

Extract from **Grundrisse at Context XXI**

(http://contextxxi.org/counter-revolution-against-a.html)

extracted on: 28 March 2024

Date of this contribution: September 2007

Counter-Revolution Against a Counter-Revolution

■ GÁSPÁR MIKLÓS TAMÁS

Unlike the revolutionary upheavals of 1953, 1956, 1968 and 1981 (respectively: East Berlin, Budapest, Prague, Gdańsk), the East European régime change in 1989 did not proclaim a purer and better socialism, workers' councils, self-management or even higher wages for proletarians. It was seen as a re-establishment of 'normalcy', historical continuity and a restoration of the treble shibboleth: parliamentary democracy, 'the market' and an unconditional allegiance to 'the West'.

As I have shown earlier, [1] this idea of continuity was a mirage. No such system existed before in Eastern Europe but a backward agricultural society based on ramshackle latifundia, an authoritarian political order led mostly by the military caste drawn from the impoverished gentry, prone to *coups d'état*, and a public and intellectual life dominated by bitter opponents of a perceived hostile 'West'. Elements of modernity, such as they were, had been introduced subsequently by Leninist planners and modernisers who, exacting an extremely high price of blood, suffering, scarcity, tyranny and censorship, had been able to impose mobility, urbanisation, secularisation, industrialisation, literacy, numeracy, hygiene, infrastructure, nuclear family, work discipline and the rest.

Those were the foundations on which the new market capitalism and pluralist democracy were built, not a rediscovery of a spurious liberal past, but its introduction by decree for the first time.

It was an extremely popular decree for that portion of the population (and of which I, too, was an enthusiastic and active member) which participated in the marches, rallies, meetings – not to speak of the shenanigans and skuldugery unavoidable even in utopian politics – and which seemed at the time to have been 'the people', but which was at best five per cent of the actual, empirical *dēmos*. Still, to those of us, stepping into the light from our sombre dissident conventicles of a few dozen people, a hundred thousand people appeared as 'the masses'. This minority, since dispersed, possessed a political attitude and a world-view that was a combination of 1848 and 1968: a joyful democratic nationalism and constitutional liberalism mingled with a distaste for authority, repression (cultural and sexual), discipline and puritanism. These transient ideological phenomena which seemed so profound, interesting and solid to us at the time, reflected a state of affairs that nearly all observers had been very slow to understand and even slower to describe comprehensively. [2]

Neither the leftish bent of most dissident criticism of 'real socialism', nor the the sixty-eightish, libertarian feel of some of 1989 was ever explained satisfactorily. Even the most glaringly obvious historical comparisons were not made. What I find most curious is that the coincidence in time of the crisis of the welfare state – East and West – did not awaken any interest. Historical and political imagination was paralysed by the unthinking acceptance of the claim

that Soviet bloc régimes must have been (in some elusive sense) 'socialist' since this is what they have declared of themselves and, in a more important sense, this was why they were relentlessly fought by the great Western powers of various hues.

Here, a few precisions should be made.

I don't think there can be any doubt as to 'real socialism' having been state capitalism of a peculiar sort. [3] It was a system with commodity production, wage labour, social division of labour, real subsumption of labour to capital, the imperative of accumulation, class rule, exploitation, oppression, enforced conformity, hierarchy and inequality, unpaid housework and an absolute ban on workers' protest (all strikes illegal), not to speak of a general interdiction of political expression. The only remaining problem is, of course, the lack of 'market co-ordination' and its replacement by government planning. The term 'private property' is misleading here, since if its essence is the separation of proletarians from the means of production, it also refers to state property, even if we should not try to minimise the considerable differences. If property is control (and legally it is control) then 'state property' is private property in this sense: nobody can pretend that in Soviet-type régimes the workers controlled production, distribution, investment and consumption. [4]

Nor can there be any doubt that post-Stalin state capitalism in the Soviet bloc and in Yugoslavia (roughly 1956-1989) attempted to create a kind of authori-

tarian welfare state with problems very similar to, and immanent in, any welfare state in the West, be it of the social democratic, Christian Democrat or Gaulist or, for that matter, New Deal, variety. (I shall neglect features of welfarist state capitalism in Fascist and Nazi régimes, however apposite. [5])

