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Book review

“Why it is worth preparing for breaches to open in these two systems and strive for socialism”

- Reviews section -

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

Livio Maitan was born in Venice in 1923 ; he was politically active from 1943 until his death in 2004. During this period, both the world capitalist system and the bureaucratic countries that escaped its grip, generated great discontents, social movements and crises. Unfortunately none of these upsurges was able to establish a society that was democratic and egalitarian in a lasting way. As a young socialist in postwar Italy, Livio could see the problem as it was crystallizing into the Cold War. [1] When he met the Fourth International in Paris in April 1947, he decided to dedicate his life to making the perspective of socialist democracy a real political alternative for militants searching a way out of the “Washington or Moscow” dilemma. He stood by this commitment all his life.

What was needed, he thought, was not just more brilliant books like *The Revolution Betrayed* by Trotsky, but a network of militants organized on a global scale and sharing information, analysis and at times, a helping hand. When he joined the fray, the worldwide socialist movement was embodied almost exclusively by states (the USSR, Yugoslavia, China) whose leaders called themselves communist, and large social-democratic parties prepared to manage capitalist states engaged in the Cold War. Both trends, known as the “traditional leaderships”, expended considerable energy to attract, control to their advantage and sometimes repress popular protests. They presented themselves to the world as communists and socialists continuing a century-old struggle. Individuals periodically rediscovered through their research or experience in struggles that the doctrine and practice of these parties were incompatible with the socialism advocated by the founders and leaders of the socialist movement before the 1920s. But their discovery was slow, painful, incomplete, often prevented from reaching a wide audience, and could not be tested even on a small scale by practical collective action. How much faster and deeper would be their learning process if they could meet an organization that transmitted the lessons drawn by others like them and brought comfort and assistance to continue the fight. This was the function that he ascribed to the Fourth International.

In his memoirs, Livio often uses the term “we” for the Fourth International : we decided, we sent, we reacted, we made a mistake. He does not deal specifically with the issue of the “International” as a collective intellectual formulating the collective will of rational humanity. But as I read page after page, I was led to make an analogy with Antonio Gramsci’s concept of the party as the “collective intellectual” of the working class and oppressed layers of one country, grasping the totality of the situation and formulating the collective will for the common good. Can one transpose his concept from the territorial context for which it was meant, to the whole planet ? Maitan describes how his international group gathered information both from the press and from militants, followed situations, debated interpretations, produced analyses, tested them, elaborated balance sheets, sent emissaries to verify, published and distributed its findings, coordinated actions, elected and replaced leaders. Circumstances (wars, repression, demoralization, cultural divisions) do not always make such a process realistic, but it was possible in the years covered by the book, even though sometimes only on a very small scale, stretching material resources and human endurance to the breaking point. The international mechanism worked and produced a framework for understanding and acting on world reality that is an essential legacy today. For me this is quite different from a collection of radical individuals investigating social dynamics in the context of academia, the news media, banks or official administrations. There might be intermediate solutions such as circles of intellectuals and militants producing a journal, or a professional journalist being an active member of a revolutionary organization. But what we see in Maitan’s testimony is quite different : a person functioning as a leading member of a network of revolutionary groups in twenty to fifty countries, a rare and interesting experience.

The social movements of different nations have organized international congresses and elected permanent

coordinating bodies since the nineteenth century. Political workers reached out to form the First, Second, Third and Fourth International, each with different functions and forms of organization. Craft and industrial unions, women’s organizations, civil rights, peace and environmental movements also regrouped beyond national borders. Today Greenpeace, Amnesty International, antiwar coalitions, school strikes to save the planet clearly need to coordinate their action in several countries. Such international organizations inevitably face the question of determining the basis for representing national delegations, electing international officers, funding common activity, translating not just words but national cultures and experiences to make them understandable to others, settling disputes, rooting out fraud and corruption in their own ranks, finding compromises. Livio’s story provides many case studies of such problems, the solutions applied and their outcome.

