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A Journey with Livio Maitan

# Lessons from a Critical Intellectual

- Features -

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**This article fulfils a promise I made to Livio two days before he died. Sensing that the end was drawing very near, Livio expressed his wish that along with Fausto Bertinotti and Alain Krivine, I would be the person to record my memories of him. The few hasty and general words I uttered at his funeral did not suffice for me to feel I had fulfilled my promise and the task I had to accomplish. So here, I am fulfilling my commitment in a way (I believe) Livio would have appreciated, by explaining the meaning of his lessons and his political work in Italy. [1]**

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/TORINO1973a-2.jpg>]

Turin, 1973

If the first part of my article touches upon my own life, it is because the only things I feel authorised to relate about Livio are the circumstances of our encounter and our journey in common. My outlook on his political work is a very personal one. I don't go into other matters, such as the distance feminism has put between myself and the current I nevertheless want to feel I still belong to. As for his lessons, needless to say I've assimilated them and developed them in my own way.

To my mind, the moral of his life story is that history proved Livio Maitan right and politics proved him wrong. As far as I am concerned, this observation does not detract from the figure. On the contrary, it is a way of undertaking a reflection on politics, its limits, its ability to remain an authentic instrument of liberation, and on its long, diffuse crisis.

In the Italian left, the crisis of politics was talked about for a while, but then this discussion evaporated without a trace. This is also because there were no subjects who could be really interested in it.

As a Trotskyist, Livio devoted his entire life to a critique of politics, criticising the policies of the major political and trade union apparatus of the 20th Century workers' movement. The cultural instruments on which he relied exclusively (history, political economy, sociology...) did not enable him to extend this criticism to politics as a whole, including the environment in which he had carried out his own political action, the margins. Livio always made a de facto criticism of the historical position in which he had chosen to inhabit. However he was unable to make this systematic, due to his cultural background, his generation and his gender.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Paris1969a-2.jpg>]

Paris rally 1969. Left to right: Livio, Charles Micheloux, Henri Weber; Alain Krivine.

For everyone, including Livio, choosing to act from the margins during the 20th Century, outside genuine politics to a certain degree, meant sharing the lot of society's outsiders. It meant an analogous position, working to achieve convergence between intellectuals and masses in the only way they could, sharing in their point of view, but seeing things far more clearly.

And yet, the margins are a disreputable place, like the run-down districts where the workers' movement began to live, to win victories and to spend a season in hell. The working-class vanguards and critical intellectuals who left their place and class of origin rubbed shoulders with thieves, drunkards and prostitutes who were the outcome of unemployment and misery. The disreputable neighbourhoods of politics have their own form of misery, are outsiders in their own way. Of course this political misery is very different from the types that fed petty crime, drove people to drink or threw jobless workers onto the streets.

Livio never left those districts, despite his awareness of the risks of knives in the back and artful dodgers of which he

encountered many over his life. He never left them, but he never idealised them either. He never sang the "praises of the margins", as in the title of a well-known feminist essay written in the days of the debate about difference. Refusing to idealise the margins meant first of all recognising their misery and not confusing it with virtue. It also meant making every effort to break out of the margins. But not to break out of them alone; to emerge from them alongside the sectors of society still living on the edges.

The misery on the margins of the workers' movement meant sectarianism, an extreme, irresponsible, fragmentation, an inability to really measure up to politics, laziness in thought and effective action alongside neurotic bursts of activism for a month - or a year.

I would like to attempt to read Livio's life and work as a criticism of politics and explain the existence of people like him who give us some reason to hope. Because, if there is any possibility of building a new workers' movement, it will depend those with the same or very similar historical and political position or positions very similar to Livio's.

## Without Trotsky or Mao

I met Livio Maitan in the mid 1960s: I was young, confused and I had an irrepressible need for explanations, which no one provided. Between the events in July 1960 and the lead-up to 1968, a great many young people grew close to the Italian Communist Party (PCI). First came a handful, then others, then a great many. In Naples, the phenomenon affected two sections most of all. These were Old Vomero and Vomero-Centre. [\[2\]](#)

The epicentre of this radicalisation was not by chance, as Vomero was a "respectable" district and those young people were almost all students at the university or had recently graduated and were living there while seeking out scholarships and careers.

It was yet another case of the phenomenon that students (most of them still male) would play for a number of years in Western societies, the role of outsider intellectuals. In other times and places this role was played by Jews, by impoverished minor aristocrats or other social groups. In their own way, students were intellectuals, and in their own way outsiders, although it may be only for a transitory period of their lives.

The Neapolitan PCI did not know how to harness the extraordinary energy let loose by the "best youth". Perhaps because the Federation was under the aegis of the Party's right wing (Amendola and Napolitano). This was already obvious from the tendency to turn the local circles into electoral committees. The leaders dealt almost exclusively with internal struggles for assignments and positions and national and local elections. In the local sections, how to be rooted in the social corpus, youth demands, the Vietnam war and workers' struggles were as far from their everyday concerns as the moon.

With exceptions, of course, with "Sunday Socialism" speeches and a growing alarm about these young people popping up who were so different from their traditional base, so far removed from the respectful party faithful. The youth in both Vomero sections began to meet half way in-between the two. Weather permitting - and it did permit most of the year - they discussed things passionately in the outdoor cafés for hours upon end, even into the night. That is how we started, without Trotsky or Mao. They would only come along later, when our relationship of personal trust in our leaders, who often led nothing beyond their own *cursus honorum*, had already completely broken down.

## Italian Communist Party's 11th Congress

This is the context in which the 11th Party Congress took place. The differences in outlook were so great as to break the Stalinist superstition against currents. Amendola and Ingrao represented the two poles of the conflict and their speeches, if we study them closely, were also the embryonic form of the two opposing currents latent later on in the PCI until its demise. All of us found ourselves on the same side as Ingrao's left current - at least those of us who had joined the party, as a greater portion of the "best youth" was to join the party and its periphery above all in the two years after the 11th Congress.

