



## Florin Faje: from sport and the body to nationalism and modernity

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Radical scholars often have the bothersome quality of spoiling the few delights of life with clouds of despondency. Critique often meanders from the pages of the books we read and write into pointlessness that eclipses the experience of smoking a cigarette, devouring an unhealthy meal, or imbibing a glass of wine. To the end, Anthropologist Florin Faje never stopped enjoying life: not to mention cigarettes, wine, and unhealthy food. Yet, it would be a mistake to misconstrue Florin’s fun-loving and compassionate spirit for either complacency or the lack of a critical view. Indeed, he passionately rejected the righteousness and moralism inherent in liberalism. He recognized that the world was far too damaged for simple social reforms while, at the same time, he never accepted living in a perpetual state of angst and unhappiness as an option. His student Maria Martelli beautifully captured his perspective in her eulogy. She described a scene where she had complained to Florin that her understanding of the dire nature of the “climate crisis” had left her unable to focus on her thesis. Florin responded, in his

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measured way. “Well, yes, that could be a setback. But look, he said: if we must die, why die desperately? Why not walk towards death joyfully, dancing? What’s left to lose, why not be happy meanwhile?”<sup>1</sup>

On January 15, 2020, at the early age of thirty-five, Florin died from a cerebral stroke. He was beginning what promised to be a long and productive career as an anthropologist, social critic, and teacher. The unexpected loss has dealt a severe blow to students and colleagues of the Department of Sociology and Social Assistance at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. His unique approach to life made him a dependable calming force who contributed to the department’s collegiality.

Florin was born and raised in Baia Mare, in Romania’s northwest region, the capital of Maramureş County, on October 10, 1984. He was proud to be from Maramureş, and always sensitive to its particularities. As Florin developed as a scholar, he used Baia Mare as a point of contrast for understanding other parts of the country. Those who debated Romanian politics and history with Florin are well acquainted with his many references to Maramureş’ particularity, which he used to establish intellectual distance from Romania in general and inspired him to analyze it differently.

As he excelled in high school, winning many academic honors and contests, he developed an interest in understanding the lives of working-class Romanians. After high school, Florin moved to Transylvania to study sociology and anthropology at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. His intellectual seriousness distinguished him from many of his peers. He quickly developed an obsessive interest in how state authorities and agencies came to develop athletics and physical training as a mode of intervention to create specific types of social and political dispositions. Professors in the Department of Sociology and Social Assistance, especially Professor Marius Lazăr, encouraged Florin to develop his interests in sport. He was passionate about sport, and especially an avid follower of football, as he had an encyclopedic knowledge about teams, players, strategies, and trends in the game. Professor Lazăr convinced Florin that studying sport was legitimate and had great potential in disclosing new insights about Romanian nationalism in the Hungarian stronghold of Transylvania.

At Central European University in Budapest, he worked with Dan Rabinowitz and Don Kalb. In his dissertation “Playing to Win, Learning to Lose: Sport, Nation and State in Interwar Romania,” he detailed many of Romanian socialism’s contradictions in the political reorganization that followed World War I and the collapse of the Austral-Hungarian Empire. His historical analysis countered many of the Cold War-era studies that viewed Eastern European failures as predetermined by communism. Instead, he showed how the elite organized the state in ways that would shape the communist period in detrimental ways. He explicitly analyzed the way the authorities established the football club Universitatea Cluj to “safeguard” the nation. Florin portrayed these plays of power by describing the emergence of “Romanianess” in the Transylvania region’s explosive context, an overwhelmingly non-Romanian population, with large numbers of Hungarians, Jews, and Germans represented significant challenges.

In 2014, Florin returned to Babeş-Bolyai University as a faculty member in the Department of Sociology and Social Assistance. During his six years as a lecturer in the department, he had become a popular figure. Despite his young stature, he was slated to become the department head in the upcoming academic semester. His reputation stemmed from the unique and unusual way that he brought criticism and a good-

<sup>1</sup> Martelli, Maria. 2020. <http://www.sociolink.ro/amintindu-ne-de-florin-faje-si-de-cursurile-lui/?fbclid=IwAR1tRj6FQ-SVnMmvEPSvtvI9mvOgYw50ogL9eEqGIXfOXESgZoxP-M3tVE>

naturedness together. Florin had voracious reading habits, reading almost everything. One would be continuously amazed by the various intellectual sources that he learned, often outside of his immediate research interests.

Along with reading, he had a propensity for discussion, dialog, and debate—he mastered the East European intellectual habits of talking and discussing issues at length, which he combined with hospitality and conviviality as he enjoyed having dinner guests, eating, and long talks. When he died, he was involved in a new project on Romanian infrastructure’s role in managing the population in terms of liberalized economics. He was doing fieldwork in the small town of Nădlac on the border with Hungary, focusing on the construction of a new highway and its influence on agricultural development. Posthumously, the EAA and Norway Grants Fund awarded a research team, which included Florin, a three-year grant to study Roma housing and precarious labor in Baia Mare, with Eniko Vincze and Neda Deneva. Florin is survived by his mother, Florina, his father Sandu, his twin brother Ducu, and his wife Neda Deneva-Faje and their child, Nikolay.

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