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Livio Maitan Is a Forgotten Giant of Italian Marxism

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Livio Maitan belonged to a lost world of professional revolutionaries whose struggles and sacrifices left a deep mark on twentieth-century history. Historian Enzo Traverso pays tribute to one of the Italian left's most creative activist-intellectuals.

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This year marks the centenary of the birth of the Italian Marxist Livio Maitan. Maitan, a remarkable figure of the radical left who died in 2004, is almost unknown among the latest generation of political activists. His intellectual and political trajectory belong to the history of an age of fire and blood that finished in the 1990s, between the end of the Cold War and the 9/11 attacks.

For fifty years, between the 1940s and the 1990s, Maitan was one of the leading figures of the Trotskyist Fourth International, alongside Pierre Frank and Ernest Mandel. As a tireless strategist and organizer, he was very influential in many of the Fourth International's crucial decisions — although he was less colorful and flamboyant than some of its other leaders, and only featured briefly as a character in *Redemption* (1990), Tariq Ali's satirical novel on the Fourth International.

In his native Italy, Maitan was a public figure of the radical left. A conference at the National Library in Rome recently discussed his legacy, with many prominent representatives of the Italian left taking part, from Fausto Bertinotti to Luciana Castellina.

One hundred years after Maitan's birth and almost twenty years after his death, his heritage deserves retrospective reflection. Seen within this broad horizon, he appears to me very distant from our own time. He belongs to a world that no longer exists, and perhaps for this very reason, he matters for our historical consciousness.

Professional Revolutionaries

Livio Maitan embodied a noble figure, in many ways heroic and tragic, that deeply marked the history of the twentieth century: the professional revolutionary. It is worth dwelling on the definition

of this term. Revolutionaries have not disappeared: there are still some with us today, and they are probably more numerous than people might think. Yet while the twenty-first century has already experienced revolutions, the figure of the professional revolutionary belongs to the past.

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With the exception of some national liberation movements in the Global South, professional revolutionaries now belong to a time when the division of labor, political parties, and the public sphere were all structured differently. Above all, they belong to a time when revolution was a horizon of expectation or, in the language of Ernst Bloch, a concrete, necessary, and possible utopia, one that had penetrated the mental universe of millions of human beings.

Professional revolutionaries were men and women for whom revolution was not just a project to adhere to or fight for, but a way of life — a choice that oriented and shaped their entire existence. This choice implied deep political, cultural, and ideological motivations, which could be questioned, reconsidered, or rectified, but which constituted the starting point for experiencing reality.

We might say that these revolutionaries overcame Max Weber's dichotomy between politics as a vocation and politics as a profession. But we should add that for professional revolutionaries, politics was anything but an opportunity to make a "career." It was a choice that implied rather the total renunciation of any well-paid, respectable, and prestigious career. It was a choice to be part of a kind of countersociety.

Being professional revolutionaries meant accepting that they would live very modestly, often in precarious material conditions. When the finances of their movements did not make it possible to pay them a meager salary, these men and women could write for newspapers and magazines, translate and edit books, or sometimes teach seminars in universities, as Maitan also did. However, these were not professional choices — they were expedients allowing them to conduct their main activity, which was preparing for revolution.

This choice of life created characters somewhere between bohemians and monks, split between total freedom and the strictest self-discipline, between the rejection of all conventions and a certain asceticism. Max Weber described the Protestant work ethic as a form of "inner-worldly" asceticism. I believe that a similar ethic existed among professional revolutionaries. The rebels, Hannah Arendt wrote in *The Hidden Tradition* (1943), were conscious "pariahs," not because they were miserable (although they had no heritage to defend), but because they consciously assumed their marginality.

A Way of Life

One of Maitan's great merits was to avoid the dangers of sectarianism and dogmatism to which such marginality inevitably exposed its practitioners. By culture and temperament, he was entirely unlike the charismatic leaders of small sects — a scourge that has dotted the history of revolutionary

movements, particularly the Trotskyist one. If anything, his flaw was an excessive modesty that limited his personal ambitions.

This life choice obviously possessed a solid moral foundation. It was a choice to struggle against oppression and injustice; a belief that the dominated could change the world; a bet on the capacity of human beings for self-emancipation. Because the revolution was a worldwide horizon, it oriented these men and women toward cosmopolitanism.