The Fourth International (FI) had already gone through different phases before Livio joined it and would go through at least three phases during the period described in the book : 1945 to 1968, a chain of mainly small organizations hoping for a break, 1968 to 1985 rapid growth leading to a stronger international center, 1985 to 2000 adaptation to setbacks and downsizing. The author does not pretend to write a full or even skeletal history of the FI in these years, but only a contribution based on what he found most significant through his own participation in leadership bodies and specific assignments. But that is quite a mouthful : he offers detailed accounts of major events, the problems they posed for revolutionaries and the organizational efforts deployed to respond to them. Countries receiving sustained attention are : in the “Eastern bloc”, the Soviet Union and Russian Federation, Yugoslavia, China, Poland ; in the “south”, Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Algeria, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) ; in the “north”, Spain, Portugal, France. In addition, interesting insights on particular episodes concern Czechoslovakia, Germany, Cuba, Peru, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Vietnam, Indonesia, Greece, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan. And there are occasional worthwhile mentions of India, Pakistan, Japan, the United States, Canada, Ireland and Britain. Discussions on the revival of feminist themes appear after 1968 and environmental preoccupations emerge in the 1980s. The book is spiced with first-hand impressions, such as the qualms of an organizations having won parliamentary representation and invited to join a left government (the Lanka Sama Samajama Party of Ceylon 1963-65), or militants having won mass influence in trade unions and peasant leagues and preparing to participate in demonstrations forbidden by the army (Bolivia). More generally, Livio’s specific interests are evident in the analysis of the contradictions of bureaucratized systems (USSR, China, Yugoslavia), the potential and limits of the Maoist and Castroist currents, the shifts in “the center of gravity of the world revolution”. For a person seeking to understand the fundamental features of world politics from the end of World War Two to the new century, the book provides a framework and many important examples.

Decisive events for the relationship of forces between the classes on a world scale are the main but not the only subject of the memoirs. Livio also deals with the difficulties of small revolutionary organizations to function in a pluralist and democratic fashion. The main source of these problems is identified as the weight of objective factors : the ability of capitalism to overcome its crisis, the wealth and power of state bureaucracies, the small numbers of individuals willing to prioritize the struggle for emancipation, the effects of enemy propaganda and repression, the resulting isolation and fatigue of the most enlightened and dedicated militants. But Livio’s story brings out another factor : the social atmosphere and leadership styles that can develop in these groups. For Livio, the Fourth International “mainstream” or “majority” to which he belonged, escaped the main deviation of authoritarian or dictatorial regimes. Maitan was part of several teams, one of which was dubbed “the troika”: Maitan, Mandel Frank, known for a while in the US SWP as “MMF”. [2] The fact is there was no single preeminent leader in this mainstream current. It always brought together representatives of several countries on the basis of pluralism, free discussion, a fair representation and inclusion of minorities in leadership bodies. It emphasized the democratic dimension in democratic centralism. The only real exception took place in 1952-53 when Pablo sought to impose his international line on the majority of the French section, which had opposed it. Attempts were made relatively rapidly to repair the ensuing split, but the explosion had set in motion dynamics and bitter recriminations which could no longer be overcome. [3]

Of interest for readers of ATC is the fact that despite considerable attention focused on the analysis of the Soviet Union and social transformations in Eastern Europe and China, then Cuba, the FI did not consider “differences over

the Russian question” as grounds for a separate organization. Various analyses of the issue coexisted and evolved within the FI and its sections. Attempts were made to overcome the 1939 split in the US SWP between the supporters of Cannon and Shachtman and similar splits in a few other countries. The issue reemerged after 1989 as the Soviet bloc disintegrated : of the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches of “bureaucratic collectivism”, “state capitalism”, “degenerated and deformed workers states”, “Stalinism”, “bureaucratized societies of the transition”, the only question was : which could best explain what was taking place and guide the action of the promoters of socialist democracy?

Livio deals most extensively with three cases of authoritarian centralist leaders that emerged inside the Fourth International and left it : Michel Pablo, Juan Posadas, and Nahuel Moreno. Pablo seems to have developed an authoritarian style not in any national base (Greece or France) but amid expectations in very difficult times (1949-1953) that the International needed a resolute secretary who could step into the shoes of its regretted founder, Leon Trotsky. According to Livio, this tendency was limited by Mandel, Frank, himself and others until Pablo became engrossed in material support for the Algerian liberation struggle, which he saw as a potential future base for a much enlarged revolutionary movement, centered on the colonial revolution. Reunification with the US SWP proceeded without him and Pablo left in 1965 with very little support inside the International. On Posadas, Livio’s account is precious. What comes out is the portrait of a man convinced of his own importance and willing to bully his closest associates and subvert democratic procedures. Both Posadas and Nahuel Moreno used Argentina as their base to bring other Latin American sections in their orbit and claim to represent the colonial revolution against the Eurocentric mainstream of the Fourth International. [4] “The concept of the guiding section was present and played out in recurring behaviour and practices, linked to cultural pretensions” (p. 216).

