

POST-FASCISM IS NO LONGER A DANGER. IT IS A REALITY

Interview with G. M. Tamás,
by Lukáš Matoška*

G. M. Tamás, once known as a left-libertarian dissident and later as a liberal member of the Hungarian parliament, has become one of post-Communist Europe's most important Marxist intellectuals. In his writing on the history of the socialist movement, the character of Communist-led states, and the nature of the "transition" from state capitalism to free-market capitalism, he highlights the deep historical and structural roots of the current morass in which Central Europe, and much of the rest of the world, finds itself. In this interview he explains and further develops his diagnosis of the present, setting out from his well-known notion of "post-fascism."

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Some questions in this interview emerged from endless debates with my friend Ondřej Lánský. I would like to thank him for that. (Note L.M.)

Fifteen years ago you published the essay, “On Post-Fascism,” in which you described “a cluster of policies, practices, routines, and ideologies” that reverses “the Enlightenment tendency to assimilate citizenship to the human condition.”¹ How do you judge your hypotheses today? Were you right or far too pessimistic?

Every attempt at social theory always needs corrections and expansions. But on the whole it has been proved more or less correct. Elements of post-fascism were apparent even then. Now you can see how elements of civic discrimination have become a part of politics everywhere. In that essay, I wrote mainly about ethnic groups; “the migrant problem” was not so serious at that time, but look at what we have today. I described how citizenship, from being the universal condition of humankind – which the French revolution was aiming at in some respects – is becoming a privilege of the citizens of rich, stable, and peaceful states. Now, the civic condition is becoming a privilege in general.

Firstly, there are non-citizens who have no rights. Hundreds of millions of people are not citizens of a proper state; they have no rights, no obligations, no law, no culture, no school, no power. Secondly, and not completely independent of the first, there is a further deterioration of citizenship as such. The proportion in which people participate in the handling of public affairs, even in so-called democratic countries, is ever smaller. Political passivity is on the increase, and this passivity is imposed by the manner of governance which is dominant in most polities: civic participation is on the wane. It is not only an economic crisis that we are facing, but also a crisis of politics. Versions of inequality – economic, social, cultural, and educational – are now synthesized by political inequality, by ever smaller elites steering public affairs, by the low quality of public debate, and by the demise of public media (compare the British Tories’ attack on the BBC and the occupation of Hungarian media by the right-wing régime).

The deterioration of citizenship offers a gateway to the phenomenon of post-fascism as civic and political inequality is being taken more and more for granted by public opinion. This is both a tragedy and a challenge because I am convinced that the re-creation of democratic citizenship is not possible on the basis on which it has rested in the West since 1945 and in Eastern Europe since 1989. This cycle is about to end. The old democratic, liberal, constitutional solutions are not sufficient since they weren’t able to prevent this deterioration. Therefore, there will probably be a new cycle of struggles that will aim at the reconstruction of political participation and at a new understanding of democracy. How long this will last and how strong the democratic side in this struggle will be, I don’t know.

You have mentioned the crisis of politics. But is it really a crisis of politics that we are facing today? Of course, it depends on your notion of politics. But it seems to me that at

¹ G. M. Tamás, “On Post-Fascism,” *Boston Review* 25 (Summer 2000) (online at <http://new.bostonreview.net/BR25.3/tamas.html> [accessed May 20, 2017]).

the least global capitalist governance is quite strong, or probably even stronger, than it was before the beginning of the economic crisis in 2008...

I think there is a difference between politics and governance. Of course, economic and social affairs are run pretty smoothly, especially in the wealthy states. However, in the poor states this is not the case. Look at the Balkans, look at Hungary: a great deal of dissatisfaction is simmering under the surface. But I don't think even bourgeois democracy can survive with this abysmal level of participation and identification. Yes, indeed, we do have some sort of elitist and oligarchic rule in most of these places. There are local differences, but we don't need to go into that – the essence is the same. As long as unemployment is not too high and wages are not dropping very sharply, people might tolerate this decline.

The old ideological forms that have fueled the resistance movements of one kind or another seem to be dead. There is no great threat to the rulers. But this kind of oligarchic system, in which only a very small and distant group of administrators, professional politicians, and lawyers (and transnational companies, local oligarchs, and business managers and international bureaucrats) are governing, cannot be stable. That means that societies as societies are not operating properly. There is no real support for the régime – people merely tolerate it. This bond – even according to traditional, bourgeois democratic standards – is extremely superficial, very unpopular, and very distant. And every time that the problem surfaces you can see that people's actions are non-political. Look at how “the immigrant problem” is dealt with, this is not something that a democratic politics that is barely present can resolve: politicians are pursuing their exclusionary politics, while the democratic majority is largely silent. There is no debate, there is no resistance, there is no moral outrage, and people just hope that our governments and the European Union will solve it somehow. Such a feeling that our own affairs are not our affairs is what I call a political crisis.

This means that the ruling capitalist cliques and the political elites can drive these countries anywhere. For example, think of the two danger spots for war in our neighbourhood – one in the Ukraine, another in the Middle East. For the first time in modern history there are no peace movements during such conflicts, nobody is really saying “stop it,” “stop killing people for no reason whatsoever.” But there is no enthusiasm for the war either. There is nothing, only a truly serious alienation of the public from public affairs. Since these bourgeois régimes that we live under are still supposed to have some degree of public participation – but in reality they don't have any – I wouldn't consider them extremely stable in spite of appearances to the contrary.

I think there is a tendency among contemporary intellectuals to redeem the idea of politics. For example, Jacques Rancière argues in favour of distinguishing “politics” from “the police.” Isn't he doing so in order to support a thesis – to put it very simply – that politics is actually much more than what we are living in? But is such a differentiation –

or a similar one – plausible? I mean, is or was there any such thing as politics in a sense that is radically different from what we are used to calling politics?

What I said was quite similar to Rancière's ideas. What I was saying was kept intentionally within the framework of bourgeois democracy that, alas, I do not support. Of course, these states had faced the same problem before the First World War. At that time there were even more oligarchic systems. Think of Austria-Hungary – a very narrow layer of administrators, priests, military officers, grand financiers, and the court dominated a huge country in which people didn't even know what the hell was happening in Vienna, in Prague, in Budapest, or in Zagreb. Our age is increasingly similar to those times, and what followed those times back then was the First World War. Unlike before the Second World War, when people knew that it was coming, the First World War came after a long period of peace, everybody was pretty much surprised that it had happened. It could have been avoided, but there was nobody to control or stop those totally irresponsible, myopic élites. Now we are in a similar position. Stability is but a dream.