Maitan embodied this tradition. As a leader of the Fourth International, he devoted much of his life to traveling from one country to another, attending public congresses and clandestine meetings, discussing with leaders of parties, movements, trade unions, groups, and clusters from four continents. His books provide eloquent testimony to this activity.

The combination of these features — the rejection of a career and acceptance of permanent precarity with solid convictions, a strong moral impulse, and extreme mobility — indicate that the life of the professional revolutionary was also made up of sacrifices, which are the other side of nonconformism. Above all, the renunciation of a normal life.

The lives of professional revolutionaries did not, in many cases, escape the gender hierarchies of a patriarchal society. Many of them relied on their female partners who were raising children or had steady jobs.

Maitan never told me about his private life, about which he was very shy. His autobiography, *La strada percorsa* (The Road Taken, 2002), is exclusively political and contains almost no mention of his affections, his companions, or his children, who apparently reproached him for it. This, too, was one of the consequences of choosing revolution as a way of life.

Peripheral Publications

This existential choice inevitably reverberated in his intellectual ambitions. Maitan left behind a vast body of work, very rich in the variety of topics covered and the originality and depth of his analyses. But such analyses were almost always relegated to the newspapers and magazines of the Fourth International, or to the publishing houses that sprang up on its periphery.

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In Italy, the public knew him essentially as a translator and popularizer of Leon Trotsky. He possessed a classical education and was widely cultured but wrote mostly to intervene in strategic debates and issue political polemics, seeking to orient an organization or to theoretically delve into problems that had political relevance. I do not think he ever tried to write an essay to satisfy a personal or an intimate intellectual desire.

A party man, he never set out to write ambitious theoretical works, such as those of his closest collaborators like Ernest Mandel or Daniel Bensaïd. Personally, I regret this voluntary sacrifice on Maitan's part. It was the result of great modesty and humility but also, probably, of a certain political myopia.

The history of Trotskyism in Italy would have been different if it had found a more solid historical location, political definition, and theoretical elaboration. It never had the theoretical brilliance of operaismo ("workerism"), whose foundations were laid first with the journal *Quaderni rossi* (1961-66) and Mario Tronti's *Workers and Capital*, then with the later works of Toni Negri. Maitan was the only one who could have accomplished such a task, but he thought the priority was translating and disseminating Trotsky's works.

In the following decades, he decided to entrust his sharp interventions on the crisis of Marxism, Antonio Gramsci, or the history of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) to small publishers, and they never reached a wider audience. This, I fear, was the result of a choice rather than objective circumstances.

This choice was rooted in a way of life. Maitan was writing for an organization and his readers were activists. That was how professional revolutionaries had always done it, from Rosa Luxemburg to Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, and he followed their path.

Mario Tronti and Toni Negri, on the other hand, were university professors, as were Mandel or Bensaïd. The fact that they shared experiences, debates, and choices with figures like Maitan, while participating in the leading bodies of the same movement, did not prevent them from also belonging to another social world that allowed them to be public intellectuals as well as political leaders. Perhaps this is what Italian Trotskyism lacked in the 1960s, at the time of its greatest influence.

Between History and Politics

Let me now shift the focus from Maitan's life to his work. While history proved him right, politics did not, in the words of Italian feminist Lidia Cirillo. As Reinhart Koselleck has pointed out, it is not the victors who are the best interpreters of history. The most profound contribution to the knowledge of the past comes from the vanquished, whose gaze is not apologetic but rather critical.

Maitan was a champion of just causes that were almost always defeated. He made the right choice in his twenties to participate in the anti-fascist resistance, and then to join the Fourth International, rejecting the blackmail of the Cold War that divided the world into opposing blocs. He was right not to want to choose between US-led imperialism and Stalinism.

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There was nothing natural or obvious about the choice to become a Trotskyist in Italy during the late

1940s. To be a heretical, anti-Stalinist communist meant condemning oneself to isolation, and there were few who opted for this path. But it saved the honor of the Left.

Maitan translated Trotsky's book *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936) in 1956, the year of the Soviet invasion of Hungary. A few years later, he published for Einaudi a volume on Trotsky's legacy, and went on to translate the texts of the Polish left-wing dissidents Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski.