In the course of the Congress debates there were long meetings of what was already a clandestine current in the making. Through the dynamics of the discussions I grew to understand that the party operated with a logic of concentric circles. Our youth members were in the outermost circle, where we learnt mostly about how to conduct ourselves at the Congress. At the Federation congress, with rather cunning manoeuvres behind our backs, the bureaucracy's real consciousness and professional training, there was a scrupulous backward selection. Those among us who had played the most marginal role, either through timidity, limited convictions or abilities, were admitted to leadership bodies. The Ingrao current did not raise a finger to defend us. On the contrary, they sent us the message that we were not to meet apart, because (as mentioned earlier) in a Communist party there must be no currents.

So it is easy to understand how and why a group of young people in Vomero decided at a certain point to join forces with what they saw as the left of Ingrao's left current, namely Livio Maitan's group.

In the second half of the 1960s and the subsequent decade Livio Maitan gave me a number of fundamental lessons on the way a pedagogical relationship is conducted in politics. Collective discussions, suggested readings, examples of practices, taking part together in struggles, seminars or simply open-ended friendly conversations...

## **First lesson: criticism of bureaucracy, political apparatus and political circles**

The first lesson was the most effective one because it did not only represent a method of interpreting the experiences of the 20th Century workers' movement, but also was what I needed most after the 11th Congress. That is, a better understanding of my personal experience, my conflictual relations with the leaders of the Neapolitan federation leadership of the PCI. This pushed me towards such readings, as they provided me a plausible explanation of the dynamics, attitudes and unfulfilled promises I had witnessed first-hand.

Before anything else, I succeeded in understanding that I was facing a far different species from the professional revolutionaries I kept reading and hearing about. The other side let it be understood that this was due to the difference between ideal constructions and reality, or infiltration by enemy agents. Such people, the party bureaucrats, were the product of specific dynamics, which led to the prevalence of attitudes contrary to those a Communist party should have displayed in society. Later, I would come to the conclusion that the bureaucrat, even more than the bourgeois, was the polar opposite of the revolutionary, from an anthropological standpoint. At least from revolutionaries of the same type, if not the same stature, as Gramsci, Rosa Luxemburg or Trotsky.

The contrast between ends and means started out from the internal logic of the organisational forms that should have furthered social transformation and the emancipation of subaltern classes. A critical and disinterested attitude, the need for change, the ability to see beyond the apparent static nature of social relations the molecular processes undermining these, were turned on their head.

The bureaucracy emerges from co-option mechanisms that favour a specific human type, whose main concern is his

or her own career. Such people are prudent and able to conform without undue psychological pain. They contemplate their own *cursus honorum* as a separate body, where the logic of competition and complex power techniques take the fore. These will eventually represent the bureaucrat's only real professional speciality. This will lead them to a conservative outlook, as their main concern is maintaining the status, role and position that will grant them privileges and power. The community organised to meet such needs becomes a hierarchical whole where the same people who would rise in other hierarchies come to the fore: males, with the culture required to be spokesmen and the spare time indispensable to undertake an unpaid apprenticeship.

This conception of bureaucratisation remains largely misunderstood on the left for the same reasons clear explanations and transparent phenomena and self-evident truths find no listeners. For the same reasons that the obvious truth of neo-colonial plunder, exploitation and the existence of a hierarchical order without any social usefulness are constantly denied. The same denial applies to the dynamics that created and destroyed the 20th Century workers' movement. The thesis on bureaucratisation can only be thoroughly understood and then forgotten when disillusion, the needs of everyday life or Narcissus push people to positions of which they had long been critical.

Trotsky and the Trotskyist movement, due to the historical position to which they were relegated were able to conduct a thoroughgoing criticism, but they did not invent the thesis on bureaucratisation.

Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg had a sense of this before them. Lenin described the liberal thought to which the workers' movement owed a debt for the category of imperialism, through systematic use of empirical data and logical deductions. Max Weber wished to calm the German conservatives disturbed by social-democratic leaders' "Sunday socialism" speeches. He explained that this oratory was meant for a socially dissatisfied and politically unsophisticated rank and file. At almost the same time and in her own way, Rosa Luxemburg made similar affirmations and no one can deny that the German events of 1918/19 proved both of them right. She added that, if by chance a revolution actually took place, the party bureaucracy would have built a top-heavy, deeply conservative state bureaucracy.

The thesis on bureaucratisation is based on evidence, later caricatured by counterposing the good rank and file and the nasty leaderships. Rosa Luxemburg explained instead that professional politicians and their social base (rank-and-file activists are the specific form of liaison between these) have rather different needs. This divergence is at the origin of bad and good effects, of infamous and noble things. The workers' movement was born out of qualitative needs that go far beyond employment and wages; the need for rationality and justice, to feel one is the agent of one's own destiny and the countless other impulses born from the driving forces of history.

But the more it is structured, the more complex it becomes, the more it creates different functions that it absorbs as politics becomes a means for the affirmation of other demands. Where it has taken power, eliminating or assimilating any other powers, it has become an instrument of social hierarchisation. Then the demands of social ascent and power, the tendency of *Homo hierarchycus* to develop vertical structures, manipulate ideology to abuse power and everything that has come to be known as "real socialism" affirmed itself within.

In senile-capitalist societies, in which a great degree of actual power is held by economic elites, social equilibriums are adequately ensured, positions in elected assemblies and related privileges become numerous, politics becomes first and foremost a desirable profession.

The parties of the European left since the Second World War provided a career path to part of the surplus intellectual labour produced by the new educational processes. They also became a mechanism for rising in status, formation of elites and the exercise of power.

The history of the 20th Century workers' movement is a succession of involutions, mutations, and metamorphoses. We must no longer succumb to or spread illusions about these. From intellectuals who bore possible utopias to ferocious Stalinist bureaucrats, to the post-Stalin gerontocracy, to the guardians of Marxist orthodoxy recycled as Mafia billionaires after the collapse of the USSR, there have been moments of deep rupture, but also a dynamic.

There is a continuity between the reformist party in the best sense of the term, holding lively discussions on the problems of transition and dealing much more than the PCI ever did with the problems of developing a truly secular state, to the remains of Bettino Craxi's gang allied with Catholic fundamentalists and post-fascists. Noske and Scheidemann, Blair and D'Alema, the exponents at different times of an imperialist, militaristic left are also products of a history.