The social purpose of any welfare state – including post-Stalinist ‘real socialism’ with the Gulag closed down – was (we can safely use the past tense here) the attempt to bolster consumption through counter-cyclical demand management, to include and co-opt the rebellious working class through affordable housing, transportation, education and health care, to create a *dopolavoro* (a Mussolinian idea already much admired by New Dealers, but of course equally prevalent in the Stalinist Russia of the 1930s) replete with paid holidays, mass tourism, cheap popular entertainment, moderately priced sartorial fashions, and The Motor Car. *The Merry Kids*, a 1930s Soviet musical featuring Young Pioneers (the greatest Russian box-office hit ever), with its unbearable happiness, is undistinguishable from Hollywood or the Third Reich UFA studios’ deliriously smiley output, perhaps with less stress on sauciness and girls’ legs. At the same time, in ‘socialist’ Eastern Europe there were a few features more reminiscent of South East Asian corporate welfare methods – company holiday camps and company-owned holiday hotels, usually free for the employees, managed by the trade unions (access to them was basically a right for all citizens), free crèches and kindergartens for the workforce’s offspring – and some features inherited from European social democracy, but generalised and made mandatory, such as well-stocked lending libraries and cut-price bookshops in every enterprise, affordable good books, theatre and cinema tickets (moreover, books and tickets ordered through your trade union were to be had at half of that non-competitive price), positive discrimination in favour of working-class youngsters at higher education admissions, job security, cheap basic food, cheap alcohol, cheap tobacco, cheap and plentiful public transport, easy access to amateur and spectator sports. The absence of conspicuous wealth, let alone ostentatious luxury, of the ruling

class together with ever-recurrent shortages and a very reduced consumer choice, sexual puritanism, lengthy terms of military service, the cult of hard work (‘popular mechanics’ and space flight cults for the young) and a relentless propaganda emphasising the plebeian and ‘collectivist’ characteristics of the régime where everybody was supposed to know what to do with a tool-chest, a hoe or a pitchfork, promoted an atmosphere of equality.

An atmosphere, a mood, yes, but also a reality of incomparably greater equality than today. Nation-states in ‘real socialism’ oppressed ethnic minorities – outside Soviet Russia especially *after* Stalin’s fall – offering assimilation instead (training films for Hungarian social workers and local council officials in the early 1960s show forcible baths, haircuts and delousings for nomadic Roma families, operated by police and military hospital personnel, amid scenes of infernal humiliation and artificial for-camera grins) suggesting ‘unity’ and ‘harmony’ and an end to age-old cultural conflicts. The transfer of peasant populations to industrial townships, unlike in the nineteenth century, had been relatively well organised: until the 1970s when resources had begun to run out, they were moved into high-rise council estates, and immediately offered the whole set of comprehensive and egalitarian social services including health and culture – there are countries, such as Romania or the former Czechoslovakia where the majority of urban population still lives in disintegrating ‘communist’-era blocks of flats. [6]

There is no doubt that these societies were intolerably authoritarian, oppressive and repressed, but we are beginning to see how well-integrated, cohesive, pacified, crime-free and institutionalised they were, a petty bourgeois dream, but a dream nevertheless. Also, ‘vertical’, that is, upward social mobility was fast and comprehensive and, since we speak of initially backward, peasant societies, the change from village to town, from back-breaking physical work in the fields to technological work in the factory, from hunger, filth and misery to modest cafeteria meals, hot water and indoor plumbing was breathtaking – and the cultural change dramatic. Also the route from illiteracy

and the inability to read a clockface to Brecht and Bartók was astonishingly short. (By the way, it is instructive to see how institutionally embedded cultural needs can be – how half a continent stopped to read serious literature and listen to classical music in a couple of years since the social and ideological circumstances ceased to make such activities both handy and meaningful: *Doch die Verhältnisse, sie sind nicht so.* [7])

When, after the régime change in 1989 (in which the present writer has played a rather public rôle and about which his feelings are quite ambivalent retrospectively), the concomitant onslaught on ‘state property’ through privatisation at world market prices, asset-stripping, outsourcing, management by-outs (companies subsequently bought up by multinationals and closed down to minimise competition and to create new captive consumer markets) caused unheard-of price rises, plummeting real wages and living standards, massive unemployment. Market liberalisation meant that the hitherto protected, cushioned, technologically backward local industries could not withstand the enormous competition in retail markets which has led to the collapse of local commerce unable to resist dumping and similar techniques. Almost half of total jobs have been lost. The very real rejoicing over pluralistic political competition and hugely increased freedom of expression was dampened by immiseration and lack of security, accompanied by the ever-increasing dominion of commercial popular culture, advertising, tabloids and trash. What has been conceived of at first as colourful proved merely gaudy and as it became more and more shopsoiled its novel charm has waned.