In Italy, he was among the very few who condemned Stalinism without falling into anti-communism. Many socialists whom he had known in the postwar period followed the latter path, as did intellectuals such as Nicola Chiaromonte and Ignazio Silone, who ended up aligning themselves with the Congress for Cultural Freedom.

His choice to support anti-colonial revolutions in what was then called the "Third World" was equally correct. In Maitan's case, this support was enthusiastic, generous, and concrete, flowing naturally from the revolutionary cosmopolitanism mentioned above. He was a traveler of world revolution from Chile to Argentina, from Bolivia to Mexico, and from Algeria to Iran.

His writings on these revolutionary movements clearly illustrate this commitment. Out of these experiences came many friendships and sometimes bitter conflicts. To these revolutions, he brought ideas, experiences, and the material support that the Fourth International could offer.

Entryism Sui Generis

The issue of so-called entryism in communist parties is more complex. This was a strategy for which Maitan was one of the main inspirations, starting in 1952. In his conception, entryism was not a conspiratorial operation aimed at infiltrating the apparatuses or at the subterranean preparation of splits, according to a Machiavellian vision of politics that was completely foreign to him. The strategy he favored, which came to be called "entryism sui generis," was based on the objective observation of the strength of communism.

The Italian case was clear evidence of this. In the 1950s, the PCI gathered more than two million members and possessed impressive social roots as well as an extraordinary aura deriving from the anti-fascist resistance. This force gave dignity and political representation to millions of workers, performing an irreplaceable function in the defense of their social interests and in many cases a pedagogical function for their education and cultural growth.

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It was a party full of contradictions, vertical and authoritarian, with a frightening gap between its leadership and its often barely literate base. The PCI was a Stalinist party that had organic ties to Moscow, but it had helped build a democratic republic in Italy. Being in this party to make a voice of dissent heard was the right choice, motivated by the rejection of sectarianism.

However, postwar Italy was transforming itself at a dizzying pace. Its sociology was changing as the working class was being modified from within, with huge masses moving from the countryside to the cities and from the south to the north. During the same period, the mass university was born, and a new rebellious generation appeared.

Italian Trotskyism had made itself an expression of this profound change. One need only think of the ephemeral but significant experience of a weekly such as *La sinistra* or the creation of a publishing house like Samonà e Savelli, which functioned for twenty years of the Italian equivalent of the French publisher Editions Maspero or the British Verso. Paradoxically, however, Maitan and his comrades had not understood all of its implications.

In his autobiography, Maitan mentions the fatal delay with which his current decided to end their practice of entryism, between late 1968 and early 1969, while tracing this “unconsciously conservative reflex” to purely tactical considerations. In fact, I think he had not grasped the political dimension of the profound transformations underway in Italy. His culture led him to see the labor movement through the exclusive prism of the PCI and the trade unions, but this understanding of reality was becoming obsolete.

The Long '68

A new working class had arisen that did not want the “emancipation of labor” (according to the old social-democratic view) but practiced the “rejection of labor” (*rifiuto del lavoro*). Students had appeared who were no longer fighting for the right to study (now largely achieved) but for a radical critique of the “bourgeois university” and market society. A new generation was taking to the streets and wanted to be protagonists and subjects of change.

The PCI, which had always looked with distrust on anything that moved outside its control, could not channel this revolt. Operaismo, with its theory of the “mass worker” and “class composition,” had a better understanding of what was happening, and this is perhaps one of the reasons that it became the culturally hegemonic current in the radical left during Italy’s “long '68.”

Of course, many of the criticisms that *Bandiera rossa*, the Italian Trotskyist weekly, directed at New Left groups such as Lotta Continua or Potere Operaio were to the point. However, when it came to diagnosing the underlying trends of the time, workerism was more farsighted. Maitan had criticized the “theoretical deformations” of this current without detecting its historical premises.

In this sense, politics in '68 had proved him wrong. He thought that the PCI would channel a new wave of student, feminist, and workers’ political radicalization. When he understood that this radicalization had taken place outside of the traditional left-wing parties, it was too late. In the early 1960s, Trotskyists led most youth federations of the Communist Party. By 1968, a very large section of their members and leaders had abandoned the party and joined the forces of a nascent radical left.