Although his lessons definitively opened up a horizon for me, Livio still had to overcome my tendency to unilateral, drastic conclusions, the movement-based outlook and the anarchistic spirit. From Livio, I learnt that reality is more complex than the literary representations of it and that one affirmation and another from an opposing logic can both be true. That often, there are not certain solutions, but only concrete possibilities of trying out antidotes.

His criticism of bureaucracies, apparatuses and political layers did lead him to deny obvious. He did not believe in the so-called spontaneous action of the masses, although he was of the opinion that their role should have been re-evaluated with respect to social-democratic and Stalinist tradition. He was perfectly aware of the demands of an organisation and in his own way did everything he could to ensure at least the shadow of one existed. He explained to us that the major political and trade-union organisations of the workers' movement were essential to social progress and a democratic space; that we had to work with the left parties and at the opportune time, even vote for them.

During the "Two Red Years" at the end of the 1960s, at times his attitude towards what we by then saw as adversaries even seemed too moderate to us.

## Second lesson: thinking with a revolutionary break on the horizon

But of course, Livio was not a moderate by any of the possible definitions of the term. Indeed, his second lesson taught me nothing less than to think with a revolutionary break on the horizon.

When the party functionaries who had done so much to dampen my youthful enthusiasm understood the direction we were moving, they tried to patch things up, finally talking to us. One of the fantasies they alluded to most was our supposed 'abstraction'. This was implicitly counterposed to the 'concrete' nature of the local and national party leadership.

Events soon proved Livio to be far more concrete than they were. As the movement against the Vietnam War was on the rise throughout the world, they said little or nothing, in deference to a bipolar balance that they thought untouchable. While the irresistible tide of workers' struggles was underway in the factories ... a movement that would last almost twenty years in Italy (until the last acts of resistance by the factory councils) they insinuated that the Socialist presence in the government called for a tight rein on the trade unions.

It took us a couple of years to understand what was going on in the class we claimed to be organic members of. History would prove how much they lacked a concrete outlook, even in terms of optics. They seemed hypnotised by

the mirage of national unity and thought the Socialist Party joining the government would open up a benevolent cycle. On the contrary, it was the extraordinary season of struggles that brought the PCI so close to their fond hope of returning to government. They were scandalised by our criticisms of the Soviet Union, but later on they tossed out the baby with the bath water, and fell into neoliberal criticism's image of that reality and its history. They told us that currents could not be built within Communist parties, and then split up into groups seeking power, prepared to dispose of any public goods if those goods did not correspond to their personal interests and careers.

I learnt from Livio Maitan that being a revolutionary meant thinking in motion; that is, in realities very different from falling into the way the wind was blowing. The latter attitude was more typical of the political layers seeking an electoral base, would-be generals without an army yet, small apparatus with lesser responsibilities with respect to a social equilibrium.

For Livio, thinking in movement meant having a project for transformation, liberation and justice and also the ability to see the elements and dynamics within a specific state of affairs moving in that direction. It was not just an ability to see things better, but meant that every time he sought to see with a view to getting others to understand what they failed to, by opening an infinite number of more windows. This attitude later became the origin of some optical illusions, because lucidity and errors are also relative to the position where each person is located.

That said, I don't think that he ever believed the revolution was round the corner, at least not in Europe. Although he did always refuse to believe that only another corner lay beyond the first one. The revolutionary horizon also meant for him the risk of a military confrontation, which he refused to rule out from a principle of intellectual honesty and because he was too familiar with 20th Century history. But it was not only his historical knowledge and deep repugnance towards mystification. It was also a type of culture, foreign to any image of history as linear progress, the antipositivist criticism implicit in his cultural references.

His mindset was on the same side of the mountain as Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky, Benjamin and Bloch (each one in rather different ways) and the best revolutionary tradition of the first decades of the 20th Century.

He saw the elements of conflicts, the breaks, the brusque turnabouts, the sudden risks of regression and barbarism in humankind's progress to liberation. He conceived of socialism as salvation, but never idealised it and above all never imagined it as a historical arena to achieve his "Cartesian civil phantasms".

From Livio I learnt that keeping a revolutionary horizon firmly in sight is a requirement for critical thought, a way of seeing, a position to orient ourselves in the world. And only from such a standpoint can socialism, the other, possible world, cease to be an ethical requirement and concretely take on a possibility linked to anthropological observations.

If it is indeed true that humankind, like all primates, is a hierarchical species, it is also true that the community of human beings is not an anthill with predetermined dominant and subaltern roles. Those who imagined they belonged to a master race destined to rule the world have already seen their insignia dragged in the dust by the so-called slave race, in 1945. For Livio, thinking that power relations can be destabilised contained, overthrown or cancelled out meant taking the part of a form of realism, one of the two forms of anthropologically possible realism.

Where Livio found himself with regard to history obviously exposed him too to the risk of specific errors. Livio's most glaring error (shared by Mandel and the entire United Secretariat) was not by chance. More than a political error, it can be described as an actual case of denial, that is refusal to believe unacceptable evidence. At the time the Berlin Wall came down and the USSR imploded, for too long a time Livio imagined that this would be the dawn of the anti-bureaucratic revolution which could return the State to its legitimate owners, without challenging the October revolution's conquests. It was difficult for him to accept the idea that the process that began with the October

revolution would conclude thus, without amends or a happy end. Precisely because he understood the gravity of the implications, this time he saw things less well than others who were usually more shortsighted. As often happens, he saw in the phenomena of the late 1980s what he wanted to see. This aspect was indeed present, but it was too much weaker than other dynamics and other forces in play.

## Third lesson: on democracy and the socialism we want

Much of the third lesson would come later, when the "best youth" of Vomero had almost all left the PCI or were radicalising outside it. Its subject matter was antidotes to bureaucratisation and the possibilities of a socialism different from any known up until then.

In mid-1966 a group from Vomero-Centre first joined the Fourth International. For some time we had already earned an unwarranted reputation as "Maitanian Trotskyists", when some of us still saw Trotsky as a literary critic, as we had glanced at a compilation of his cultural essays in the university library. In the second half of the year, we attended the lessons on workers' movement history taught by Libero Villone, a philosophy instructor at Vico classical college.