All this was regarded by the unhappy East European populations as unmitigated and incomprehensible catastrophe. The political groups on the ground possessed by a little critical sense had been those which fought the former régime and continued to fight its ghost for a long time to come and pushed the post-Worl War II liberal agenda – freedom of expression, constitutionalism, abortion rights, gay rights, anti-racism, anti-clericalism, anti-nationalism, certainly causes worth fighting for, but bewildering

to the popular classes, otherwise engaged – without any attention to the onset of widespread poverty, social and cultural chaos. These groups combined the ‘human rights’ discourse of the liberal left with the ‘free to choose’ rhetoric of the neo-conservative right (they still do, after 18 years) and thought of privatisation as the break-up of the almighty state which – armed with the weapon of redistribution – appeared the enemy to beat, the ‘dependency culture’ to be the ideological adversary preventing the subjects of the *Sozialstaat* from becoming freedom-loving, upright, autonomous citizens. I remember – I was a member of the Hungarian parliament from 1990 to 1994 – that we discussed the question of the republican coat of arms (with or without the Holy Crown; the party of ‘with’ won) for five months, but there was no significant debate on unemployment while two million jobs went up into the air in a small country of ten million.

The task of a welfarist rearguard action went to any political force considered to be beyond the pale. In countries where there was official discrimination against functionaries of the ‘communist’ *apparatus* and where the members of the former ruling party had to stick together for self-protection and healing wounded pride, like in East Germany and the Czech Republic, this was incumbent upon the so-called ‘post-communist left’, and for the rest, it usually went to extreme nationalist and ‘Christian’ parties. Since there was a certain continuity of personnel between the ruling ‘communist’ parties’ pro-market reformist wing (and their expert advisers in universities, research institutes and state banks) who, being at the right place at the right time, profited handsomely from privatisations, there was a superficial plausibility to the popular theory according to which ‘nothing has changed’, this was only a conspiracy to prolong the rule of a discredited ruling class. The truth of the matter is, of course, that the changes have been so gigantic that only a fraction of the *nomenklatura* was able to recycle itself into capitalist wheelers-dealers. The ultimate winner was nobody local, but the multinational corporations, the American-led military alliance and the EU bureaucracy.

Nevertheless, there is a grain of truth in this popular theory, namely the suspicion that the contrast between planned state capitalism (aka ‘real socialism’) and liberal market capitalism may not be as great as solemnly trumpeted in 1989. Popular theories formulated as paranoid urban legends, however understandable, cannot (and should not) replace analysis. But they do have political significance, especially as many successor parties to former ‘communist’ organisations are now touting the neo-conservative gospel (the term ‘neo-liberal’ is something of a misnomer: today’s ultracapitalists and market fundamentalists are no liberals by any stretch of the imagination) and are dismantling the last remnants of the welfare state. Hence the strange identification in some countries of Eastern Europe of ‘communists’ with ‘capitalists’ – after all it is frequently former ‘communists’ who are doing this to us, it is always the same people on top, the democratic transformation was a fraud, this is all a Judeo-Bolshevist cabal and so on.

Now the identification of socialism and capitalism is well known to have been a Nazi cliché – both are ‘racially alien’ – but ‘the circumstances, they are not so’, they could not be more different. After all, communists and social democrats in the 1920s and 1930s were united and adamant in their false consciousness concerning their integral opposition to capitalism and tyranny. False consciousness does not preclude sincerity. The ex-communist parties at the beginning of the twenty-first century are opposed not only to socialism but to the most elementary working-class interests, this is nothing new and it also not limited to Eastern Europe. (When speaking of Eastern Europe, I always include the European part of the former Soviet Union, following the good example of General de Gaulle.) After all, the Italian Communist Party and its leader, Enrico Berlinguer have called for austerity measures and the proletarian duty to acquiesce in them two years before Mrs Thatcher’s accession to power. [8] (The right wing of the former PCI, the DS, is now proposing a *merger* with its enemy of sixty years, the Christian Democrats ...) Therefore the cliché, while it has not become any truer, represents fair and just historical revenge.

This is why and how the neo-conservative counter-revolution is countered by forms of resistance couched in the terms of the pre-war nationalist and militarist right, often intermingled with open fascist rhetoric and symbols and, in the case of the former Soviet Union, extreme eclecticism trying to synthesise Stalinism and fascism. (The Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the main opposition force in Russia, is inspired by the loony ideologues of the White Guards who represented the political ‘brain trust’ of the general staff of Admiral Kolchak and Baron Wrangel.) There is a great variety of political solutions. After the defeat of the ‘neo-liberal’ or neo-conservative régime of ex-communist President Kwaśniewski in Poland, the ultra-Catholic Kaczyński twin brothers’ act, however ridiculous it may have appeared at first, is quite successful and consolidating, combining extreme social conservatism, anti-gays, anti-women, anti-minorities, anti-Russian, anti-German, anti-semitic and, above all, anti-communist, with monetarist orthodoxy, pro-Bush military zeal, persecution of everybody on the left (they have stopped the pensions of the few surviving veterans of the International Brigades in the Spanish civil war in the 1930s), censorship and savage ethnicist propaganda. In Slovakia, the government of the left social democrat, Robert Fico, is an alliance of his own party with the nationalists of Vladimír Mečiar and the quasi-fascist National Party led by the notorious alcoholic blowhard, Ján Slota. Mr Fico had the effrontery to increase pensions, cut public transport prices, stop the dismantling of state-managed, essentially free health care and public education. It is an immensely popular government, made even more so by its sharp anti-Czech and anti-Hungarian nationalism combined with pro-Russian leanings.