But even if this world would be more stable, if there would be more popular participation, it still wouldn't save us from what I have called post-fascism, and for a very simple reason. And this is what I might add to the old essay. Back then, I didn't stress that historical fascism came into being not so much in order to fight liberal democracy, as it is – in a completely baseless, mythical manner – described nowadays, but in order to fight communism. In 1929–1933 the Soviet Union was seen as the only country unaffected by the crisis, so the challenge of communism seemed extraordinary. The very dubious German historian Ernst Nolte had a point when he said that National Socialism was a preventive counter-revolution of sorts. He was inspired by ultra-left groups of the twenties and thirties. There were a number of people who saw it that way, and I think they were right. All this anti-capitalist dynamic was embraced by Nazism to a certain extent – it had to mobilize and then demobilize the society in order to save capitalism from the challenge of communism. We forget that a similar phenomenon – saving the bourgeois society by autocratic measures of the bourgeois state – took place in all Western countries, although it didn't always succeed. I don't like it when people compare Roosevelt's New Deal to, say, the policies of Salazar, but there are similarities.

In the present time we don't have an organized international workers' movement. Capitalist society before 1989 always lived in a tension between the ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie, on the one hand, and the challenge of the counter-power, counter-culture, adversary ideology, which were Marxism and other radical left ideologies, on the other. That was a valid adversary or challenger which influenced hundreds of millions of people, tens of millions of whom were organized in very militant and well-organized, often armed (think of the *Schutzbund* or of the *Rotfront*) groups. Now, whatever we might think of the Soviet Union and of real socialism – I very much loathe it – it kept the continuity of the socialist challenge alive, and it represented the authority of a great military and political force. Something like that is totally lacking, we live in a world unified in most

respects, and there is no organized challenger, no real adversary culture. There are leftist intellectuals, for the first time without a movement and a committed, *engagé* audience. Adversary cultures of the past had a background of huge unions, parties, states, armies. It wasn't just a matter of theory or a matter of who is funnier or cleverer.

There is no need for the blundering and floundering bourgeois states to invoke extreme measures, they can domesticate the far-right challenge because – to call it by its proper name – there is no real class enemy, in the political sense, although the proletariat, of course, exists as the main structural element of capitalism, now as ever. This explains why we are talking about *post-fascism* – *the communist element* is missing. This is one of the reasons why people put up with the impoverishment of the political participation, why there isn't even any kind of reformism to speak of. In the Western countries there was some kind of social democratic reformism until Tony Blair – until that time people at least knew that if they want a little more equality, if they want free health care, and higher unemployment benefits, they have to vote for social democratic parties. Even in such a narrow and poor sense of political intervention as that was, there is nothing of the kind nowadays.

Rancière is quite right that social struggles and aspirations are politics and can be atomized and still remain politics. But we should not forget one thing – politics isn't a zero-sum game, but a battle in which people without capital or without a state are losing. That is the rule and there are no exceptions. The existence of historical socialism in whichever form – be it anarchist or social democrat or Bolshevik or Left Communist (say, situationist), including to a certain extent even dictatorial developments – at least presented a different model and simply kept alive a certain idea of an alternative. The ruling class is exploiting this situation – they would be fools if they didn't.

We should not forget that even bourgeois society has some objectives that aren't completely identical to the anonymous workings of a market that focuses on accumulation. The market doesn't have any substantive aim to achieve, but the bourgeois state does. For example, what is it exactly that the liberals call the “rule of law?” It means that uniform regulation is extended to virtually everybody, and people's relationship to the state is thoroughly legalised, “juridified,” thoroughly transformed into legal frameworks. When dealing with a state whose laws you have to obey – or challenging it, actually – your option was to go to court. This is very conspicuous in English-speaking countries, where courts are the only places to challenge the decisions of the state, of the élites, or of the corporations. That's why earlier social movements were led towards couching everything in legal terms. It had created a great deal of political uniformity – you change laws, you pass laws, you challenge laws, you go to court, you resist within legal frameworks, influence legislation, and so on. So the gradual process of the legalisation of politics was turning everybody into a lawyer of sorts – that's a part of the liberal utopia according to which, in a well-ordered society, people will accept the supremacy of the lawmaker and of the judge, and the public itself will participate indirectly: that is, by accepting its own inferiority in the whole process of law that is only very slowly modified to fit people's

needs, aspirations, or life-styles. This utopia – it was a glory of American liberalism in the nineteen-seventies, when it took those fantastic proportions – is challenged worldwide by what I characterised before as the loss or limitation of citizenship, because these people won't strike, won't demonstrate, won't join parties, and won't go to the court either. Mass political activity is no longer inspired by possibilities or hopes of new legislation.

What was the aim of the liberals? Of course: peace, stability, and all that, not to mention well-ordered procedures within which to change things. But also, at the same time, political subjects and subjectivities should become legal subjects and legal subjectivities. By this they were conforming to the basic, abstract nature of the capitalist society – a level of abstraction imposed by capital, in which there is no longer a direct personal relationship to the ruler like in an ancient society, but in which every relationship between people is increasingly abstract. Indeed, as an employee of a corporation you don't have to deal with an owner, a chief, or a boss; similarly, as a consumer, a participant of cultural events through the mediation of digital culture and as a political subject you are legally subject *to abstraction*. What are laws? Laws are texts, rigid texts, so citizens are supposed to become symbolically, as it were, subjects in the literal sense of the word, part of the text, people who confront the text, read the text, modify the text, and, up to a point, become the text. And it is a highly abstract idea of what politics and citizenship mean. Well, this utopia has failed. But this was an intrinsic, inherent objective of bourgeois democracy, which has now failed dismally.

