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Obituary

Livio Maitan - a man of different times

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Livio Maitan was a man of different times, but not for reasons of age. Rather, he was a man of different times because he was an organic intellectual - a rare breed that, while not entirely extinct, has precious few surviving members.

To be an organic intellectual, it is not enough merely to have the requisite intellectual and cultural talents and the ability to understand and explain the world. One must also have an ethical attitude and modus operandi, and agree to play a role that is uncomfortable, and sometimes not unlike a kind of self-torment.

An organic intellectual agrees to bear the burden of pedagogy, and the curse of lucidity and inability to delude oneself that come with it. I believe that this is the simplest explanation why a man of Livio's intellectual qualities always remained on the margins. Livio always saw deluding himself and others as a betrayal of himself and his reasons for being involved in politics. Obviously, that did not mean forsaking hope, which is something else altogether and linked to entirely different needs and motives.

In 1956, it was not easy to be a communist and state in clear terms that the revolutionaries were on the opposite side to that imagined by a certain brand of common sense. Nowadays it is difficult to put ourselves in the place of those who lived in the political climate of the Hungarian revolution. It meant being crushed between those who, on the one hand, condemned the Soviet intervention while ignoring the fact that the insurgents were also and primarily communists, and those, on the other, who denounced the insurgents as conscious agents of reaction. Ultimately, these two widespread views of the events nurtured one another and merely became a way for those with conflicting values to read the same factually incorrect narrative.

To be a revolutionary, to protest and condemn the world order at the end of the 1960s, and not show reverence to the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" in China, was no small thing and cost Livio a great deal in terms of popularity and following. He had understood the originality and the value of the Maoist experience before others and had pointed out that in certain respects it was a fruit of the process of permanent revolution. But he obstinately refused to believe that the solutions to society's ills and bureaucratic hegemony lay in the Chinese events known as the Cultural Revolution. The masses had burst onto the political stage, but were to a great extent manipulated. They didn't have their own democratically elected bodies, and they were unable to choose between the two conflicting points of view because the minority's positions were only available through the majority's caricatural presentation of them. Thousands of people were killed, humiliated, and jailed, in rituals involving unbelievable violence. The fact that many former apologists of such rituals have become current partisans of "non-violence" says a lot about the current state of the workers' movement. The radical difference between the two positions does not amount to much; one finds the same reasons behind both - the same renunciation of an independent stance, or the same difficulty adopting such a stance and sticking firm to it.

In the 1980s he responded to the chatter about the "end of work" with great irony, and this sometimes made him look like a dinosaur. That is, after all, a careless and crude way to describe a man of different times. He had a debate of an altogether different character with Sylos Labini, in which Livio explained the origin and features of different phenomena of proletarianisation under senile capitalism.

He did not fall prey to political and cultural fashions. He had and displayed a sincere contempt for impressionistic thought, tall tales, superficiality and lack of intellectual rigour. But his clearheadedness was not influenced by conservatism or misoneism (a hatred or fear of change and innovation) — even of good intellectual calibre. He was very close to heterodox revolutions such as those in Algeria and Cuba. He had pointed to the emergence of the

new movements and recognised their value, without ifs, ands or buts. He even tried to understand feminism, when some women sought to explain it to him with rational arguments.

Livio waged a strenuous battle against sectarianism within the Trotskyist movement. This made him a preferred target for the fragmented microcosm on the sidelines of the huge bureaucratic apparatuses, before the latter also began to split apart. He was full of enthusiasm whenever he saw the first signs of an opportunity to overcome divisions, sectarianism and faction fights. He was enthusiastic - perhaps somewhat naively — about the birth of Rifondazione, the turn at the last congress and secretary Bertinotti's openings to the global justice movement and its fight for "another possible world".

Of course, Livio was by no means infallible, and never claimed to be. Nor did he believe in the infallibility of Leon-Trotsky thought. He was always capable of bitter and self-critical irony about his history and our own. In recent years he sometimes became absorbed by whimsical polemics about the most minor points, but even here he was very rarely wrong.

For me and for many other people, including many who later chose paths rather different from his own, Livio was the man-who-explained, the lucid observer and the pedagogue. One image keeps coming to mind. I see him standing at the other end of the desk. Sometimes he is explaining how and why the ascending cycle of the capitalist economy had finished; others, how and why the entry of the masses onto the Chinese political scene did not inherently guarantee socialist democracy; still other, how and why work was not disappearing, and that globally wage labour was actually growing. As a young woman and much later in life, I received memorable lessons in politics and history from Livio. I still can't decide if I should be grateful to him or not.

He also had a passion for practice, which is above all a way of thinking and discussing translated into action. He was long involved in trade-union activity, and among the first in the second half of the 1960s to discuss with Roman workers at the factory gates. He had wanted to share in Bolivian miners' struggles and was active in his local party circle as long as age and health permitted.

For a few days now he had been convinced that his time was near. Others close to him, family and comrades, did not share in his conviction. When the news of his death was circulated, a mutual friend sent me a text message on her mobile phone: "He was right this time too".

Livio Maitan was a man of different times, but the necessary condition for a communist refoundation is that he also be a man of the future. For it will be very difficult to build a new workers' movement unless a new generation repeats — in other forms and ways — the experiences that made the older movement's birth possible.