In Hungary, the socialist-liberal coalition led by the young and gifted Ferenc Gyurcsány, a billionaire businessman and a former secretary of the Communist Youth League before 1989 was returned to office in 2006 after an election campaign based on left-populist promises which, in a secret speech to his parliamentary party, Mr Gyurcsány himself announced to have been a bunch of deliberate lies. After the

speech has been leaked, riots erupted in Budapest, and the headquarters of state television – the symbol of mendacity – has been torched. On October 23, 2006, the fiftieth anniversary of the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the formerly defeated police visited retribution on the protesters, beating up rioters, passers-by, already immobilised prisoners and whoever else was in their way. (The liberal intelligentsia, to its eternal shame, took the side of police terror.) Protests continued for months, deteriorating rapidly, dominated by the symbolism of the Arrow-Cross, the Hungarian Nazis famous for their anti-Jewish terror in the encircled Budapest of 1944. The protests were adroitly mined by the parliamentary right, led by the former prime minister, Viktor Orbán. The government coalition proceeded with its radical austerity measures, immense tax increases, social and health expenditure cuts, closing down hospitals (the first deaths caused by the chaos in the health service have already occurred), schools, cultural institutions, cutting or stopping subsidies altogether, planning to privatise the hospitals, the railways, the electricity board and municipal services, liberalising prices (e. g., those of medicaments), introducing fees for every visit to a (state) doctor, fees for university students, doubling the price of public transport, freezing wage and pension increases – all necessary to reduce public debt and trade deficit in order to meet the so-called ‘convergence criteria’ demanded by the European Union, mandatory for joining the eurozone. Credit-rating agencies such as Standard and Poor’s, have more influence on government policy than the electorate.

All this is opposed by deafening anti-communist vociferation, xenophobic, anti-semitic, anti-Western and anti-immigrant agitation (there are practically no immigrants in Hungary, but never mind, there may be at some point in the future if the rootless cosmopolitans in office are not chased away). The polls show that the parliamentary centre-left may disappear, government supporters are openly threatened. There will be a referendum on the most unpopular measures initiated by the parliamentary right, certain to be another, unsurprising major defeat for the socialist-liberal government. Because of po-

lice abuses, the three major chiefs of the national police, the head of the secret service and the justice minister responsible had to resign in ignominy. Corruption is rife. Motorway and underground railway construction is in tatters. High-rise office blocks are unfinished or empty. Trust in public institutions is nil.

Thousand of motorcyclists, sporting imitation Wehrmacht helmets, huge Nazi and Arrow-Cross flags on their machines, the official name of their association – *Goy Bikers* – proudly emblazoned on their leather jackets are filling the main streets of central Budapest with their thunderous noise and billowing exhaust fumes. The country is rife with rallies demanding an unelected, non-party upper chamber, a constitution ascribing sovereignty to the Holy Crown (instead to the people). Forty-one Polish MPs, members of the majority in the Diet, proposed a bill for the election of Jesus Christ as honorary president of Poland (some would amend this to honorary *king*). The speaker threw it out on a technicality, they did not dare to put it to a vote: it might have won.

Add to this the seeming inability of the Czech Republic, Romania and Serbia to put together a working parliamentary majority, the anti-Russian madness gripping the Baltic statelets together with very real, apartheid-style discrimination against their ethnic Russian minorities, the persecution and segregation of the Roma minorities everywhere (said the president of Romania of a journalist from whom he personally wrestled and stole, well, confiscated her mobile phone: ‘I won’t talk to this stinking Gipsy c**t’), the total collapse of ethnic enclaves ‘statified’ by the august ‘international community’, Bosnia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia, Moldova/Transnistria, the Stalinist *intermundium* of Belarus, the expulsion of ex-Yugoslav residents from Slovenia – and you have a picture of the ‘new democracies’, the brave soldiers of the ‘coalition of the willing’, Mr Rumsfeld’s and Mr Cheney’s ‘new Europe’.