To offer people only two courses of political action, law on the one hand and war on the other, allegedly in order to meet the needs of the people, is simply not enough. It exaggerates or deepens the alienated character of capitalist society. People won't put up with it, and when they don't put up with it but don't choose revolution various social pathologies appear. What has happened is that although people are not content with this legalistic form of social participation and social change, they still accept a variant of the basic bourgeois idea of uniformity and abstraction. This is why they don't support heterogeneity, and what indeed isn't procedural in the dominant bourgeois forms of social and collective action appears to the population of the bourgeois states as an irrational intrusion and eruption of the foreign, of the alien, of the irregular, of the threatening, of the "abnormal," of the immoral, of the seditious. At certain times, this was captured in the historical figure of the Jew, and it is given other forms: the immigrant, the Muslim, the Jihadi, or, yet again, the communist – but this time only as a *revenant*, because true communists are, well, a spectre (or, if not, like the Bohemian-Moravian variety, a sad joke).

It is pathological in the sense that people are attacking exactly what could save them; I mean, heterogeneity could have saved them from the uniform domination of capital and law, of the capitalist state. Similarly to fascism, which was people's action against themselves. Yet these new pathologies cannot be characterised as fascism, because they aren't a political tendency or a movement. They are merely a term for certain types of political feelings and actions. People are turning pathologically against their own best interests that they cannot conceive of due to the absence of a critical culture. Such a critical

culture doesn't exist (in spite of all our writings and speeches) as it has only ever existed with the support of a counter-power, as historical challenges to the existing order. So you can't blame people since the conceptual tools are simply not at hand. It is rather telling how the radical Left is turning paranoid: leftists are often discovering the substance behind the façade, and this is transmogrified into "secrets," hence the monomaniacal preoccupation with the intelligence services and hidden powers and "deep states." It's as if the machinations of élite groups, which are nothing new to the world, would somehow unveil the mystery of contemporary society; as though capitalism were an obscure conspiracy, although it is obvious enough. All of this is a reaction to the vanishing of revolutionary substance, which is blamed on occult powers and incomprehensible plots.

You mentioned that the so-called state socialist regimes, unjust as they were, functioned as a kind of support – at least in the ideological sense – for counter-power or counter-culture. This reminds me of Fredric Jameson's notion of "liberated territory." Slavoj Žižek is following this in his *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* He's theorizing that even under the worst period of Stalinism the idea of socialism was present, for example, in the cultural production of the state...

Lukács said that Solzhenitsyn was the best socialist realist, in *Ivan Denisovich*, and he didn't mean it ironically. As I said in my essay "Back to Banality" and elsewhere, it's very conspicuous that the Soviet-type societies had indeed operated a transvaluation of values by putting physical work, hence the body, at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of values. This hasn't happened in any other society, it was an absolute historical exception in which not the spirit – be it religious, royal, philosophical, legal, or state *raison* – but the people who have to do manual work were put symbolically at the helm of social hierarchy. It wasn't merely glorifying the proletariat and the peasant, but, very interestingly, also glorifying the housewife. Housework was always the most despised kind of work and it still is. In my own milieu, which is more or less leftist, people are surprised that, as I'm living with a little child, I do the housework even though I'm a man. Seeing a man doing woman's work? Of course, people say that it's nice, they don't laugh at me, they are simply surprised that a well-known intellectual should cook and wash the dishes. This old contempt for housework and for women is very deep-rooted. So this glorification of physical work and of the housewife, although it contained some conservative elements, meant a major change. It was a withdrawal of recognition from the traditional social hierarchies and "value systems."

Traces of this are still noticeable sometimes in Eastern Europe – in the general popular notion of the good and bad, not in the official ideology, although official ideology sometimes tends to use it. For example, politicians are praising hard work when they want to discard unemployment benefits and lower pensions. Apart from that it is very interesting that the figures of the plebeian man and woman were symbolically at the "top" of society, because a critical attitude towards leaders was always possible, in spite

of totalitarianism and dictatorship. There was no “divine right of kings,” no anointment. Party functionaries, the prime minister, or the general secretary of the party were not presented as the most valuable members of society, the worker in the factory or on the fields was – symbolically, not materially, but this was a very important ideological element of politics which had practical consequences in the form of unprecedented social mobility and a very high degree of economic and social equality (but, of course, this had nothing to do with a classless society). This is why whatever Stalin might have wanted, he couldn’t talk like Napoleon or Hitler, because the system was still notionally based on the dominance of the lower classes, which was extraordinary, an absolute exception in the history of received ideas (*idées reçues*, you know: popular, accepted ideas).

All these elements are lacking today; we are back to a very reactionary society, sometimes reactionary in quite an old-fashioned way, say, like in the 1820s – from before the 1848 revolutions – that kind of thinking in which people are openly flaunting their contempt for the masses, with even people who consider themselves liberal saying that “we need a rule of law and we need legal guarantees to defend us from the passions of the masses.” Passions of the masses were always supposed to be evil and dangerous. Look at the rhetoric of “dangerous classes” in the 1830s. This is counter-Enlightenment – a typical “reaction.” At that time, these sort of people were calling themselves, self-consciously and proudly, reactionary. I mean Joseph de Maistre, or Louis de Bonald, or, later, Hippolyte Taine, and then, quite idiotically, Gustave Le Bon. (Revived in a more intelligent manner by Elias Canetti’s book on the “masses.”) This is obvious today when, for instance, respectable people are talking about the extreme right and the dangers of neo-fascism, and they say these parties are using the prejudices of the people, exploiting the nihilistic and destructive energies of the plebs. (So racism would be the spontaneous ideology of the masses, would it not?) Such nonsense would have not been tolerated thirty years ago in polite company, people just wouldn’t dare talk like this, it would have been bad manners and intolerably hidebound prejudice. But it is no longer the case, bourgeois democracy is being undermined by reactionary attitudes because it has less and less popular legitimacy and this legitimacy is undermined by the élites, not by anything or anybody else. The élites, as always, are afraid of the masses – this is a classic right-wing attitude – and the predictable result is a total negation of any philosophical or moral or rational approach to questions of the common good.

