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Boof Review - Livio Maitan: Heroism of reason

Saturday 25 September 2021, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: 19 January 2020).

Livio Maitan, *Memoirs of a critical communist. Towards a History of the Fourth International*, Preface by Daniel Bensaid, translated by Gregor Benton, edited with and introduction by Penelope Duggan, Resistance Books [1], IIRE [2], Merlin Press, 2019, 455 pages.

In his beautiful Preface to this book, Daniel Bensaid described Livio Maitan as “one the last Mohicans” of a generation who had to struggle in two fronts, against the imperial dictatorship of capital and against the no less fearsome Stalinist bureaucratic despotism. He was one of those who needed a “heroism of reason”, an indomitable will, in order to withstand the irrationality of the age. His book is both a witness account of the Fourth International and “the transmission of a legacy”: revolutionary Marxism.

Fortunately, the Fourth International (FI) has no “official history”. Maitan’s work is valuable precisely because it is a personal testimony, and the author does not hesitate to voice, on several issues, his personal views – which do not always coincide with the official resolutions – and his opinion on the rôle of different personalities of the movement. [3]

The *Memoirs* begins with Livio (the name, we, his friends, called him) telling how, as a young socialist, he joined the Fourth International in 1948, after having a discussion with Ernest Mandel, and ends with the 14th World Congress of the FI in 1995 and Ernest Mandel’s death. [4] As a leader of the movement, from the early 1950s to his death, he discusses the main activities of the FI, the Congresses, the debates, always in the context of the main historical events, from the Korean war to the fall of the Berlin Wall. As described by Livio, it appears as a history of splits and reunifications (followed by new splits), advances and retreats, brilliant insights and Byzantine discussions, heroic struggles and serious blunders. But on the whole, at least for the majority of its members, it never ceased to be a permanent combat for international workers’ emancipation. Since it is impossible in this article to discuss all the Congresses of the FI, and the actions of its sections, we will deal here only with a few moments of this complex history.

If the Second Congress of the FI in 1948 was a positive step in refounding the movement, the 1950s were years of divisions and splits: a big step backwards. Livio recognizes that the international split of 1953 was “disastrous” for the FI: “we continued to pay for it until the early 1970s”. While his critical analysis of the motives of JP Cannon and the American SWP in 1953 is quite persuasive, his general approach on the split seems to me insufficiently critical of the FI leadership, particularly of Pablo’s political views (the pamphlet *The Coming World Showdown*, 1951) and his authoritarian behaviour towards minority views. Particularly surprising is his almost silence on the crisis of the French section: Pablo’s attempt to impose, in the name of “international discipline”, a line of entryism in the French Communist Party, against the will of the majority of the French Trotskyists, led to their break with the FI. Livo only mentions, in rather cryptic terms, that the connection

established by Pablo and the FI leadership between the perspective of war in short term and entryism, had negative consequences: the FI had to pay for it a high price in organizational terms "for instance in the French case". For a deeper discussion of this tragic episode, the best reference is Michel Lequenne's book *Le trotskysme sans fard* (2005). [5]

The trial of Michel Raptis (Pablo) and Sal Santen in Amsterdam in 1960, accused of forging identity papers for the Algerian anticolonial fighters, provoked an unprecedented wave of solidarity: J.P. Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Isaac Deutscher, Maurice Nadeau, Pierre Naville, Claude Bourdet, Laurent Schwarz and Michel Leiris supported the FI leaders and called for their release. Never before had the FI achieved such a degree of notoriety.

Soon afterwards, the FI and the American SWP began to find common ground, both supporting the Cuban Revolution, which had taken in 1960 a turn towards the socialist road. This led to the Congress of Unification, in 1963, in which the FI majority joined its forces with the SWP (now under the leadership of Joseph Hansen) and several other organisations. But this was followed by other splits: Posadas (a figure suffering, according to Livio of "pathological self-exaltation" and his followers in Latin America, and later, Michel Pablo himself, who founded the Marxist Revolutionary Alliance. Some of Posadas followers, such as the brilliant Argentinian-Mexican historian Adolfo Gilly, later returned to the FI, and Raptis, in his last years, had the same intention.

A different sort of split occurred in 1964, when the LSSP, FI section in Ceylon, and one of the largest parties of the Trotskyist movement, joined the bourgeois government of Mrs Bandaranaike; when the FI leadership criticized this move, they broke with the FI. A few years later, (1971) this government, which still included LSSP leaders, killed thousands of young Guevarista insurgents of the JVP movement.

May 1968 was of course the high point of the FI in the 20th century. For the first time since its origins, notes Livio, the Fourth International had been able to move out of its relative isolation. And also for the first time, one of its organizations, the JCR (Revolutionary Communist Youth), had a real impact in revolutionary events in an imperialist country (France). In the following years the movement achieved an unprecedented growth, in Western Europe and the US.

Livio had a keen interest in Latin America and made several "missions" for the FI to the continent. In a trip to Bolivia in 1964 he describes a visit to the Trotskyist miners of Catavi: "I was almost moved to tears seeing, in the house of a comrade, among his few books, and anthology of Hegel": even among the superexploited workers of Bolivia it was possible to find "heirs of classical German philosophy!" This comment tells us a lot about Livio as a person of culture, and human sensibility.