Liberal commentators speak of an insurgency against modernity. This is utter nonsense. The neo-conservative (or neo-liberal) counter-revolution has attacked the nation and especially the

lower middle classes on two fronts.

First, it has ignored the fact that social welfare institutions are the backbone of national identity, the only remaining principle of cohesion in a traditionless capitalism. It is not only the loss of livelihood, but the perceived loss of dignity, the loss of the sense of being looked after, protected, thus respected by the community represented by the state which is at stake. Upward mobility was the greatest triumph of planned welfare states, internalised as dynamic equality. The loss of class status – this latter symbolised in East Central Europe characteristically by a university degree: even a starving *Herr Doktor* is a gentleman – the feeling that the descendants of tradespeople, civil servants, teachers and physicians may have to do physical work, *again*, or flee somewhere as illegal migrants, to be *déclassé*, is an intolerable threat. This insurgency is the revolt of the middle classes against loss of nation and loss of caste.

Second, identifying with the bulwarks and battlements of the welfare state *created by the communists* is ideologically impossible for the middle classes. It would be a tremendous loss of face, since ‘communism’ symbolises defeat and the past, and the petty bourgeoisie is nothing if not modernist and driven by the myth of achievement, self-improvement and the rest. They cannot defend openly the institutions that gave them their dignity in the first place, which has made peasants into bureaucrats and intellectuals since this would be acknowledging the shameful agrarian past and the equally shameful ‘communist’ legacy. Thus, by representing the neo-conservative (or neo-liberal) destruction as the work of communists, shame can be avoided and the defense of pre-1989 institutional arrangements acceptable. Also, former communist party or communist youth secretaries cannot say that they never belonged to that institutional order and they have nothing to be thankful for its blessings, and they have to declare that the dismantling of that order is a correction of a mistake. So they appear fallible and opportunistic, not the harbingers of a new era, liberty or some such.

So, the new counter-revolutionaries can be fashioned as being of both the left

and the right, and the impeccably anti-communist foes of the 'communist' privatisers, monetarists, supply-siders and globalisers. They can defend the Bolshevik-created welfare state without giving an inch to Bolsheviks who went from the International to the Transnational and the Multinational, since both can be opposed by the idea of militant ethnicity, quite different from classical nationalism built upon the legal and political equality of all citizens, regardless of creed and race.

Since this outbreak of political lunacy in Eastern Europe is as much a defensive reaction to neo-conservative or neo-liberal globalisation and neo-imperialism as the anti-capitalist version of the new social movements in the West and in the Third World (I know, this expression exudes an unpleasant whiff but I could not find or concoct a better one), we shall have to consider briefly the quite numerous and slightly alarming parallels between the two.

The differences between the 'post-Fordist' contemporary protests from past forms of resistance to capitalism in the twentieth century are considerable.

Because of changes in technology and housing (including suburban spread, 'home ownership' for the working class, the motor-car, the dismantling of the mass factory), the dispersal of the workforce and, in general, because of changes in the organisation of production, not to speak of the impact of the new mass media, the main adversary class in advanced capitalism, the proletariat, is now spatially separated from the seats of power (both economic and political) which are *anyway de-territorialised* and *de-nationalised*. One cannot storm the Bastille or the Winter Palace since the structure of power has been transformed. Direct revolutionary confrontations between, say, the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' are impossible, except in some so-called backward, that is, poor, countries. Thus, contemporary struggles are *largely symbolic*, compare, e.g., the protests against the G8 summit meeting at Heiligendamm, taking place as I write. Let us suppose for a moment that the protesters 'win' and manage to chase away the assorted heads of state and other great panjandrum from Mecklenburg-Vorpommern – what would happen? They would return to

their respective seats of government, with a few bruises, perhaps – end of story. There are no specific demands ('*Make capitalism history*' is not one), therefore the protesters are not meeting 'bourgeois politics' at the level where it is designed and implemented – and the few really specific demands, in fact, requests, voiced by a moderate wing are confined to the framework of bourgeois politics and therefore not revolutionary (for example, those concerning carbon emissions, migrant labour, intellectual property rights etc.), so ultimately compatible with bourgeois (mainstream liberal) politics even if they have few chances of immediate success. Violence erupts because the protesters are opposed to the 'system' but the system is not invested in an arbitrary congeries of nation-state bosses who are not exercising their true, that is, legal power in this setting. What is threatened (unlike in the case of communist or socialist revolutions) is not a régime change, but chaos. Chaos cannot be met by repression (although it can be suppressed and 'cleaned up' by police and Bundeswehr), since only counter-power can be repressed, and protest as such is not power. Repression itself can be made, on the other hand, into chaos. Power does not encounter counter-power, unlike in the case of classical – especially European – revolutions. [9]