We are facing old-style reactionary politics practiced by very narrow élites. I am saying this although such an outcome wasn’t our intention in 1989; people then – including myself – were to a certain extent naïve, although I was never as naïve and sentimental as, say, Václav Havel. But basically we all believed that the “velvet revolution” and the rest of it might actually signal an ennobling, or at least an overhaul, of liberal democracy which was even then rotting away in the West. We thought it was, metaphorically speaking, like new blood coursing through old veins or a blood transfusion. That was nonsense – nothing came of it. On the contrary, even the problems of Eastern Europe have inspired Western business and political élites to accept the very aloft, distant, and

contemptuous élitism of today. For example, when you see the attitude of the conservative press in Britain concerning Scotland, what do they say? “If these idiots want to go, let them go.” It means that any popular or, God forbid, “populist” desire is by definition vulgar, stupid, unworthy of discussion. I think that the political, intellectual, and imaginative energies of the prevailing order are spent. This is the tragic decay of capitalist democracy, but without a victorious challenger. That explains the force of the post-fascist element, not because there is a strong fascist movement (there is no such thing, at least not separate from the mainstream *fascisant* right), but because there is no resistance to it – that is, to the *passion of inequality*, prevalent in the media, both in their neoliberal and their romantic-conservative guises; in all this, good old class hatred and contemporary racism are nicely blended.

If this élitism, this contempt for the masses, and this totally irrational approach to political participation and collective action is dominant, then how can you create an egalitarian citizenship or anything that resembles egalitarian citizenship, or a constitutional system in which every citizen is a participant in the elaboration of the common good? Everybody would laugh if I told them that the latter is actually the aim of the state or that we’re living in constitutional states and therefore we are active agents in establishing the common good... Who would take it seriously? I wouldn’t. So this is a very sad state of affairs. I am not mourning bourgeois democracy, but I think that it was better than an utterly chaotic autocracy. And please remember the anti-political stance of dissidents such as Václav Havel and György Konrád, and also please observe the current NGO myth of “civil society” – attitudes of perfectly decent people that willy-nilly denigrate the dignity of collective action aiming at constitutional and legal changes, as if these were not within the purview of private citizens, as if “legitimate coercion” (the essence of the state) did not involve us, only the rulers that we distrust, disobey, and despise; what we can do is tend to the victims. But preventing their being victimised is, again, the business of government, unelected by an “us” who don’t give a toss about capital, law, and power. And what’s worse, this Epicurean withdrawal is perceived as resistance.

What established liberal democracy? Who managed to implement, for example, universal franchise universal franchise? Who established political equality for women? Who established more humane immigration rights? Who wanted equal wages for equal work and so on? Well, the workers’ movement – it would never have happened without it. It wasn’t capitalism’s own moral energies. There were counter-forces and the historical challengers and adversaries who succeeded in setting up class compromise through effective blackmail and contained violence. Bourgeois democracy is a result of class compromise. It wasn’t the work of the bourgeoisie. We forget what an important component of public life the workers’ movement was. What is a comparable force now? Of course, we have this micro-politics we’re all doing on behalf of women, of the homeless, of migrants, of the unemployed, of LGBTQ people. Maybe the only still effective emancipatory movement is feminism: it’s weaker than it used to be, but it’s still a force. But all of that is quite plainly unable to change the situation as a whole.

To sum up, I don't think that the problem of post-fascism can be solved by a bourgeois state; it cannot defend the population from the aforementioned elements because post-fascist elements are imposed by the bourgeois state or, if you wish, by liberal democracy. There is no total unity on this, there are variations, but I think that only a new adversary culture can launch the real resistance. You will ask me how... it's very difficult to say. But if we refer to historical precedents, then – if I'm not very much mistaken – there was the Enlightenment before the French revolution. So I think that the left-wing intelligentsia cannot be relieved of these duties. One is involuntarily reinventing the genres of the Enlightenment – in my case, political pamphlets and articles. So it may be a long period. Victorious social and political movements are unpredictable, and, meanwhile, we'll have to do our duty.

You bring a specific understanding of the Enlightenment to your essay "On Post-Fascism." I was wondering if your notion of the Enlightenment is not too straightforward. I quote from your essay: "the Enlightenment [...] progress meant universal citizenship – that is, a virtual equality of political condition, a virtually equal say for all in the common affairs of any given community – together with a social condition and a model of rationality that could make it possible."² Is this really an accurate denotation of the period of the Enlightenment? I mean, what we understood as social and political progress that took place at that time was more or less made possible by slavery and colonialism. In other words, if post-fascism, as you wrote, "reverses the Enlightenment tendency to assimilate citizenship to the human condition," was there ever a moment in the past when the Enlightenment stream of thought was genuinely universal? At the same time, is it not true that the whole concept of the Enlightenment is, at least to some extent, a Eurocentric phantasm?

It was never a universal condition and it is Eurocentric. But historical parallels and notions are never perfect. When I think of the Enlightenment, I always think of Kant. I am no *Aufklärer* myself – who could be after Horkheimer, Adorno, and Robert Kurz? – and I've just noted the change in the bourgeois condition from the one related to the Enlightenment and the subsequent demise of the Enlightenment under fascism. Even the Enlightenment utopia of universal citizenship was abandoned. Of course, it was never truly realized: there was colonialism, and neither the bourgeois state nor the universal market was born of anything but violence, including genocide, racial massacre, and mass displacement of colonial populations. During the reign of such utopias, the greatest of *Schweinereien* were taking place. My handling of "the Enlightenment" is an abstraction culled from a very imperfect social reality. I don't think that imperialism and colonialism

² *Ibid.*

can be logically deduced from the basic ideals of the Enlightenment, which of course should have included people of colour and women if it wanted to be universal.

Most certainly, the idea of a democratic utopia was constructed on the foundations of the Enlightenment; it must be based – as my subsequent work has uncovered – on the work of historians. The whole international system of human rights that was established by the UN charter, the Helsinki Conference, and continued by the European charter of fundamental rights – has to be considered in relation to the question as to how is it possible that Soviet lawyers actively participated in the formulation of the UN charter. It was none other than Andrey Vyshinsky, the chief prosecutor of the show trials of 1937, the foreign secretary of the Soviet Union at that time, who participated in the foundation of the United Nations and helped formulate its ideological character. What made the Soviet Union participate in the elaboration of the human rights legislation from San Francisco and Yalta to Helsinki? We shouldn't forget how unified modernity actually was. Emancipation and equality, industrial development, modern technology, the enlargement of the material base of human life – these ideas were shared by all, both by the Soviet Union and the United States. That was a common heritage of the Enlightenment that both communists and bourgeois liberals shared. Victory over fascism gave meaning to the life of my parents' generation. So, however paradoxical it may sound, and this is what people, obviously, cannot understand today, the Soviet Union was in its own horrifying and incomprehensible way quite sincere in believing that it was some kind of democratic power and formally took part in the international human rights régime because it considered itself to be ruled by the powerless. Absurd, of course, but rather interesting. Dominance of the poor over the rich was, after all, what the Greeks called democracy. Of course, it was an illusion, a mere "ideology," but it created some realities, and it was also a very powerful conviction and motivation for hundreds of millions of people – from Shanghai to Prague.