I confess that I don't agree with my friend Daniel Bensaid's criticism of Livio's discussion of Latin America: "The comments about the controversies regarding the armed struggle in Latin America may appear incomplete and partial to many of us". On the contrary, I find these pages among the most lively and interesting of the Memoirs. Livio's draft on armed struggle, presented at the 9th World Congress provoked as he writes, "moment of highest tension and passionate interest", both among the Latin American delegates and the others. [6] He recognizes that prioritizing rural guerrilla was a mistake, but explains that these were the views of our main organizations in the continent, in Bolivia and Argentina. There are a few very moving pages about Roberto Santucho, the main leader of the the PRT (Revolutionary Workers Party), the Argentinian section of the FI until 1973, both criticizing his wrong views - the illusion that, by leaving the FI, he would get weapons from the "Soviet comrades" - and paying homage to an intransigent revolutionary who gave his life for the cause.

I must now comment on a disappointing chapter in the history of the FI: the misunderstanding of the

nature of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, which committed a genocide on its own people. When Vietnam invaded Cambodia (1978) the FI called for “negotiations in order to solve the problems among the two countries”. As Livio recognizes, “our first reaction was to play down the repression (in Cambodia ML) ...It seemed difficult to accept the figure of 3 million deaths”. The minority (SWP) supported the Vietnamese operation to overthrow Pol Pot, while Mandel opposed it. The arguments employed by both sides were (in the humble opinion of this reviewer) Byzantine: Mandel believed that Pol Pot aimed at the “destruction of private property” while Clark from the SWP argued that the Khmer rouge intended to preserve the capitalist system...A purely economic discussion, while a genocide in the name of “socialism” was taking place. Livio acknowledged that “the Khmer rouge carried out one of the worst massacres of the 20th century”, but his criticism of the FI position at that time is very timid...

Taking stock of four decades since the foundation of the FI, Livio raises the difficult question: why has our movement failed to play a leading role anywhere ? Among the reasons: the destructive splits, the negative role of authoritarian, centralist, even “Bonapartist” leaders (the list of names is too long), propagandist and voluntarist attitudes, and, for some, a dogmatic approach, exclusively based on the Russian experience of 1917, and on quotes from Leon Trotsky. But the main factor was objective: the force of attraction of the USSR, China, Cuba. Castroism had a special power of attraction for the radical left, and this led to the last split, when the SWP (under the leadership of Jack Barnes) broke with the FI (in 1990), gave up Trotskyism and uncritically adopted the line of the Cuban government.

During all these years Ernest Mandel played a decisive role, in intellectual and political terms, in the history of the FI. Livio had a great admiration for him, while criticizing his voluntarism and excessive optimism. He was the main author of two key FI documents: “Dynamics of the World Revolution Today” (1963) , on the dialectical interconnections between the proletarian, the colonial and the political revolutions, and “Dictatorship of the proletariat and socialist democracy” (1979), a path-breaking statement, which met with fierce opposition from some “orthodox” figures. [7]

The first and only moment when Livio considered renouncing his leadership duties in the FI was in 1978, when a disreputable figure, the Nicaraguan (anti-FSLN) Fausto Amador was admitted, under heavy pressure of the SWP-minority, into the FI. One year later, the SWP entirely changed its politics, and gave full support to the FSLN government in Nicaragua. [8]

Livio’s narrative ends with the 14th Congress of the FI (1995), where he felt “a heavy air of disenchantment”, based on the “perception of our enfeeblement”. A few months later Ernest Mandel died, and Livio gave him the last salute at the funeral in the Père Lachaise cemetery. Health problems prevented him of continuing his *Memoirs*.

In her introduction to the English edition, Penelope Duggan, a key member of the FI leadership today, briefly describes the events after 1995, and the following Congresses of the FI, where an increasing number of countries were represented. The history of the FI goes on, and its presence in the world is now greater than in the past. As the young rebels used to chant in May 68, “ce n’est qu’un début, continuons le combat !” (It’s just the beginning, let’s continue the fight).

Michael Löwy

P.S.

- IVP. Sunday 19 January 2020:
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6369>
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Footnotes

[1] <https://resistancebooks.org/product/memoirs-of-a-critical-communist/>

[2] <https://www.iire.org/index.php/node/890>

[3] On the early stages of writing the book, Livio discussed the general plan with me. I made some modest suggestions, which he took into account.

[4] The book is about his experience as leader of the Fourth International. Unfortunately nothing is said by the author about his political commitments before 1947.

[5] Lequenne had left the FI with the French majority, but soon came into conflict with Pierre Lambert, whose orientation he considered as deeply negative. He became an independent Marxist and a few years later returned to the FI.

[6] Livio notes that among the Latin Americans there was a delegate (name not mentioned in the book) of the Partido Operario Comunista (POC) of Brazil, which was in the process of joining the FI. This delegate was the author of the present review... The POC, after the assassination in 1971, under torture, of one of his young leaders, Luis Eduardo Merlino, practically disappeared.

[7] Nahuel Moreno published, under the eccentric pseudonym of "Darioush Karim", a violent pamphlet against Mandel, under the title *The revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat* (1979): in a sort of caricature of civil war communism in the USSR, he claimed that democracy was admissible "only for the industrial proletariat and the revolutionary workers".

[8] In 1978 I was sent by the FI to Costa Rica, where Fausto Amador lived, to investigate his case. He pretended to criticize the FSLN from a "Trotskiyst" perspective. But only a few years earlier he had accepted a minor assignment at the (Somozista !) Nicaraguan Embassy in Brussels. I asked why he had accepted such a shameful position, and his answer was: not for political reasons, only because it was the only way for my father (a friend of Somoza) to send me a car in Belgium without paying taxes...In my report I strongly advised not to admit Amador in the FI. Livio considered his admission "a dark page in the history of our movement".