But there are other figures of the same type. In the US SWP, “Barnes and his group seriously corrupted the internal life of the movement, by making systematic use of the arbitrary category of ‘disloyalty’ toward the party...’ (pp. 330-331). Livio deals only with people he met inside the FI, but his insights might inspire analogies with attempts to build international organizations outside the FI by charismatic leaders such as Gerry Healy, Ted Grant and Tony Cliff (Britain), Pierre Lambert and “Hardy” (France) and others, perhaps less successful. [5]

Livio believes participation in a democratic and pluralist International can be a counterweight to “authoritarian” temptations. However, this is easier to accept in a small country like Belgium than in a major imperialist center. In the case of the US, Livio identifies an argument that underlay the option of both James P. Cannon in 1953 and Jack Barnes in the 70s and 80s : “At its origin lay an idea that was, in itself, incontestable : the fate of the struggle for socialism in the world would be decided, in the last analysis, in the supreme bastion of capitalism, in the United States. This was the origin of the propensity to consider the role of the SWP as primary...” (p. 264). To me, this argument explains neither the dominant relation which the Barnes leadership imposed on its allies in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Britain ; nor the monolithic conformism which it demanded of its own membership, through its twists and turns. But the United States is not one of the subjects on which Livio worked the most during his long career and one can be thankful for his lucid interpretation of what he did witness.

In his introduction, the author regrets that neither Mandel nor Frank wrote a political autobiography, and announces that his text will not be a history of the International but a personal testimony. Besides the omission of Italy, apparently because another book already dealt with that story [6], important subjects are not developed either because the FI as a whole did not deal with them extensively or because, although the FI did expend considerable time on them, in the division of labor inside the leadership bodies, they were not assigned to him, or because he chooses to gloss over them. Thus we find very little on northern Europe (Ireland, Britain, Scandinavia, Switzerland, Belgium and Holland), the US and Canada, important parts of the Middle East (Egypt, Iraq, Syria, the Arabian peninsula), Japan, India and Australia. The growing attention given by the FI or its sections to the women’s movement, anti-war and ecology issues, immigrant or sub-proletarian sectors, gay movements, long before 2000, is underrepresented. We await the accumulation of memoirs, oral testimonies, and archives from different countries, and attempts at synthesis to get a more precise idea of the balance sheet of the Fourth International for that period.

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In the meantime, Livio's book stresses some of its fundamental achievements : maintaining a revolutionary Marxist analysis of world reality, detailing the perspective of socialist democracy , overcoming the isolation of revolutionary socialists operating in one country, and producing an analysis of major events in the world since 1945 showing at once their potential for socialism and the obstacles that must be overcome to achieve that goal. Today, the new generation of revolutionaries are told that a socialist democracy with feminist and ecological values is utopian, and that they must choose between profoundly corrupt and unfair capitalist welfare states or bureaucratic dictatorship on the Chinese model. The recent history presented in Livio Maitan's *Memoirs* shows why it is worth preparing for breaches to open in these two systems and strive for socialism.

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[1] He says little about how he radicalized first as Mussolini's fascist regime was collapsing in northern Italy between 1943 and 1945, then in the turmoil that followed. Readers interested in the Italian far left can probably find more in *La strada percorsa. Dalla resistenza ai nuovi movimenti: lettura critica e scelte alternative*, 2002, not yet translated.

[2] Livio Maitan, Ernest Mandel and Pierre Frank were respectively leaders of the Italian, Belgian and French sections. According to Maitan, Michel Pablo (Raptis), a prominent figure between 1943 and 1961, was the first to apply the term “troika” to them in the 1950s, because they stood in the way of his supremacy.

[3] The main result was the formation of a dissident current in France which gradually congealed as “Lambertism” and refused the reunification of 1963. Michael Löwy identifies the problem in his review “[Heroism of reason](#)”.

[4] Posadas had established the *Buro Latino Americano* (BLA) and Moreno the *Secretariado Latino Americano del Trotskismo Ortodoxo* (SLATO).

[5] The international currents are known as Healyism, “The Militant” (Grant), International Socialism (Cliff), Lambertism, Lutte Ouvrière (“Hardy” or Robert Barcia), and their offshoots. Smaller attempts include the Spartacist (Jim Robertson).

[6] *La strada percorsa. Dalla resistenza ai nuovi movimenti: lettura critica e scelte alternative* Massari Editore 2002