In post-Fordist, twenty-first century protests the fundamental principles of the political and legal order and of statecraft are not directly challenged. The regular army is not opposed by a Red Army, police by Red Guards or *Republikanischer Schutzbund* (Austria 1934), national, parliamentary governments by workers' councils, bourgeois parties by proletarian parties, nation-states by a universal republic of councils (let us not forget that the coat of arms of the Soviet Union was the terrestrial globe swathed in red strips inscribed with '*Proletarians of all countries, unite!*' in languages not local – such as French, English, German, Hindi without the slightest parochial allusion to Russia and initially its 'national' anthem was, simply, the *Internationale*), principles of private ownership, of the separation of powers, of the distinction between state and civil society are not announced in a straightforward manner to be abolished presently, cultural or ideological sub-

-systems (from law to art) are not directly denounced to be deceit. As we have seen, the demands of the protesters are not wholly unimaginable within the system as greater equality, an end to imperialistic intervention and to the pile-up of nuclear weapons, greater justice towards various groups etc., even if not the matter of practical, feasible politics of the moment, have nothing in them that could not be welcomed into a more generous, more innovative liberal politics. (I have said earlier that the anti-globalisation movements combine social democratic, reformist policies with revolutionary street theatre.) Why the despair then?

I do not think that the actual policies propounded matter very much. These movements are *profoundly a-political or anti-political*. They are addressing 'problems', not attacking state-forms. They are attempting to ignore studiously the state as such which they recognise *implicitly* since they are more or less expecting their demands and proposals to be made into government (or global government: IMF, World Bank, WTO, OECD) policy but not trying at the same time to create a new state-form more amenable to prosecute such policies.

In these post-Fordist protest movements there is nothing that would be inherently impossible to be also attained by change(s) of government(s) through elections by parliamentary parties or an international alliance of such parties. Why then the reluctance to join the by now traditional varieties of political participation, e. g., elections, referenda, plebiscites, strikes or different but longer, more patient and more purposeful methods of passive resistance or civil disobedience? Or, if this proves impossible, why not prepare, and train for, revolution?

The answer is, I think, in their a-political substance: it is *the withdrawal of recognition from pluralistic politics* – which presupposes the conquest and exercise of power – *as such*, including revolutionary politics. It is not apathy – there is a lot of passion, particularly hatred, contempt, scorn – but an objectless repudiation of a subjectless order (that of capital). But the wholesale rejection of the present order is not matched by a corresponding and re-

sponding utopia (like in 1968); this is a projectless, anti-utopian revolt, pure negation – which makes it paradoxically stronger since the wrecking debates about means and ends are implicitly void.

It is important to establish that the new protests are, by the same token, not less subversive than they predecessors had been, since what they attack is not the political and social order per se, nor liberal political institutions as such (not even the markets: 'fair trade' presupposes markets), but *legitimacy*. Civil disobedience, when partial and particular in its aims, however radical, is a morally grounded, publicly declared and assumed law-breaking. But however much it resists law, the very resistance is couched in terms of liberal constitutionalism. Now *generalised* civil disobedience (generalised in its objectives, not in its prevalence), even if it is plain that it cannot trigger a collapse of the prevailing order, poses a problem for liberal democracy. Without the systemic opposition being able (or indeed, willing) to create counter-power, government by consent – which is the basis of any 'free' polity – becomes impossible. Consent is increasingly, albeit passively and symbolically, withdrawn, not counterbalanced by resistance (which is naturally political) but by a checking-out from institutions and by a relegation of reflection on human affairs onto an altogether different, usually ethical, plane. But since this ethics is usually some species of distributive justice, it needs an authority in which the intellectual force necessary for fair redistribution rests.

The ever more consensual character of formerly and supposedly adversarial political processes (elections, party politics, the nations' contest, conflict of capital and labour in the workplace) proved self-defeating. Authority is historically asserted only against something: the conflation of authority and politics is extremely dangerous. Nevertheless, all other forms of authority (religion, consensual social morality and 'moral sense', high culture, science, tradition as such comprising old people's alleged wisdom and the like) have atrophied, therefore all scission within politics causes panic. The one surviving form of authority by assent is still with

us since it is not maintained by the community by virtue of its excellence, but only as an expression of the serendipity of surreptitious, whimsical, capricious, impermanent will. When this will appears to be cheated, hell breaks loose. This popular will, perceived as an empty screen, onto which anything can be projected, is subservient to mood and fashion. If the dominant style of public decisions and pronouncements is not in tune with these transient perceptions of demotic preferences, this serves as a proof of the hypocritical or illusory character of political institutions which are 'out of touch' with these demotic preferences, hence subservient to occult élite powers, interests or cabals.