In 1967 things moved far more quickly than our capacity to understand them and take action. Some Catholic groups had begun to move leftwards with what we saw as incredible speed. At the university everything was happening: occupations and pitched battles with fascists, wild discussions about things we had never heard about before, such as "new orders" which we spent months debating. The "Che Guevara" circle, which we had built with one foot inside and one foot out of the PCI began to fill with young people we didn't know, who spoke of the party in ways we thought even too disrespectful.

The upsurge of the youth movement struck our circle head on and pushed it irresistibly towards the political myth of the second half of the 1960s, the [Chinese] Cultural Revolution. The Mao-Stalinist groups in Naples partly came out of our own work, as did the red and black "lines", the "Serve the people" movement that wound up later in Formigoni's Catholic fundamentalists.

As was his intellectual habit, in the years beforehand Livio emphasised the key importance of the Chinese revolution. His attitude contrasted with the Trotskyist movement's sectarian and dogmatic outlook, understanding so little about this event. However his willingness to value all leftward dynamics stopped short when it hit knots that would have made it into another story altogether. Between the end of the 1960s and the end of the following decade, those of us who decided to remain in the Fourth International received another series of important lessons. The subject matter was democracy and the socialism we wanted.

As Livio explained to us - the masses certainly came into play but that fact was not sufficient by itself. They did not have any instruments of self-organisation where they could develop an adequate understanding of issues at stake, debate and make choices. The party faction led by Mao, attempting to avoid the risk of becoming a minority in the apparatus, quite rightly appealed to the masses, but their methods promised nothing good. The other party fraction was subjected to physical violence and humiliation and could not make their case. The Chinese people only learnt about their position through the caricatures of their opponents. Mao encouraged youth to challenge the powers of party leaders and functionaries. When the youth's criticism addressed the entire bureaucracy, that is Mao's friends as well, he relied in the army to put them back in their place.

If Fausto Bertinotti had also raised questions about post-revolutionary societies, asking, "what didn't work?" -, Livio would have certainly spoken of democracy. "Socialist democracy", of course, that a whole series of different things

that contribute to each other. Internal party democracy, the possibility of forming tendencies or fractions, democracy as diversity and variety of organisational forms (Councils above all, but also trade unions, parties, self-organised movements, associations and every kind a society can develop), as well as plurality among Soviet parties. The adjective does not refer to ideological limits - it merely indicates the context in which the democracy is exercised and permits different forms of direct democracy.

To a great extent with reference to Trotsky's experience and thoughts on the matter, and with the historical experience afterwards and due to the position in which we found ourselves, the best part of the Trotskyist movement developed over the years an organic vision of democracy, as an alternative both to liberalism and bureaucratic rule. Many have ironised scathingly at this image of the socialism we want, bringing up the reality in which 20th Century revolutions actually took place: underdevelopment, surrounded by enemies, harsh living conditions, cultural and political backwardness, as well as Lenin and Trotsky's own practices during the Civil War years.

Naturally, there is a core of truth in such considerations. They remind the squeamish of the violence, isolation and outside pressures under which the subaltern classes undertook their processes of liberation. And yet, if we look carefully at each specific case of repression and limits on democracy, few of the acts were really intended to thwart outside enemies' aggressions and plots. Or else, when that was their intent, they were almost always ineffective from that standpoint.

If experience is of some use, we must add that Lenin and Trotsky fully understood their outside enemies' nature, but were very ill-informed about the internal enemy that was developing, partly through measures taken during the civil war with very different intentions.

To my mind, the ultimate meaning of Livio's lessons on the relationship between revolution and democracy was: Democracy is not less important, but much more important in systems or environments in which politics is everything or just about. In the capitalist countries the existence and invasive nature of economic power makes democracy merely formal to a large extent, though in the long run capitalism doesn't even shore up liberal democracy. However, in countries where the very economy is under political control democracy can never be merely formal. This is why even partial forms of democracy never took root in those societies.

Looking at capitalism, Marx observed that means of production based above all on property paradoxically produced the generalised impossibility for non-capitalists to gain access to property. One could make a similar argument about "real socialism". That form, based on politics more than any other, made meaningful access to politics impossible for the masses, by denying them democracy, autonomy and freedom.

Democracy is also the key that opens up the prospect of organisational forms not necessarily destined to become bureaucratic, sclerotic and genetically modified. The recognition of temporary or ongoing organised tendencies is a necessary but inadequate condition. Usually leadership groups on the left tend to become more open to currents when their parties play a more minor role or the distance from a social base widens. The closer the base is, the more it sees, the more it passes judgement, the more the logic of the apparatus demands omertÃ and internal solidarity among a political layer. Contrary to the common view, the mother of all bureaucracies, of the vertical, centralised party ready to appeal to party discipline was the right wing of German social democracy. A party that was already highly bureaucratised, but followed closely by a politically cultured and active working class.

Freedom to organise tendencies is an aspect of democracy, but the latter is the relation with its own social references. These must be as active and self-organised as possible, have as many decision-making powers as feasible and be as educated as they can to make decisions as to the choice of the party's political staff. As this does not occur spontaneously and is itself the outcome of educational activity, the antidote to bureaucratisation can seem based on the unrealistic postulate of a political layer with the vocation of divesting itself of power to give it up to others. But insofar as this hypothesis (like any other) is not devoid of contradictions, the paradox is not as great as it

seems. Leadership groups, political staff able to make the concepts of direct democracy an integral part of building their own organisational instruments, can't be those coming out of co-option mechanisms. Instead, they could be a generation of intellectuals and political volunteers, still on the margins, who came out of challenges to those mechanisms. But it must also be a well-informed generation, able to attempt a second experiment with clear ideas about why the first one failed.

## Fourth lesson: building in the current

Some consider Livio a theoretician and not a builder. However, such an image does not correspond to reality. Firstly, he was not a theoretician and never claimed to be. He did not have the relative distance from his own passions and the needs of the here and now, the time and the will to pay monomaniacal attention to the object of study.

Livio was a cultivated political intellectual who was familiar with theory. He was above all a man with a specific and relatively rare ability to find his bearings in the world. He rarely erred in his evaluations of the state of affairs, the economic situation, or a national or international political event.