I think that the moment of 1945 was unique, and that from 1945 to 1989 we all, East and West, lived under the sway of this strange harmony of various Enlightenment utopias which held the United Nations together and prevented a war between the former victors in the Second World War. It wasn't only strategy and "the balance of terror," that is, nuclear weapons in both camps; there were also aspects in which these systems were secretly, yet closely, related. Therefore, when people started to notice that the Enlightenment utopia contained in these charters and covenants of human and civic rights simply didn't conform to facts... that was really shattering. This is why my essay on post-fascism has become so well-known, because it has shown these illusions to have crumbled in different ways – both in the East and in the West.

I'm using the term "Enlightenment" as a *terminus a quo*, as a comparison, not as something that can or should be rebuilt. Now, the question is that, since everybody is up to their necks in this weird end of universalism, including emancipatory aspirations that are supposed to build various autonomies – not republics, not world republics, but at

least autonomies for groups, individuals, cultures. They, too, participate in the *Zeitgeist*. There is no agenda for building a society for everybody in which an end of alienation can be imagined, in which universal emancipation is the final aim.

Therefore, there are two ways to go from here. One is chosen by the best elements among the liberals, who just want to save what has definitely passed. I have a little grudging sympathy for this, because it is a decent way of treating final defeat, but it's destined to fail. It's quite popular among enlightened bureaucrats in various institutions. Others are looking for new avenues, trying to reconstruct a very fragmented and fragile and fractious adversary culture, but they are affecting things in ways that are too small.

I don't think humankind is unable to generate something against exploitation and injustice and oppression and so on – if people had been capable of doing so in the past, they might manage in the future as well. Human nature, if there is such a thing, can't change so drastically, and certainly not only and always for the worse. So I'm not all that pessimistic. The question is: Do we have time? The deterioration of European societies is taking place very fast. I think, for example, that the increasing rôle of the secret services shows that the last vestiges of democratic participation are vanishing. Secret services governing, waging wars, keeping prisons, or controlling the courts through public prosecutors? That's quite a terrible development, even if I don't share the paranoias of a part of the radical Left. But it is undeniable that unaccountable public institutions and informal power arrangements at the top are playing an increasing rôle, from the international financial institutions to the para-states of the largest transnational corporations which make "liberal democracy" a travesty even for the more thoughtful people in the mainstream media.

The last argument of rulers has always been war. I don't know if we can wait indefinitely.

It seems that between 2000 and 2015, post-fascism has become very much a part of the political establishment. That is the main change – it's not a danger any longer, but an all-encompassing reality.

I believe that the concept of post-fascism is deeply connected to racism. The term "race" has not always been used to designate an ethnically identifiable group of people. I think that the French philosopher Étienne Balibar was following this conceptualization when he called broader practices of social exclusion "a racism without races." Ethnical racism has, of course, not disappeared, the opposite is true, but more and more people are stigmatized in a racist way although they are not necessarily identifiable on the basis of minor ethnicity. Am I right that this concept has something in common with post-fascism?

It's almost identical. Hungary is a conspicuous example of this, and there are more and more. I've just written about this issue – I analyzed the rhetoric of Aleksandar Vučić, the Serbian prime minister, saying exactly the same things as Mr. Orbán. That is, that people in need of social assistance belong to inferior "groups," meaning "inferior races" or *ethnies*. So the poor and people in the slums are considered to be something like

the Roma. The old reactionaries called them “the criminal classes” or “the dangerous classes.” They are not treated so much as a hostile class now, rather as an inferior race. So far it has been a quasi-racialisation and ethnicisation of the social question. Take an international perspective – all this talk about the “lazy Greeks,” those “swarthy Levantines,” the “dark-skinned” proletarian nations of the Orient or of the Mediterranean. Again, this shows that the ruling class doesn’t have to confront its political adversary any longer, because the political subjectivity of the working class is dead. The proletariat as a political subject doesn’t exist any longer. This rationalization isn’t a completely new phenomenon as it began with colonialism. At that time proletarians of the South were called “*les bougnoules*” – the racist term for Arabs, mostly North Africans, in France. So it’s not totally new, but it has now become exclusive. In countries such as Romania, for instance, the term “*asistat social*” (the “socially assisted,” an extreme right idiom now accepted everywhere and which denotes “subhuman”) is used unashamedly in the media. The right, increasingly both the conservative right and the social democrats, would say that “we won’t pay for these people,” which means: hard-working, hetero “real” men are not inclined to pay for the debauchery and the bad mores of the inferior classes or underclasses or genders, assimilated to the notion of “inferior races.”

You are critical about the concept of human rights. You wrote that “[t]he current notion of ‘human rights’ might defend people from the lawlessness of tyrants, but it is no defence against the lawlessness of no rule.”³ In his *Ethics*, Alain Badiou develops probably an even more radical critique of the human rights concept. He argues that since it is based on the notion of the human as a victim, “it reduces him [or her – LM] to the level of a living organism pure and simple.”⁴ That is why it may look like the current human rights concept leaves no place for an emancipatory project...

The subject of human rights is somebody who has to be protected against the deprivations of an unregulated society – in other words, capitalism. That wasn’t a stupid idea; nevertheless, it was based on the classical dichotomy of state and civil society, or authority and the individual, in a class society. This isn’t satisfactory for me as a socialist. Not because I want less freedom, but because I want more. So my answer is twofold. If we consider capitalism to be a society which still has a future, than the weakening of the defence mechanisms for the weak individuals in such a society is fatal. That doesn’t mean that we should be neutral towards the depredations of market societies and market systems and the various disadvantages and dangers that flow from it, the twin perils of autocracy and chaos. The general human condition is in a sorry state – people are persecuted, killed, humiliated, raped, burned, exploited, despised, and disrespected as always. When you

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2001), p. 11.

need a political action against this, you have to think very thoroughly whether you want the present structure (and to persuade its representatives) to help the unfortunate and the suffering, or whether you want a change that would create a more effective agency to succour them. Although I would prefer the second solution because I don't think that the bourgeois state in its current form is of any great help, I don't see real movements at the moment that would go against the present condition. Mere philanthropy, however noble and meritorious, is – unfortunately – hopeless.