Small wonder, then, if the desperate and *déclassé* middle-class youth in Eastern Europe dreams of sinister plots and feels that its sorrow and anxiety is both democratic and profound because somehow it matches the style of the epoch.

The unmediated, direct negation of legitimacy seems to contradict the lack of truly revolutionary intentions I just have imputed to the new social movements. But revolutions are quarrels. The revolutionary says to the tyrant, 'You declaim that your order is just; no it isn't; it is the next order we are going to inaugurate that is just; you are wrong, and we are right; God is on our side'. The new social movements would say nothing of the sort. Justice as conceivable by conventional politics is of no interest to them. They desire an end to global warming or to child poverty by means they despise, while they do not think there are any other means available – but it will not be they who would have to use those means.

The shift of the political struggle *from form to substance* makes constitutional, legal, legitimising arguments superfluous. The apparent recognition that there are no contemporary alternatives to capitalism in the offing does not mean that capitalism now is considered legitimate or even bearable. On the contrary. It means the abandonment of the constitutional and social idea of legitimacy and of the philosophical ideas of justice and liberty seen in the context of conscious human action. This is in marked contrast to Marx who saw that the problem with capitalism is precisely that it (together with exploitation, op-

pression and hierarchy) prevails among free and equal subjects.

The *Zeitgeist* that makes young Western Europeans to march under red and black flags is different from young East Europeans who imitate their Palestinian scarves and bandannas, their hoods and masks, their stone-throwing and their rebel cool they have watched enviously on television but combining all this with extreme authoritarianism, racism and so on. While West European, North and Latin American anti-globalist demonstrators evince a nostalgia for the revolutionary proletariat, their East European counterparts express unambiguously their fear and loathing of proletarians. Even if this is merely politico-cultural atavism, it (class as orientation point) is highly significant.

The adaptation of the props and stage management of *gauchiste* demonstrations by reactionary, bourgeois nuclei of future storm-troops is in part a cargo cult. [10] More importantly, though, it is the application of militant anti-politics – at its heart there is, both East and West, a culturally anti-*étatiste* defense of the redistributionist, protective, strong state, a living self-contradiction – to the ruins of a secular society based on egalitarian planning, 1945-1989. R. I. P. Involuntary post-modern pastiche plays a certain rôle. A born-again (as fake Catholic and fake nationalist) burgher middle class created by 'communists' striving and seeking to preserve institutions and routines practiced by 'communists' all the while shouting 'death to the communists' meaning capitalists: this would have warmed the late Jean Baudrillard's cunning heart.

The working class is silent. There are hardly any strikes. This battle is fought between transnational capital and its native agents and the local, ethnic middle classes and the ethnicist and clericalist intelligentsia. An authentic left has not surfaced.

Yet. [11]

[11] 'Un capitalisme pur et simple', La Nouvelle Alternative, vol. 19, no. 60-61, March-June 2004, pp. 13-40; 'Ein ganz normaler Kapitalismus', Grundrisse 20, June 2007 (forthcoming).

[2] Cf. G. M. Tamás, 'The Legacy of Dis-sent: Irony, Ambiguity, Duplicity', in: Vladimir Tismaneanu, ed., *The Revolutions of 1989*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, pp. 181-197 (a first version has appeared in the *TLS*, May 14, 1993); 'Paradoxes of 1989', *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 13, no. 2 (spring 1999), pp. 353-358; 'Victory Defeated', in: Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, eds., *Democracy After Communism*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, pp. 126-131.

[3] An excellent survey of 'state capitalism' theories can be found in Mike Haynes, 'Marxism and the Russian Question in the Wake of the Soviet Collapse' (formally a review of books by Michael Cox [ed.], Paresh Chattopadhyay and Neil Fernandez), *Historical Materialism* 10.4 (2002), pp. 317-362. See also my 'Un capitalisme pur et simple', loc. cit., and cf. Stephen A. Resnick, Richard D. Wolff, *Class Theory and History: Capitalism and Communism in the USSR*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, compare Paresh Chattopadhyay's review, *Historical Materialism* 14.1 (2006), pp. 249-270.