Moreover, it is not true that he was not a builder, because the small size of the Italian group was unrelated to his abilities to build one. He had twice built what a person with his role had to prove able to build - a leadership group. During the 1960s, especially through entrism, he had united a group of people who would later lead almost everything that began to organise to the left of the Communist Party at the end of that decade. The way that group dispersed depended to a great extent on the disproportion between its rational arguments, which remained merely arguments, and the material strength of currents pushing in other directions. A country of one billion people with the status of an alternative myth to the Soviet one, an irresistible youth upsurge without history or memory, finding its own way in the world under the influence of what appeared on the horizon.

Perhaps subjective elements also played a part in the Italian section's crisis. Certainly entrism and an entrism outlook for too long played a part. But historical accidents, chance, and personal characteristics were even more determinant. And accidents, chance and personalities must be seen as fully active agents of political vicissitudes.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Atene1976a-2.jpg>]

Athens, 1976

Livio didn't waste many tears on the crisis. He saw that there were many fish in the sea and plunged in, undertaking to build what he saw as the new leadership of the Fourth in Italy. We grew rapidly throughout the 1970s, but still remained a small group on the margins of a crowded margin. At least life there was a lot more fun than in the Vomero-Centre section of the PCI, under Giorgio Napolitano's watchful eye. Although we were small and burdened with the image a galaxy of groups with similar references to ours projected onto us: ultra-Leninists, extra-Bolsheviks, orthodox Trotskyists, M-Ls, 'red liners' and 'black liners', neo-Bordigists and all the other masked youth committees - we managed to take root with a small but active presence in major factories.

We conquered and held our position among the students for a long time by building a network of small nuclei intended to be the core of Soviets. We took the initiative in the revolt of untenured teaching staff against the trade unions at Brancaccio Theatre in Rome. This forced the extraparliamentary left of the day to take a stand, although they had quickly moved from extremism to excessive prudence and merely imaginary tactics. In Naples, along with the "unemployed with diplomas and degrees", we built the first attempt to organise precarious intellectuals. This quickly burnt itself out due in large part to the crisis of Lotta Continua, which had assured its organisational support to the campaign.

Our marginal situation was no longer linked to Maoism as its influence fell off rapidly in the early 1970s. Nor was it

due to the youthful enthusiasm that had made even an old radical like Maitan seem moderate in 1968.

It was due above all to political organisational factors. As Gramsci had written, a political group or any organised entity is a kind of chemical composite. With a certain number of leaders and their qualitative and quantitative weight one attains a proportional ability to build. We certainly had our political bureaux and our executives, but names are not numbers. The Italian section had lost its leadership group in 1968. Another would begin to take form only at the end of the following decade in a close obstacle race between a history and a society that history was attempting to communicate with.

At the end of the 1970s this newborn leadership (perhaps not yet born) experienced another crisis, although it was less devastating and very different. In 1968, the Italian section of the FI was hit by a wave going in a direction opposite its own, to a return, albeit brief, to Stalinism. Ten years later saw a backlash. The retreat of the youth movement brought its own instabilities and problems. Thus, the people Livio had brought together before 1968 scattered to become leaders of other currents. Ten years later, those who dropped out began brilliant careers as judges or university professors, essayists or leaders of something or other. Prestigious roles in a society that was tending to return to a certain equilibrium.

That is, that the margin is the historical and political setting for permanent crisis, due to the lack of funds, arenas, institutional backing, access to communications media. In short, what we lacked to carry out an effective criticism of the apparatus was ... an apparatus.

I must also admit that it was not easy to master the oxymorons of revolutionary Marxist tradition. And if on a literary level it was possible to rename those "tensions", in the critical practice of the apparatus and the demands of those, it meant an exhausting struggle in the effort to substitute everything we could not claim to have at the margins with our own will. I went through a personal experience that was the reverse of what we had lived through a bit more than ten years earlier in the Communist Party.

Thus, Livio was a builder, as he knew how to build and rebuild a collective intelligence: by playing a pedagogical role without pedantry, a guiding role without arrogance. He was able to get along with strong personalities and overdeveloped egos while limiting the moments of personal conflict as much as possible. But he was a builder most of all due to a certain outlook on construction. For him, it meant always being in a current, in part of the social body, in a progressive phenomenon, in a dynamic of liberation.

## **Fifth lesson: better the King of Prussia than the museum of mummies**

Like all human beings, Livio had his limits and personal defects. Like all, he made mistakes, was late to understand things and sometimes took wishes for reality. It happened to him less than to others, but it did happen. However, he had no tinge of sectarianism, one of the endemic diseases of the margins.

In the history of the workers' movement the centre was bureaucratic and the edges fragmented due to sectarianism. This is a phenomenon analogous to another great bureaucracy in history. The break from the overgrown Church apparatus also let loose a fragmented universe of sects. Those fragments did give rise to innovative processes which were forerunners of the poor organising against the riche and even egalitarian feminism.

Livio thought that it was rather difficult to avoid being viewed as a sect and that we had to resign ourselves to it to a

certain extent. He did think though that we had to use all means at our disposal to protect ourselves from sectarianism. That is the main reason a part of the Trotskyist movement viewed him as a "Pabloite", an epithet that means a liquidationist willing to throw out Trotskyism's organisational and cultural heritage, and was not firm enough in his own revolutionary outlook. Because negative judgements, when they are systematic, build an identity, Livio can also be understood through that anathema.

Livio viewed the risks of sectarianism and dogmatism linked to the conditions of the Fourth International's birth and later situation as no mere phantasm or abstract possibility. It was confirmed in the heat of the action. In one of the lessons on China, I learnt that just before the 1949 Revolution, a distinguished Chinese leader of the International had stated flat out that Mao would never make a revolution, that it was not in his intentions or his political prospects. Evidently that comrade (a most respectable person in human and revolutionary terms in the past) had been cast so far from the revolutionary current in his country that he did nothing more but deconstruct the literal meaning of political texts. He had not only ceased taking action (which he had to resign himself to for a certain period), but also understanding why one thing is strictly linked to another in politics.

