his work and activist legacy will remain a compass for generations to come.

Adam Fabry

My dear Anita, just got back home from Vienna. The phone is already ringing. To hell with all of it. Would you still be my friend?’

Gáspár Miklós Tamás is remembered as a revolutionary intellectual, public speaker, lapsed conservative, and critic of authoritarianism. Many have been paying tribute to his greatness and his contributions to Marxism. But to some, he was also a loving father, a good friend, and a compassionate comrade. He deeply cared for the people around him.

I was born in rural Transylvania in 1988. Although my village was not far from Tamás’ hometown, I met him in Budapest. A colleague introduced us at a Marxist conference at the CEU. He was polite enough to engage in conversation with an irrelevant student like myself, and asked if I was at this conference because I have left-wing sympathies. I replied that I wouldn’t say I have left-wing sympathies, I am literally a communist. This was the only time I ever saw him caught off guard, and I immediately felt awkward for revealing myself in such a vulgar manner. He responded that this was the most unusual reply he had heard recently. Laughing, I jokingly asked him: “Why? Because of my age? There are so many young communists now!” He smiled and said he is perfectly aware of this, but hadn’t heard anyone declaring their communism so emphatically in a very long time.

In the neoliberal era, anti-communism was endemic across Eastern Europe. Not long ago, the Romanian government announced that they are establishing a rather Orwellian organization to monitor and persecute any activities related to “promoting nostalgia for the socialist era.” Nostalgia for the fascist era, however, is always encouraged in Eastern Europe. There is a price to pay for declaring yourself a communist, even for a well-respected post-1989 “freedom fighter” like Tamás. He once said: “Prepare for hostility, solitude, derision, career setbacks, betrayals, infighting, the arid and disconsolate vistas offered by radical critique. Be unfashionable. Be uncool. Do not be a fanatic and a puritan. Nobody will be grateful to you, but cheap wine and cheap books are still available.”

As for me, this was the first time I met a comrade with an identity so close to mine. Connecting with another half-Jewish Transylvanian Marxist between post-socialist Hungary and Romania felt almost unreal, and validating. Our experiences stuck in the folds of the European periphery are often invisible. Even the Budapest-based liberal intelligentsia is growingly hostile towards so-called “cross-border Hungarians” – a term, often used in a derogatory manner.

Over time, Orbán’s system has become more repressive, cruel, and unbearable for anyone with an ounce of empathy. The usual enemies are refugees, immigrants, Muslims, LGBTQ people, communists, philosophers, journalists, atheists, theatre students, teachers, unhoused people, Romani people, or any “deviation” from their idea of being. Nearly all parties of the Hungarian political spectrum are growingly indifferent to the inequality, injustice, poverty, and human suffering produced by present-day capitalism. This is where Gazi stood most firmly: always alongside the oppressed. His last public speech was a compassionate call for solidarity with the poor and abandoned people in Hungary.

At Tamás’ funeral, many prominent figures of Hungarian public life paid beautiful tributes to the late philosopher – including the mayor of Budapest. Many rushed to emphasize his revolutionary Marxism, influential ideas, status as an Eastern European intellectual icon, and his struggles for a democratic Hungary. It still felt somehow impersonal. We may have become cynical enough to dismiss the very engine of his Marxism, communism, anarchism, or whatever he may have called it in different periods of his life. The engine being love. The authentic love he carried for his children, friends, comrades, countrymen – his fellow humans. Despite a forty-year age gap, there was no hierarchy in our decade-long friendship, it was never about an experienced Marxist lecturing a naive one. At times, he was pessimistic enough to lose faith in a better, more reasonable world being near. I was optimistic enough to tell him that love, empathy, solidarity, mutual aid will eventually lead to something more bearable. I’m not sure he ever indulged himself in the cheap thrills of

hope, but I know he empowered young generations of Eastern Europeans like myself to keep struggling nevertheless.

Anita Zsurzsán

Being on the Left after the historical defeat of the working class is no easy feat. Being on the Left over the ruins of Eastern European state socialisms is even more problematic. The neoliberal-cum-nationalistic hegemonies constructed after 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe were, by design, profoundly hostile to the collective political organization of working people: the reigning technocratic managerialism excluded productive and distributional relations from the realm of political contestation, while the nationalistic re-framing of the noble principle of self-determination neutralized the authentic democratic potential of 1989.

What can be salvaged from the emancipatory goals of the universal Left in this context? This was the central question Gáspár Miklós Tamás grappled with in the last decades before his untimely death on 15 January 2023. His engagement with this dilemma was not only philosophical and historical but also profoundly political: it contributed to the emergence of a new and growing generation of activists, intellectuals, communities and institutions on the Hungarian Left.

His undisputable intellectual clout, inimitable rhetorical style and indubitable moral integrity made Tamás a unique presence in the post-socialist Hungarian public sphere, his op-ed pieces and TV interviews were followed by millions. This alone conferred some political legitimacy and intellectual prestige to the Left as an idea; a fact that could seem superficial

or frivolous, but in the context of the generalized nationalistic and liberal anti-leftism not a small achievement.

His public persona was also an example of how to engage with everyday politics: in a principled manner, with authentic emotions, and without withdrawing into the ivory tower of sterile ideas.

Without G.M. Tamás there would be no new Left in Hungary. Naturally, ongoing socio-political transformations would have, necessarily, catalysed the emergence of people interested in the relations of production and distribution, in the plight of working and disenfranchised people, but their self-understanding, historical consciousness and moral-philosophical outlook would have been in worse shape had they lacked such a titanic figure.

In 1988, in an influential samizdat essay, Tamás bid farewell to the Left. For many commentators, this gesture marked the moment of his conservative turn; only to “return” to the Left a decade later. Read from today, however, it marks the foundation of a new Hungarian Left: in it Tamás commits to the value of freedom, and does away with all those traditions of the Left that are contrary to the ideal of liberty. From then on, he was in a constant fight with what he considered Bolshevik, provincial, reactionary and petty bourgeois misunderstandings within the Hungarian Left. We, the younger generation of leftists, are richer thanks to this.

Besides stripping away the misunderstandings and mistakes within the tradition of the Hungarian Left, he also did more than anyone to recuperate its truly emancipatory and democratic trends. His essays on the social-democratic and civic radical thinking and activism of the fin de siècle and interwar years, his uncompromising interpretation of the 1956 Revolution as the only truly socialist revolution in human history gave us tangible predecessors, a usable past, a tradition we can all engage with – both as members of Left and as Hungarians. For, he not only salvaged a usable past for us, young leftists, he also gave

us extremely erudite and original analyses on the broader history of Hungarian political thought from the Enlightenment up until the present, uncovering the genealogy of ideas, dispositions, conceptions and misconceptions.

But the legacy of G.M. Tamás is no provincial matter. He grappled with the large historical dilemmas of the contemporary global Left – with an unwavering “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.” He saw the post-2008 resurgence of the Left as an instance of unimaginative, petty bourgeois redistributionism, a condescending attempt to buy the support of working people with one-dimensional material promises. To this he counterposed a much more ambitious and open-ended quest to liberate humanity from the alienation caused by capitalism-as-totality. With this, he carved out a space for us all to engage with his arguments, debate him, agree and disagree. For, a political project is alive only as long as its adherents can think critically, have debates of substance and of strategy. Otherwise, it is just a collection of zombified orthodoxies, dead letters. Even if they are accompanied by an unwavering commitment to the downtrodden, the exploited and the excluded. By the way, he also taught us what that commitment really looks like.

Szilárd István Pap

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).