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In Memoriam

Michel Lequenne (1921-2020): A very particular Trotskyist

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Publication date: Sunday 16 February 2020

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Michel Lequenne died on 13 February 2020, at almost 99 years old. [1] He was a singular, atypical Trotskyist, an outstanding character, by the strength of his convictions, his polemical verve, his extraordinary - self-taught! - political, literary, artistic and historical culture, his propensity for dissent, his fidelity to the legacy of Red October.

I met Michel in 1962, as the leader of the Socialist Revolutionary tendency of the PSU. Catherine Samary, who also met him at that time, described him as follows: "he was impressive, with a funny laugh and a big poet's hat with wide brim". We were often together in the "tendency" debates of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as in the ... surrealist movement, and we remained friends, even though our analyses of certain events in the past - Kronstadt 1921! - had become contradictory...

Of humble origin, the young Michel Lequenne, born in Le Havre in 1921, started becoming politicized in the youth hostel movement. Unwilling to join the Vichy regime's Compulsory Work Service, in 1943, he joined the Trotskyist group Octobre led by Herni Molinier, which became one of the components of the Internationalist Communist Party (PCI, Parti Communiste International), the French section of the Fourth International. In 1946 he was elected to the Central Committee of the PCI, as part of the so-called "left-wing" tendency, along with Pierre Frank, Marcel Bleibtreu and Marcel Gibelin. In 1948-50 he was one of the main organizers of the solidarity brigades with Yugoslavia, initiated by the Fourth International.

Lequenne and Bleibtreu were among the first to oppose the orientation proposed in 1952 by Michel Pablo, the secretary of the Fourth International: a world war was imminent, two camps would clash, imperialism and the Soviet Union, and Trotskyists should practice entryism in the communist parties, especially in France. Refusing this "campist" line, he was expelled, with the majority of the PCI, from the Fourth International. As we know, this was the beginning of a disastrous process of international splits that would lead, for a decade, to a marginalization of Trotskyism. Barely three years later, in 1955, opposed to the opportunistic course of Pierre Lambert, Lequenne and Bleibtreu were excluded from the PCI (future OCI). Participating in various attempts to regroup the socialist left, they contributed, in 1960, to the foundation of the PSU, where Lequenne organized a Socialist Revolutionary tendency. Finally, in 1961, Michel decided to return to the PCI (QI) and the Fourth International and was elected, in 1965, to its International Executive Committee.

His account of these years of crisis in *Le trotskysme, une histoire sans fard* (Paris, Syllepse, 2005) is a notable contribution, from a dissident point of view, to the history of the Fourth International and its French section. [2] My only reservation concerns its analysis of the Resistance (especially the communist sector) which seems too negative to me, reducing this often heroic struggle (think of Manouchian and his comrades of the *Affiche Rouge*) to the nationalist slogan launched in 1944, "To each his own Kraut" ...

During these difficult years, Michel, who earned his living as a sub-editor and proofreader, engaged in cultural activities: translating with his wife, Soledad Estorach (a former member of the CNT-FAI), the writings of Christopher Columbus - a passion throughout his life - and the convergence with surrealism. In 1966 he even proposed to André Breton and his friends of the surrealist group in Paris, in the name of the PCI, the reconstitution of the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art (FIARI) - alas, without success. A few years later, he joined the surrealist group reconstituted in 1970, on the initiative of Vincent Bounoure.

In 1968, Lequenne had a resolution adopted by the Syndicat des Correcteurs de la CGT in support of the student movement. During the 1970s he participated in the political life of the Communist League (LC - later LCR, French

section of the FI), at the head of a dissident tendency, the “T3”. Considering (based on the work of Ernest Mandel) that the working class includes manual and intellectual work, industry and services, he refused the “turn to industry” adopted by the majority of the Revolutionary Communist League. Also at this time - late 1970s - he also opposed the majority on several other issues: the (disastrous) proposal of “unification of the Trotskyists” (i.e. with the Lambertist OCI), the support for the USSR in the invasion of Afghanistan. On the other hand, once again in the minority, he supported the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, which saved this people from the continuation of the Polpotian genocide. Of course, Michel Lequenne was not infallible, but it must be acknowledged that on these issues, and many others, his only fault was to be right too soon...

“Hoffmann” (Lequenne) with his Argentinian friend exiled in Paris, “Heredia” (Angel Fanjul) proposed at the Fourth International Congresses of the 1980s that the old thesis of the degenerated workers state be abandoned and replaced by the “bureaucratic state” which no longer has anything worker-like about it. Finally, in 1988, during the crisis provoked by Pierre Juquin's presidential campaign, he decided to leave the LCR and the International. This was not, as he himself explains, a break with Trotskyism or with the militants of the movement, for whom he maintained esteem and friendship, but rather the fatigue of internal debates and the desire to distance himself from them in order to be able to deal with his writings.

Indeed, from then on he wrote and published some of his most remarkable writings: in addition to the history of Trotskyism mentioned above, an astonishing autobiography in the form of a catalogue of the books he read (*Le Catalogue - pour Memoires*, Syllepse, 2009), the first volume of the *Grandes Dames des Lettres: From Sappho to Ann Radcliffe* (Syllepse, 2011), as well as a reflection on the history of communism, *Counter-revolution in the revolution* (Eric Jamet Editeur, 2018). [3] One may not share the somewhat a-critical view of the “Leninist” years of the Russian Revolution (1917-23) proposed by this work – which is, in a way, its political testament – but its analysis of the Stalinist counter-revolution is admirable.

We are going to miss this untiring iconoclast... To his daughter Delphine and to his companion Martine Roux, all our solidarity.

Michael Löwy

PS:

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[1] Michel Lequenne, known as Hoffman in the Fourth International, born Le Havre 25 May 1921, died Paris 13 February 2020.

[2] This book, in French, is available for free download from his blog [here](#).

[3] Download of *Counter-revolution in the revolution* [here](#).