Italian Trotskyism was never able to establish an effective dialogue with workerism, which formed the intellectual backbone of the New Left in Italy. In 1964, there was a round table discussion between *Bandiera rossa* and *Quaderni rossi*, attended by thinkers such as Vittorio Rieser, Raniero Panzieri, and Renzo Gambino, but it was not followed up. This was a missed opportunity, because this confrontation would have been fruitful for both currents and perhaps might even have resulted in a different outcome for the efforts of the New Left over the following decade.

During the 1970s, noting that the season of entryism had come to an end, Livio Maitan thought that

the role of the Trotskyists was to provide a program for the unification of the far left. But they did so by offering a Leninist party model that was exactly what the New Left, pragmatically and confusingly, was trying to overcome. Politics proved him wrong once again.

Guerilla Days

There is a striking contrast between the “unconsciously conservative reflex” that prevented him from grasping the transformations taking place in Italy and the headlong rush — I do not know how else to define it — that drove him, in the same period, to theorize the strategic choice of guerrilla warfare in Latin America. Maitan was one of the main inspirers of this strategy, responsible for drafting the resolutions of the Fourth International’s Ninth Congress in 1969, which were substantially reaffirmed by the next congress in 1974.

In Italy, he criticized the terrorism of the Red Brigades, which paralyzed the mass movements and pushed the government towards a repressive “state of exception.” In Argentina, however, a country where the Cuban experience could not be repeated, he supported the guerrilla warfare of the People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP), which was the military offshoot of the Fourth International’s Argentinian section. The Argentinian government even asked Maitan to mediate the liberation of a FIAT executive who had been kidnapped by an ERP commando.

Maitan shared the illusion that the guerrilla warfare would be the path of revolution for the entire continent with a generation of Latin American revolutionaries.

The guerrilla turn had catastrophic results and a very high cost in human lives. Maitan knew many of those killed and paid tribute to them in his autobiography, but he never seriously discussed the outcome of this strategy. In his history of the Fourth International, he limits himself to a sober narrative, sometimes marked by an apologetic flavor, that does not get to the bottom of things. In his preface to the book, Daniel Bensaïd leniently calls it “incomplete and partial.”

Maitan shared the illusion that guerrilla warfare would be the path of revolution for the entire continent with a generation of Latin American revolutionaries. He did not merely share it from the outside — he was one of those responsible for it, as a theorist and as a strategist.

He was far more lucid when it came to the task of interpreting China’s Cultural Revolution. He saw this period of turbulence not as a libertarian explosion at all but rather as a regime crisis marked by the violent clash between two fractions of the Communist bureaucracy — a conflict that Mao managed to overcome by mobilizing the party’s base. His analyses were sharp, and the book he devoted to the Cultural Revolution remains one of his most important works, although his warnings against the influence of Maoism had a limited impact on the radical left.

The Road of Resistance

Even at the end of his life, history proved Maitan right and politics wrong when he took part in the experience of Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation) with generosity and enthusiasm. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, he did not resign himself to the triumph of capitalism in its most ostentatiously obscene version, that of neoliberalism, but immediately embarked, with stoic tenacity, on the road of resistance.

He had not shared the illusion of Ernest Mandel, who had deluded himself for a moment that Germany had once again become the core of world revolution at the end of the 1980s, as the link between an anti-capitalist revolution in the West and an antibureaucratic one in the world of “actually existing socialism.” I remember a conversation in 1991 in which he told me that we had gone back almost two centuries and would have to start from scratch, as it was in the origins of the labor movement. However, the prospect did not discourage him.

Politics proved him wrong, not because it was wrong to participate in the construction of Rifondazione, but rather because he did not understand that this party was responding to the advent of a new century and a historical defeat with the tools, structures, and ideas of the past. There was an attempt to forge a synthesis between the alter-globo movements of the early 2000s and the new party, but it failed.

Livio Maitan embodied revolution as it was conceived and lived in the twentieth century, a heroic and tragic era that is no longer with us. His legacy deserves to be remembered and meditated upon critically, but the radical left of our own century will follow other paths.

ENZO TRAVERSO

P.S.

• Jacobin. 08.06.2023:

<https://jacobin.com/2023/08/livio-maitan-italy-marxism-trotskyism-professional-revolutionary-history>