Politically, the problem is proposed in the following manner: Are we willing to cooperate with human rights liberals and NGO people in defending the weakest? I don't think that it's class treason if one remains critical and clear about the fact that this is, indeed, class cooperation with the bourgeois left; that our ultimate ends as socialists are different and we therefore needn't accept the naïve or sometimes even mendacious ideology of the human rights liberals even while we are cooperating with them in order to save lives or mitigate physical suffering.

But we shouldn't have any illusions this time. I remember very well that in the East European dissident circles quite a few people were Marxists (I am not speaking of my personal experience, that was a bit more complicated). I mean people like Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuroń, Petr Uhl or János Kis. People like them were cooperating with other groups – Christian, liberal, even democratic nationalist – and all of them ended up as liberals.⁵ Why? They thought that however correct Marx was in his critique of capitalist society, capitalism is nonetheless a lesser evil because it can be tempered, moderated, and regulated by a consequent régime of human rights (as a Bolshevik régime plainly cannot be), and that if this lasts long enough it can even ensure social equality. That was the conviction – simplified, of course – of my generation of dissidents. The Marxists among them gradually gave up, because they wanted the people to escape dictatorship, whatever the price, which is fine; but they didn't keep their critical distance towards bourgeois society and lost their political independence. So, by 1989, practically no East European dissident remained on the anti-capitalist left, including me. This mistake shouldn't be repeated.

The language of capitalist society is, indeed, a legalistic, juridical language which enlarges the human rights discourse that had been thoroughly criticised by Marx 170 years ago. Those criticisms are justified. Civil society (in terms of political economy, nothing but “free labour”) cannot function in anything other than in a capitalist framework, therefore reinforcing human rights means reinforcing at least one crucial aspect of capitalist society. One should keep this in mind when helping well-meaning liberals save lives, and one should not forget that this is not an alliance, but a common action in an urgent situation.

⁵ For Petr Uhl's characterization of his own intellectual trajectory, see Petr Kužel's interview with him in this issue of *Contradictions*, pp. 169–184 (editor's note).

Now, unlike Badiou, you emphasise the concept of citizenship, coming from the Enlightenment heritage as well as human rights. Could you comment on your understanding of the relationship between the concepts of citizenship on the one hand and of human rights on the other? Is it possible to denominate the first in terms of activity and the second in terms of passivity?

Citizenship, of course, denotes an active feature of the same political framework. After all, if people have civic rights, it means they have the right to be citizens – an ability to participate and to interfere in the workings of the state. In the bourgeois state, there are social problems not regulated by human rights such as exploitation, social injustice, and inequality; however, members of society can nevertheless participate in the process of addressing social problems politically – in principle. So, formally, there is an aspect of political society such as suffrage, absence of arbitrary coercion, and so on, in which proletarians are the equals of their class superiors, the equals of the ruling class. For example, you cannot be arrested without a warrant, or your house cannot be confiscated if you pay your taxes. It's a guarantee against *arbitrary* discrimination and a guarantee of indirect participation in the running of the political state and of the government. This is the best position for subaltern classes that has been historically achieved *in a class society*.

But class society remains nonetheless a class society, and citizenship is not extended to actual participation – in systems of representative government, plebeians don't participate in the actual running of state affairs. Nor does it extend to “the economy,” which is regarded by the dominant legal and political ideology of bourgeois society as being a private-contractual and not a public affair and hence not supposed to be a part of the public interest, of the common good. That is the greatest fraud of capitalism: to present labour as a contractual relationship between an employer and an employee and a free agreement somewhat similar to marriage. But this lie is the limit that can be achieved in a class society. It can, of course, be even worse; under, for instance, Nazism, fascism, or a military dictatorship, politics is a private affair of a narrow ruling group and not even an affair of the ruling class in its entirety. Well, what we have in bourgeois liberal societies is only external control and indirect influence, but there is a very important qualification. I mean the idea of equal citizenship – for all inhabitants of a given territory, which is not much, but which contains the marrow of an idea, of the equal moral dignity of all human beings. So the idea of citizenship is potentially universal – you cannot affirm it, and then persistently deny it to some. But this is exactly what is happening. In other words, post-fascism.

However critical we may be, we must be conscious of the fact that the socialist idea of emancipation is to some extent inherited, because the universalistic element is contained within the general idea of emancipation. Of course, countless people since Rousseau knew that an exploited person without means, without education, without freedom of movement, and without a political chance to attain all this does not enjoy equal citizenship. But it is horrible that even this utopia (exemplified in practice by the avoidance,

at least, of legal discrimination) is being given up by bourgeois society. It had first been abandoned openly by Hitler, and it is being abandoned today in a more veiled fashion, in non-dictatorial, allegedly “democratic” circumstances. Even this very limited bourgeois idea of citizenship is under attack and this must not be tolerated for a single moment. So I’m speaking not only about the practical consequences which are already visible, but also about an increasing acceptance of the fact that unorganised popular masses don’t really have a say, especially in the hard stuff of politics (taxation, defence, wages, monetary policy, foreign affairs, infrastructure, urban planning, and the environment).

This is reflected by such utterly quotidian occurrences as not voting at all, or by the refusal to join a trade union, or by the unwillingness to stand for public office, the last of which I share. I was asked whether I would be on the candidates’ list of a small leftist party. I felt no need to do so – I think parliamentarism is finished. I wouldn’t be elected anyway, so I wouldn’t risk much, but even symbolically I wouldn’t do it. So the active aspect of citizenship is disappearing. It doesn’t mean anything else than your being a passive member of a regulated national community.⁶ Well, that is not what was meant by the French revolution when they thought about citizenship. It meant something more active and also much more dangerous – direct interference in public affairs naturally brings about several dangers of instability. Citizenship has become this kind of passive notion that used to be revolutionary.

You said that parliamentarism is finished, but one may ask what else? Is your critique comparable to István Mészáros’s critique in which he is calling for “an alternative to parliamentarism,” by which he also means drawing some inspiration from counter-systemic institutions of the former emancipatory movements? And if parliamentarism is finished, does it mean that it no longer makes any sense to focus on the parliament as the main site where decisions are being made?