The Chinese episode and the problems first Trotsky, then the Fourth International had simply understanding things, are connected to the turn in the communist movement after the Second World War.

On the basis of a series of relatively concrete elements, on a history of the systematic destruction of all new possibilities of revolution and every leadership which had shown the slightest trace of initiative, Trotsky formulated a credible working hypothesis. The hypothesis was that the war would prime new revolutionary processes, which happened, that Stalin would oppose them, which also happened. He also saw an opening for the Fourth International in the space between the revolutionary thrusts and Stalinist conservatism - this did not happen at all.

Thus, what Trotsky failed to predict, and which was very difficult to actually predict, was that in the exceptional war circumstances an interest and a possibility for disobedience took shape within the apparently crystallised Stalinist communist movement and that Tito and Mao would disobey the orthodox line.

Livio developed a logical conviction, which had a material basis and was far removed from sectarian hypersubjectivity. He considered that, if revolutionary processes were in the objective dynamics of reality, that they would take form also beyond and outside the Fourth International and that it was necessary to be a part of such processes or in solidarity, depending on the context and possibilities. Moreover, Livio restricted himself to observing what had already happened. But a feature of sectarianism is to overlook the most obvious aspects of reality, when they come up against their own intellectual constructions, dominated by strong defence mechanisms.

Naturally, such an approach entailed risks, which Livio summarised according to the expression "Work for the King of Prussia". In other words, build leaderships and organisational forms that would be strongly exposed to the magnetic induction of the currents with which they chose to act in solidarity, albeit critical solidarity. This happened above all with Guevarism and with the Castroist leadership in Latin America, in which Livio played an important role guiding sections and groups of the International.

As for myself, I've always thought that we could certainly have avoided such and such an error, but that it was a healthy attitude and that by so doing, the best part of the Trotskyist movement owes the fact that it is still alive politically, and that it has played the role it played later on in the new radicalisation.

In the final analysis, it was not a matter of renouncing either oneself or the exercise of critical thought, but just to lay down the arms of sectarian self-defence that kill like the Medusa's gaze because they turn critical intellectuals into stone, making them priests or priestesses.

In Italy, Livio had theorised unitary paths for the revolutionary left and the united front, including even the PCI, where and when that was necessary and possible. In 1972, I pushed the section to support Il Manifesto's electoral campaign, when it seemed to be the likely candidate to build a party to the left of the PCI. And later on, working with Lotta Continua, appreciating its dynamism, its ability to work on the ground, how it was the mostly unmediated ideological expression of a generational and socio-cultural reality. It was always capable of relativising behaviour and practices. At the time the trade union of workers' councils was founded, it was one of the first groups within the revolutionary left which understood its potential and the demands of working within it.

On the other hand, in the 1980s our section missed its rendezvous with Democrazia Proletaria, showing up too late. But those years were years without Livio, who spent most of his time in Paris. For the rest, we remained what we were: a rather fragile political organisation, always up against dramatic problems of lacking something or other and always short on funds, but rooted in decisive aspects of social struggles. During the events at FIAT in the early 1980s, our comrades in the Turin works played a role that seems almost incredible and the entire section backed them up with frantic and desperate activity. We were the first to cry out that if the layoffs went through at FIAT, they'd go through everywhere.

Alas, the layoffs did take place and with them, much of our presence in the most important working-class community in Italy. And in terms of lucidity and concreteness, forethought and the ability to find our bearings in the world, we must keep in mind the under-evaluation (instrumental or effective) of the catastrophic impact of the defeat of the 35 days at FIAT. The under-evaluation led much later to fruitless self-criticism, like everyone who failed to make a dent in the real state of affairs. The movement against the Cruise missile bases and the Pantera student movement saw us present and at least in those cases, not marginal.

## Livio's project and Rifondazione Comunista

In any event, Livio saw things better and looked farther than much of the political left. He distinguished himself with an ethical attitude of utterly disinterested commitment and fidelity to the truth and proved himself capable of construction in his own way. The political question is not that such a man always remained on the margins of politics, which is a possibility under certain circumstances.

The political question raised is the close cause and effect relation between his qualities and his positions. In 1956, Livio saluted the Hungarian revolution, taking the side opposite the Russian tanks. A communist such as him taking such a stand had no right to speak in the Communist movement. On the other hand, the leaders of the pro-Soviet parties owed their careers first of all to accepting the lie due to a lack of lucidity or affinity with the truth. Later on, those very leaders, or others who represented their organisational continuity, were to throw out the baby with the bath water, taking a stand very similar to liberal critics not only with respect to the Soviet bureaucracy, but the entire legacy of the USSR. And both attitudes had the same justification, the defence of a position of power and shoring up the chances that the context granted such a position.

Over the course of Livio's life, the logic of marginalisation was repeated many times. This was also because in politics, strength depends on strength, as a leading Christian-Democrat said in another context. One could conclude that at the end, although he was an intelligent man with no shortage of qualities, Livio had a certain naïveté, failing to understand that politics was the art of the possible. And above all that his story is a warning to flee marginality at any cost, and that it is rather hard to emerge from it. But reality is different.

Although Livio did make errors of pure formal logic, he was too intelligent a person and above all had been in politics for far too long - certainly, on the margins, but always on the margins of real processes and the most advanced and

dynamic currents of history. In substance - despite all the inevitable errors, time lags and smudges - Livio used the appropriate means to achieve his aims. Whatever the project was, it must first be thoroughly understood. It was a project that obviously was not his alone, but which he attempted to apply flexibly, avoiding mummification and constantly striving to achieve it in an effective reality.

I don't know how Livio would have synthesised it and I don't even know if he would have recognised himself in my summary's lexicon and logic. This is also because our cultural instruments grew apart with time. In any event this project inherits from Marx's own Marxism the importance ascribed to knowledge of the world, the possibilities for subaltern groups in human society to make reason part of their political action. From the left of the workers' movement at the turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries, it inherits the idea that the intelligence capable of understanding hierarchical orders is the product of an encounter between the masses and critical intellectuals. And we must admit that this idea has led an anthropological, and not historical, forcing process (historical forcing is an erroneous social-democratic interpretation). Although its model was 1789, the generation it built either supported or attempted to reproduce the October revolution, pushing it much further, since the bourgeoisie had already attained a fundamental hegemony on the economic and cultural levels. If only for a moment and under exceptional circumstances, it went so far as to overthrow the order of a hierarchical species.