[4] Also, it cannot be denied that the new bureaucratic ruling class had true and deep proletarian roots. A Hungarian analysis of the 'nomenklatura' shows that in 1952, 70% of communist party apparatchiki had been formerly factory workers or agricultural labourers (51.6% skilled workers) other employees 9.4%, intellectuals 3.3%, finished elementary school 62.7%, with university degrees 2.8%. In the separate 'state' (ministries, local government) 'apparatus', 47% had been previously factory workers, peasants 10.3%, intellectuals 11.5%. (Tibor Huszár, *Az elitől a nomenklaturáig*, Budapest: Corvina, 2007, p. 63.) Even in the main ruling bodies of the communist party, the Politburo and the Secretariat, a majority of working-class origin was maintained to the very end. There cannot be the slightest doubt that the old aristocratic and bourgeois élites had been thrown out and that a plebeian tone was to be heard throughout.

[5] See, however, David Schoenbaum, *Hitler's Social Revolution: Class and Status in Nazi Germany*, Garden City NJ: Anchor Doubleday, 1967 and compare the works of Götz Aly and the debates they have triggered.

[6] Antonio Negri, in a 1967 essay which looks suspiciously like a classic, has shown how the welfare state was the result of first radical reckoning of the bourgeoisie with the power of the working class, a political inference from a profound understanding of the structural rôle of the proletarian adversary. See his 'Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State', in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Labor of Dionysus: A critique of the State-Form*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, pp. 22-50. There must be an understanding of how 'real socialism' has reverted after the second world war to the non-coercive extraction of surplus value (an end to self-colonisation through slave labour in the Gulag) and to the construction of social cohesion through stimulating consumer demand. This was the fundamentally Keynesian programme of Imre Nagy in 1953 and 1956 and of Aleksandr Dubček and Ota Šik in 1968.

[7] Bertolt Brecht, 'Die Dreigroschenoper', Stücke, I, Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1975, p. 76. ('The circumstances are never just so.')

[8] See Ernest Mandel, *From Stalinism to Eurocommunism*, London: New Left Books, 1978, pp. 125-149. The opportunist turn towards straightforward bourgeois politics in the PCI explains the early rise and large influence of the Italian far left, cf. Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, London and Sterling VA: Pluto, 2002.

[9] This conundrum is reflected in the debates about contemporary imperialism. On the one hand, Antonio Negri, once one of the most incisive theorists of class struggle, is setting aside the problem of the locus of the revolution, thinking it has dissolved. On the other hand, the great Marxist scholar (economist, historian, geographer, urban critic, philosopher of history), David Harvey, retreats from Marx to Rousseau (and sometimes, it seems, to Robin Hood) with his theory of 'assimilation by dispossession' very much in tune with the moral sentiment of the new social movements, see his *The New Imperialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003 and his *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. I agree, though, with Ellen Meiksins Wood regarding the continued importance of the na-

tion-states as loci of power. As she points out, simply, clearly and decisively, there is no sign of a development towards world governance as a result of globalisation; a certain sheen of direct rule by capital is, I think, a mirage created by the destruction of the welfare state and the re-fashioning of government techniques sometimes harking back to old methods from classical *laissez-faire* times. Cf. her 'Logics of Power: A Conversation with David Harvey', *Historical Materialism* 14.4 (2006), pp. 9-34. Compare her wonderful, characteristically succinct analysis in *Empire of Capital*, London and New York: Verso, 2003, *passim*. Interesting points are raised, contra Negri, by Alex Callinicos, 'Toni Negri in Perspective', in: Gopal Balakrishnan, ed., *Debating Empire*, London and New York: Verso, 2003, pp. 121-143. Also, there would be need to confront Harvey's new Proudhonist doctrine (not 'property is theft', but 'empire is robbery') with Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, 'Global Capitalism and American Empire', *Socialist Register* 2004, pp. 1-42, and, *idem*, 'Finance and American Empire', *Socialist Register* 2005, pp. 46-81, also criticised by Alex Callinicos, 'Imperialism and Global Political Economy', *International Socialism* 108 (autumn 2005), pp. 109-128.

[10] It is an open question, how much more authentic are the communist and anarchist paraphernalia of anti-globalisation protest in the West than the Arrow-Cross and Iron Guard symbolism of militant youth in Eastern Europe?

[11] This essay draws on my dozens of articles written for two centre-left dailies of national circulation, *Népszabadság* and *Népszava* as well as for two liberal weeklies, *Élet és Irodalom* and *HVG*. They deserve my thanks, since their editors were not happy either with my qualified understanding for the rioters and my unconditional condemnation of police action or with my judgment on the Hungarian government's policies. I had to simplify some issues for the foreign reader.

Gáspár Miklós Tamás: Geboren 1948. Ungarischer Philosoph sowie ehemaliger und gegenwärtiger Dissident in Budapest.

License of this contribution
Copyright
© copyright the article's author