My critique is similar to Mészáros’s to some extent, although I may not agree with him completely. I think that parliament is emptying out. The parliament, after all, is a body of elected representatives, and if people don’t want to elect them, if they don’t trust the institution... You know how unpopular bourgeois parliaments are everywhere. People know what to expect: no change. But apart from that, voting for the lesser evil again and again, well, that cannot last.

⁶ Like in this anecdote from the 1930s about the Swiss border guard:

‘D’où êtes-vous, monsieur?’

‘Je suis un citoyen roumain.’

‘La Roumanie, c’est un royaume ou une république?’

‘Un royaume.’

‘Alors, monsieur, vous n’êtes pas un citoyen, vous êtes un sujet.’

Wasn't the parliamentary, judicial, and the constitutional system supposed to save Hungary from Orbán and his semi-dictatorship, indeed to prevent him from occupying the whole state? Liberals thought that it was. And yet it all went without a hitch for him, very simply and smoothly. And people still think: "Well, there is still a parliament, what do you want, what do you mean, there is no freedom?" Who reads constitutions?

I'll tell you something very old-fashioned. It is an insult to our intelligence and to our sensitivity and to our sense of humour to behold today's bourgeois politicians. I believe that the quality of a society is also apparent by its ability to select tolerable people for the top functions. And how about these packs of clowns and idiots governing the contemporary world, even countries of great tradition and wealth? That's what's frightening. There were those tapes on which Polish politicians discuss politics in private. How do these people talk? These are, forgive me, just vulgar pigs. And they are entrusted with the destinies of a great nation. It's insulting and it means that the whole representative government is losing its crucial role within the capitalist state. It will attract only the worst type of people – and if not, they'll end up like Syriza: conform or perish. Mr. Milo Đukanović, the boss of Montenegro, one of the best cigarette smugglers now operating, has just been recognised as a valid "democratic" chief of government by being invited to take his place among the leaders of the imperialist military alliance, NATO.

Parliamentarism is decaying very fast, and the left cannot really offer any competition to the far right. And the far right is also used as blackmail: if you turn against the liberals or against social democracy, the fascists are coming.

As you said, there are some local exceptions. Many people on the left are still fascinated by Syriza, Podemos, and similar organizations. But aren't these parties more or less still anchored in the framework of parliamentarism, which you regard as finished? For instance, it isn't possible to compare Syriza to a massive socialist party of, say, the nineteen-twenties, which meant above all the structure of a counter-parliament, and also of non-parliamentary institutions such as workers' education, printers, banks, etc. So what do you think about these local exceptions? If they won't be able to realize their programs under these circumstances, will it be yet another proof of the thesis that parliamentarism is finished?

I don't know what would have happened if Syriza, or such a party anywhere, would have tried to go beyond both the parliamentary and capitalist framework. That would have meant total opposition to the international order and a very sharp conflict with everyone. What would have happened if they had indeed behaved like a Marxist party or even a social democratic party of the past? I don't know. Maybe they would not have been elected.

I think that parliamentarism in this case too shows its contemporary limits.

The party system is losing its relevance. In ancient parlance, people today are not joiners, but quitters. All true political activity is outside the system, in "civil society," in

the NGOs, in charities, in internet or social media groups, in feminist, gay, or environmentalist movements, in the left underground, in what in the absence of a better term we still call “culture” and, yes, in the neo-Nazi paramilitary squads – in other words, in the old co-existence of moderate reformism and desperate protest.

Today, the lives of thousands of migrants are endangered at the European borders, while the once liberal political powers are adopting more or less anti-immigrant positions. In Britain, for example, Labour under Miliband apologized during the general election campaign of 2015 for the “far too open” immigration policies of the former Labour governments. It looks like everyone is critical of the concept of multiculturalism under these circumstances. Of course, all of these critiques – regardless of the name of the political party – are of a right-wing nature. This is why I see it as crucial to articulate a different, emancipatory critique of the concept. In your essay “On Post-Fascism,” and I quote again, you tried to do exactly that: “Multiculturalist responses are desperate avowals of impotence: an acceptance of the ethnicisation of the civic sphere, but with a humanistic and benevolent twist. [...] The field had been chosen by post-fascism, and liberals are trying to fight it on its own favourite terrain, ethnicity. [...] Without new ways of addressing the problem of global capitalism, the battle will surely be lost.”⁷ Now, my question is obvious: What are these new ways or, in other words, what else should be done instead of just defending multiculturalism?

Miliband was not elected, among other things, because everybody could see his heart was not in it, he was ashamed to say that, he’s too nice a guy to believe in that, but he let his PR people persuade him. True racists wouldn’t say “on the one hand, and on the other hand, we made mistakes, but...” A true racist speaks like Cameron.

I still think that multiculturalism is giving in to ethnicism. And it is based on the idea of relativism implemented into policy: without judging any culture, any group, any aspiration, as long as there’s no trouble, people are welcome to exercise their foolishness. In other words, these people are seen as ridiculous, praying to gods we don’t even know, but if they don’t make any trouble and have something else to do, society leaves them alone. So there is an element of indifference in it which, of course, is opposed by the militant nationalism in the French version of *laïcité*; an aggressive secularism that is actually nothing but assimilationism and, ultimately, ethnicism. Again, this displays the weakness of the contemporary bourgeois state, because when there were tendencies aiming to assimilate minorities, it was believed that there was something to be offered to them. Being a Frenchman meant not only being of French ethnicity, but also sharing an idea of the republic. It was the same in pre-1914 Hungary, where Slovaks, Romanians, Serbs, and others were offered assimilation by the old liberal aristocracy: they could

⁷ Tamás, “On Post-Fascism.”

become Hungarians and enjoy “the glorious Hungarian legacy.” However stupid these ideas may have been, they betrayed a kind of self-assurance of the ruling élites and displayed some degree of progressivism and benevolence towards the subjects. Think of the “Black Britons.” The élites have given up this line of thought. Nowadays we’re back to distinguishing between proper Brits and Pakistanis in Britain; and you may well be a Pakistani in Britain – if you’re quiet, you’ll be fine.