This is not a romantic vision of revolutionaries. Their biographies even when most pared-down and short on adjectives, reveal an irresistible drive to contribute their own existence without personal interest, and a strong emphasis on pedagogy.

The workers' movement taken as a whole - revolutionaries and reformists, huge bureaucracies and the most radical fragments on their margins, opportunists and extremists, party hacks and nomads... - all come from the same phenomenon. This is obvious even before its theoretical contributions. Everything starts from there and starts precisely because it began thus and could not have begun in any other way.

From its history of criticising bureaucracy, Livio's project also inherited the criticism of the slow and contradictory, but uninterrupted movement expelling knowledge of the world from a political formation in its relations with a social body. We have said the human type that emerges from the logic of bureaucracies represents (compared to the revolutionary type) the opposite pole of a binary opposition. Likewise, the self-awareness of the human species that liberation meant to revolutionary Marxism, is turned on its head by Stalinism, in systematic lies and a historical revisionism that only finds analogies in European fascism. In different ways, this phenomenon of expulsion also took place in social democracy. It wound up adopting the system of justifications and values typical of liberalism, including militarism and support to imperialist and neo-colonial wars.

Co-optation mechanisms, the prevailing logic of ruling corporations or castes, the importance ascribed to liberal-democratic institutions to conserve one's status, etc. took precedence over other motivations. The essentially marginal critical intellectual is far different.

With his image of salvation, of liberation, of redemption or whatever term one prefers, Livio could not discount two things in the name of tactical flexibility, or realism - though he did attempt to take it into account. The first was the permanence of something that would keep a history alive, a network of international relations, a layering of experiences and criticism. For a critical intellectual, this knowledge of the world cannot mean only the ability to find one's bearings in the present and suggest rational, and not disconnected, movements to society that will really lead it in the desired direction. At the end of almost two centuries of the workers' movement's history, it also means understanding its vicissitudes, the reasons for the rise and fall of the subjects of liberation in the 20th century. And this is especially important for our refoundation.

If we believe, not in so-called scientific socialism, but at least in the need to make use of earlier experiments, we

have to believe that the only laboratory possible for a critical intellectual is history. But history does not live in politics in the same way as it relives in historiography. It lives politically only if it becomes experience and layers of experiences, complexes of privileged relations, practice and practices, utopia and the ability to adapt to what falsifies it every day. Livio did not rule out that a community in which he had spent almost his entire existence could be surpassed and thus dissolved. But this would have to mean the new organisation would absorb what was essential to go forward by different means.

The second thing he could not discount was truth or what he saw as the truth. Of course he could err in seeing something that was not true as the truth, but he remained faithful to a methodological approach. Those who thought he was naïve either had real plans far different from his or were naïve themselves, in the sense of lacking expertise in what the best part of the Trotskyist movement had become expert at, understanding where certain historical currents lead. I think last part of Livio's life can be understood in that way.

Livio entered Rifondazione with a happy heart, without entrism intent and with the curiosity with which he always approached new experiences. He had sustained the impact with a rather difficult reality (the party led by Armando Cossuta) better than many others. Certainly far better than me. After a few months I took flight and could only describe the events in two Cossutian circles in Milan if I could write like Woodhouse or Kafka.

Some new events changed his curiosity into hope. Livio always had a capacity for hope. Above all, his encounter with Fausto Bertinotti, whom he felt, was the first to express thoughts and concerns similar to ours in a Communist party for many, many years. To those who took him to task for confusing words with reality, he objected that words don't mean the same thing everywhere and that they can't remain merely words if the party secretary is the one speaking them. And to those who viewed Bertinotti as nothing more than an intelligent social democrat, particularly cunning at "Sunday Socialism" speeches, he replied that social-democracy, in the sense they meant, is indivisible from participation in imperialist and neo-colonial wars. And thus that as long as there is no war, there is hope.

But beyond judgements about people and the personalities' role in history, Livio saw two episodes as crucial. The first was the break with the Prodi government, although it did entail a loss of institutional access, which is one of the most important conquests for any apparatus. The second was the turn at the Fifth Congress, which occurred under the propulsion of a new movement.

At that time Livio had hopes that it was not only legitimate to hope, but also that hope was more justified because our hopes and desires expressed our capacity or incapacity to understand. Livio hoped that diversity, multiplicity, and the contradictory aspects of the thrust present in Rifondazione would find a positive resolution. He hoped they would be the beginnings of a change in the opposite direction from the one that occurred at the end of the 20th century. Of course, once again, this was the best of many hypotheses. But where Livio was clear and his sectarian critics were not was that Rifondazione taking another direction would once again put the brakes on the relation of forces, other degenerative processes and other delays in times of dramatic emergencies when utopia was in agony just thinking of the future. Of course, if things went where they weren't supposed to go, this would have to be made clear. But it is far more revolutionary not to give up on the end as lost, if the loss can be averted.

The debate about non-violence preoccupied and irritated Livio above all. Not in the name of any supposed violent nature of Marxism, the birthing violence of history, the revolutionary break or any militaristic deviations... In that debate, and in the way real problems were posed, he smelt the odour of the old roast burnt too many times, the odour of mystification. He would have just as soon admitted that another world was not possible because injustice was a structure of human thought, as believe expropriators would let themselves be expropriated through non-violent means.

And this is because he knew his history and because he had entered that experimental laboratory, emerged from it

and returned many times in his long political life.

# The future of the critical intellectual

Livio's project was not achieved. Of course, history does not finish here, but in reality there are no longer the dynamics that authorised thinking with such a horizon.