There are three great theorists on treating the issue of minorities: Otto Bauer, Rosa Luxemburg, and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. These three addressed this issue at the pinnacle of the national conflicts of that time. Still, the best book on the topic is Otto Bauer’s *Social Democracy and the Nationalities Question*. This book for the first time spelled out the idea of ethnic and cultural autonomy and that made it very valuable. Where have we seen such autonomous republics in the recent times? Well, in the bloody Soviet Union, in Yugoslavia, and in other such places. As long as they existed, all those minority cultures flourished. I know it because I lived in Romania from my kindergarten years through elementary school until my university studies, and I could study in Hungarian. Free state education in minority languages? Territorial and cultural autonomy? That’s a Bolshevik inheritance. The bourgeoisie has never been sincere in its promotion of ethnic equality – it had to be forced to follow its own rhetoric. I believe internationalism, meaning recognition of all identities that wish to emancipate themselves and to contribute to the society, is still the way, and it’s much more than multiculturalism because it contains empowerment of the oppressed groups. You cannot clearly separate the issue of class from the issue of ethnicity. It is a very politically incorrect expression of Otto Bauer who said: *Rassenkampf ist Klassenkampf*. (Racial struggle is class struggle.) It is an exaggeration, but it’s essentially true.

Today multiculturalism isn’t satisfactory to anyone. Of course, even this indifferent tolerance is better than genocide, but what we need is emancipation and common creation of new communities from all these disparate elements of society. Now, when Frau Merkel says that “multiculturalism is dead,” she’s not being particularly nice or welcoming. Essentially, she’s saying: “Become Germans, or you’re in trouble.” And, compared to the rest, she’s still the best. The other day, Mr. Orbán was very laconic: “We don’t want any more of them to come, and those who are already here should go home.” That’s a clear message. Now we have practically zero immigration since nobody seems to be able to imagine that disparate cultural and ethnic groups could live together, because universalist political imagination has been lost with the universal demise of the workers’ movement.

And I don’t know how the minorities themselves will react. We have already seen some of these reactions – Islamism and such. For example, how will the Roma react to this persistent oppression of the Roma by the police around the entirety of Eastern and Central Europe?

How long will African-Americans tolerate racist anti-black police violence?

To use another example from the last British general elections, it is believed that at least the rhetoric of Labour was in some way slightly more left-wing this time. Its leader

repeated constantly that “Britain only succeeds when all its working people succeed.” Probably the main reason why this motto didn’t work is that it didn’t have a real resonance because there is simply no such decisive group that would identify itself with the denotation of “working people.” This brings me back to the question of an agent and the question of class, which was a central issue of your essay “Telling the Truth about Class.” According to the classical notion of class, it looks like the proletariat is now almost lacking as “a class for itself.” And also the position of the proletariat as “a class in itself” has changed profoundly. What could be done in this situation of the precarisation and dissolution of the working class?

This is of fundamental importance. Everybody in his or her right mind will recognise the presence of the proletariat as the main structural element of a commodity-producing society. At the same time, we know that the working class was also a political concept, the name of those alienated individuals who – if they want to be free – ought to put an end to capitalism and thus to all hierarchical society and to create a classless one. The recognition, on the one hand, of “the class in itself” as the *fons et origo* of capital creation and accumulation and the denial, on the other hand, of “the class for itself” in the subjective, active, political sense *simply reflects the bourgeois separation of the economy from politics*, the absolute conceptual and legal basis of liberal capitalism. This is conceding defeat – for eternity.

Nothing prevents us from looking for a workable idea of a new revolutionary agent. Marx and Engels found a small immigrant community of German workers in London to write their *Manifesto* for, which was more or less a spontaneous creation that resonated with many non-communist political currents, including those based on values like solidarity and self-help. This is how it started: the workers’ movement was at the beginning puritanical, egalitarian, solidaristic, and liberal. The analysis of the main social forces of today should be the primary question of radical intelligentsia. We should be better informed – not just empirically – but to think more profoundly about class than we did before.

The proletariat of today – and this was the case even earlier when it was not acknowledged by the movement – is no longer mainly industrial and is not even ‘productive.’ Many of its members do not work at all because they cannot and many still live in traditional servitude and personal dependence on plantations or in households or in conditions of semi-slavery. Like when the *Manifesto* was written. The disparate and variegated character of the proletariat was always the greatest obstacle for the revolution, as was discovered by Rosa Luxemburg, Hilferding, Otto Bauer, Lenin, Trotsky, Bordiga, Bukharin, Gramsci, and others. That is what “imperialism” means. But one of the functions of philosophy is to synthesise the infinite variety of human experience. (This is what Badiou means by “a politics of truth.”) The old Marxist conflict between “spontaneists” and “determinists” was, in the end, no conflict at all: both believed that the development of capitalism will of necessity lead to the communist *transcensus* without outside (conscious, deliberate)

interference. It was only two people – Lenin and Lukács, and later another two, Brecht and Benjamin – who saw that this is not sufficient, that the alliance of philosophy and “The Class” was necessary.

So, curiously enough, it is not “The Class,” which is lacking, but philosophy – and especially a link between the two. One of the causes of this is a strange combination of defeat and disappointment. It is small wonder that “the collapse of communism” (read: the slow decay of post-Stalinist state capitalism) was already the outcome of the disillusionment with this grandiose but substantially flawed version of modernisation, which inaugurated a system of commodity production and commodity exchange on the periphery whose false consciousness was “Soviet communism” and which ended up being nothing more than a welfare state for the boondocks without the appurtenances and paraphernalia of “liberal democracy,” as well as having a society that was more socially and morally conservative than the Victorian age but with a population listening to rock music with the corresponding sexual attitudes. Moderns wanted to be moderns and that was that. But the price for this small change – small, judged by authentic historical standards – was extremely high. So people managed to be disappointed with both communist “dreams” and capitalist reality. At the same time, the only important countervailing power – however poor a quality of one it was – that would uphold the ideal of a human condition devoid of exploitation vanished, and this has changed the political dynamic for ever. It was ultimately the rebel groups, which wanted true socialism and resisted the repressive apparatuses, which were defeated, not the one-party élites that have transmogrified themselves rapidly in the new national bourgeoisie and have made their deals with the West and with their local reactionary and chauvinist competitors. So we were defeated, unbeknownst to ourselves, by the capitulation of the régime we fought against. This irony would not have been lost on the author of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.

But quite apart from Eastern Europe, in spite of the immense theoretical material assembled, particularly since the nineteen-sixties, Marxism was, on the whole, mostly critical and not revolutionary. Faced with the threat of total darkness, I submit respectfully that this state of affairs should be considered ripe for a certain change.