The process begun with the 1917 revolution has not only concluded, but has started to regress headlong. There has been no democratisation of the post-revolutionary societies preserving the conquests of October, whether through Hungarian and Czechoslovakian revolts (but victorious ones), nor through internal reform of bureaucracies which some people in the Trotskyist movement had dared to hope in. The revolutionary processes in the economically most developed and politically most advanced part of Western Europe have not taken place. The processes of national liberation in the dependent countries have been broken off, after producing significant internal breaks with the old ruling classes and a virtuous contamination with European culture. To the question as to whether this project was merely a vision like Saint Thomas's Seraphins, I would answer 'no' because strong winds blew in that direction in 20th century reality. Naturally, this project was the best working hypothesis, but also a non-abstract possibility among others, which later took the fore.

Livio's defeat also meant the defeat of the twentieth-century workers' movement, its mutation and dispersions. And the defeat of something more; the attitude that made knowledge of the world an instrument of liberation. An attitude that passed through the Enlightenment, Hegel, Marx and became an extraordinary material force in the 20th Century.

There are two main points to keep in mind about the current state of affairs. Firstly, the criticism of the reality of that project cannot be ignored. There was probably no pre-ordained or necessary logic to the blind alley human history found itself in, but this does not mean the result is of secondary importance.

Towards the end of the 1980s, Livio and I took different political paths. There was no reason to always attend the same school and remain at the same level... It was always a pleasure when I listened to him and not only a pleasure, it helped me find my way. But in Livio's culture, there were not adequate explanations for the defeat, nor any way to develop a theoretical synthesis of empirical observations on the meanderings of the Cartesian Cogito, Reason, Consciousness, etc.

Even the "organic intellectual", the "professional revolutionary" and the "disinterested vanguard" had to be subjected to criticism. Their all too ephemeral appearance on our earth and the observation that sometimes there is the kernel of the bureaucrat in revolutionaries must also have a rational explanation. The criticisms on this human type have never convinced me, especially those supposing the possibility of a critical intelligence permeating the entire social body, which simply multiplied the unresolved theoretical problem by millions.

I found an initial, partial but convincing, explanation once again on the margins, in the most marginal among margins, feminism. However feminist theory, like any other, must be studied making the needed distinctions between useful material, subculture and ideological rubbish. Livio provided me yet more evidence of this intellectual curiosity and his capacity to use his intelligence when he read a long text fraught with difficulty, in which I had sought to distil the most complex and interesting aspects of the academic feminist debate. He phoned me several times to provide his comments and appreciations. But at the end he did take me to task for what he saw as the misuse of a relative superlative...

The only criticism that could convince him was one able to properly demystify mythological figures, while remaining in the same pedestal of Enlightenment thought, self-consciousness of the species, of the knowledge of the world... For the first time in forty years of travelling together, the teacher-pupil relation was reversed. Livio listened to the explanation of how and why Freudian psychoanalysis was the most effective instrument of criticism and feminism the social subject best placed to make use of it. And how and why such figures are limited by their over-evaluation of rational movements, while it is all too obvious that reason never acts on its own. Abstracted from the body, sex, guts, desires, Narcissus and Oedipus etc. those who understand the world better than others do wind up understanding nothing about themselves. This is the first reversal, the origin of all the subsequent reversals that can turn a revolutionary into a bureaucrat.

For the rest of the world, the revolutionary does not make an abstraction of the materiality of needs and motives, contrary to the liberal ideology according to which politics lives in the separation of institutions and the abstraction of bodiless projects. Abstraction may reappear and disappear but the person and the ideology slip on the interests, rancour, drives and everything making up a human being, whether or not he or she is an intellectual.

The second type of considerations relate to the future. The current problem of situating thoughts and practices in a strategic horizon comes from a specific state of events. The projects that clashed in the history of the 20th-century workers' movement (revolutionary breaks, structural reforms, third way, national road to socialism etc.) represent working hypotheses about a Subject's path, destiny and possibilities. This Subject - the complex of many different things in social, cultural and political terms that we have named the workers' movement - no longer exists. Of course some vital parts of it still exist, as do remains or embryonic forms, memories and ideological crystallisations, etc., but no longer with the relation of forces - I'd say also in cultural terms - able to create an image of the dynamics of a possible transition.

And yet, when we speak of re-foundation, a new workers' movement etc. we are expressing the desire and the intent to recuperate that project, though re-interpreted critically. But it will be impossible to begin anew without repeating what it was at the beginning in some way or another. That is, the act, the gesture, the watchword with which a generation of intellectuals and political volunteers have found themselves converging with the needs of a social reality. This movement of thought and bodies is indispensable today precisely because the processes of separation, mutation, distancing between the lefts and the part of society to which left forces have traditionally referred.

We must also observe that the type of person and motivations available and able to reproduce it are found to a large extent on the margins of parties, outside parties or completely outside politics. The phenomenon is an old one in the United States, well known and discussed. In Latin America, it has not been studied as much, but it is also more diffuse in the multiplication of grassroots communities, non-governmental organisations, the infinite number of initiatives that seem to spring up spontaneously but almost always have a head and are often based on a disinterested contribution of intelligence and time. In Europe, perhaps 1968 marked a watershed, with radicalisation outside and against the parties furthest left within the left. Even those parties proved unable to take in these new forces and integrate a criticism in the only way operations of the kind can be successful, that is by changing themselves. Actually, the PCI offloaded much of the change onto the labour movement, but then the radical self-reform of the councils did occur.

Yet, it was a matter of understanding that the more politics drives away the motivations and people who could restore the functions that it had lost to a great degree.

That is, the ability to be not merely managers specialised in social relations of forces, but also possibilities and hope for those who lack privilege and power in society.

With respect to parties, and the entire history of the 20th Century workers' movement, the movement of the

## Lessons from a Critical Intellectual

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movements is less fraught with conflicts. However it is more extraneous and perhaps it has fewer conflicts because it is more extraneous and without the rancour memory brings. And outside politics or on its very edge, we find the vast phenomenon of volunteerism. There is no reason to idealise the latter as it is also evidence of depolitisation and the fragmentation of qualitative needs which could be addressed elsewhere.

For these reasons and others, our future is tied up with the possibilities that people like Livio no longer remain on the margins and that the critical intellectual's project really come back to life in some shape or form.

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[1] We reproduce here the article written for the special issue of the magazine *Erre* on Livio Maitan, translated from Italian by Maria Gatti.

[2] Vomero is a district in the hills overlooking the historic city centre of Naples, so the air is better than in the core.