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LUCIO MAGRI

1932–2011

LUCIO MAGRI WAS a unique figure in the European Left—the only significant revolutionary thinker of his time whose thought was inseparable from the course of the mass movements of the decades through which he lived. He was incapable of a theoretical reflection that was not rooted in the real actions, or inactions, of the exploited and oppressed. That was normal in the generation of Gramsci, of the early Lukács and Korsch, who witnessed the Russian Revolution. In the age of the Cold War, when Magri entered politics, it was virtually unknown. The great Marxist intellectuals of the period—Adorno, Sartre, Lefebvre, Althusser, and so many others—developed their ideas in radical disconnexion from any close contact with popular politics. Italian Communism alone permitted, for a season, a classical circuit between original theory and organized practice, within the framework of a mass party. For a decade, Magri took the political opportunity it offered, before the PCI dispensed with his loyalty. Did it ever realize what it lost in doing so? One day in Biella, when he was still a young cadre, after they had spent a night together working on a speech to be given by his superior, Enrico Berlinguer—before he became leader of the party—told him: ‘Magri, you have yet to learn that in politics one needs the courage of banality.’ Such was the self-awareness of officialdom, at its most lucid. Magri had another kind of political courage: the kind that Gramsci displayed, in notebooks that were never banal.

Born in 1932, and brought up till 1939 as an only child in the Libyan desert, where his father was a colonel in the Italian air force, Lucio Magri cut a singular figure. In appearance as dazzling as any film star of the period—athletic build; strong jaw; regular features; blonde hair tapering

to a widow's peak; deep-set, blazing blue eyes; wide smile; large, perfect teeth—and in dress of immaculate informality, he was the picture of spectacular good looks and casual elegance. Skilled at chess and poker, and a first-class cook, he had every outward asset of the man of the world, admired by the opposite sex. But there was something too serious and remote, even abstract, in him to fill the role. He lacked the easy conviviality of many Italians. Trenchant rather than urbane, his metallic voice was closer to that of a caustic preceptor than a seducer. His authors were Lermontov, Fitzgerald, Joseph Roth, the Tolstoy of *Father Sergius*. In a lighter vein, also—here a touch of the dandy came in—P. G. Wodehouse, in whose honour he liked to say that the Savoy, on the one occasion a parliamentary delegation brought him to London, could no longer boil an egg to satisfy Jeeves. These were not the usual tastes of a militant, or functionary, of Italian Communism. The contradiction of Magri's career and personality is that he was at once more profoundly tied to the social conflicts in his country as the springs of his own thought, yet also more distant in style and character from them, than any of his contemporaries. He had little popular sensibility; low tolerance for commonplaces of any kind; a manner that could be standoffish, or cutting. But the laws of motion of any radical politics came, and could only come, from the masses, and it was to the strategies at stake in their revolt against the established order that he brought a rare order of analytic intensity and passion.

The condition of this paradox was his experience within the PCI. Brought up in a conventional military family, with a brief period of adolescent religious belief, in Bergamo—one of the 'whitest' areas of Christian Democracy's dominance in Italy—he joined one of its youth organizations while still in school, and was active on its left wing, which he quit when its prestigious leader Giuseppe Dossetti was defeated within the party and resigned from it. Together with other young Christian Democrats of the same levy, he then made contact with the PCI, working in an independent journal of Communist Catholic opinion, *Il Dibattito Politico*. At the age of twenty-four he entered the PCI. Joining the ranks of communism in the wake of the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Party and the Hungarian Revolt, he did so with eyes more open than was common in the inter-war or Resistance generations. Travelling to the Moscow Youth Festival the following year, he was reading Trotsky on the boat to Odessa. His first significant contribution to the party press, in late 1958, was an essay warning against dismissal of Gaullism as a

mere regime of reaction or throw-back to the past, rather than a force capable of modernizing French capitalism.¹ In March 1962 the Istituto Gramsci staged an important conference in Rome on ‘Tendencies of Italian Neo-Capitalism’. There Magri argued that Italy as a whole could no longer be regarded as a backward capitalist society, where a democratic revolution—raising no socialist demands—had yet to take place, even if there were regions within it where that was so; rather, it was already experiencing the new contradictions of advanced capitalist society, which required a different strategy from the party.²

A major historical reconstruction of successive conceptions of the revolutionary party marked his entry into the innovative theoretical journal of the PCI, *Critica Marxista*, then edited by a fellow independent spirit, Romano Ledda.³ Soon afterwards, he was transferred from Lombardy to the party headquarters in Rome, working in its mass organizations department under the commanding figure of Giorgio Amendola, the powerful and authoritarian leader of the right wing of Italian communism. A year later, Amendola announced in *Rinascita* that since neither communist nor social-democratic traditions had succeeded in achieving socialism, the two movements should merge into a new labour party in Italy. A heated debate—in which the most effective reply to Amendola from the left came from Magri—ensued, which the directorate of the PCI quickly shut down.⁴ Within months, the conflict rebounded with a nuanced but incisive critique by Magri, in the summer of 1965, of the limitations of the Popular Front experiences of the thirties that were an ideological template for the official line of the party at the time.⁵ Personal relations with Amendola nevertheless remained good until he succeeded in slipping part of a document he had written into a speech given by Longo,

¹ ‘Ipotesi sulla Dinamica del Gollismo’, *Nuovi Argomenti*, Nos 35–36, November 1958–February 1959.

² The proceedings of the debate were published in Antonio Pesenti and Vincenzo Vitello, eds, *Tendenze del capitalismo italiano*, Roma 1962; Magri then revised his contribution for its French publication: ‘Le modèle de développement capitaliste et le problème de l’alternative prolétarienne’, *Les Temps modernes*, Nos 196–197, September–October 1962.

³ ‘Problemi della Teoria Marxista del Partito Rivoluzionario’, *Critica Marxista*, September–December 1963; an English version was published in *NLR* 1/60, March–April 1970, with an important afterword by Magri on the relations between councils and party, the early and the late Gramsci.

⁴ For Magri’s intervention, see ‘Unificazione: su quale Linea?’, *Rinascita*, 6 March 1965.

⁵ ‘Il Valore e il Limite delle Esperienze Frontiste’, *Critica Marxista*, July–August 1965.

the party's General Secretary. 'You will not hoodwink your elders again,' Amendola told him, 'we are not under bourgeois law here.' For punishment he was put in cold storage, given no work and ignored. After three months, he told Amendola that at thirty-five he was too young to be a pensioner, and asked for any job to which the party might assign him, as third assistant secretary in the backlands of Sicily or wherever else he might be demoted—getting the blunt reply: 'No, if we do that you might quickly end up secretary in Palermo. You must learn discipline.'

Exit from the Party

A year later the Italian 1968 exploded among young workers and students, followed by the still larger French revolt. When Amendola denounced what he saw as the reappearance of the black flag of anarchism, Magri once again wrote the most forceful rejoinder in *Rinascita*,⁶ and soon afterwards a soberly penetrating critique of the French Communist Party's role in the upheaval, *Considerazioni sui Fatti di Maggio*. For a decade he had argued within the PCI that capitalism was both modernizing itself in ways the party was ignoring, and in doing so was generating new needs and forces of rebellion against itself, which required a bolder and more radical strategy than any warmed-over version of the politics of the Popular Front. In late 1969 the PCI leadership, disconcerted by the continuing turmoil in factories and universities as the Italian 'hot autumn' failed to die down, purged the left that had formed around the newly created journal *Il Manifesto*, when it published an editorial by Magri on Husák's 'normalization' in Czechoslovakia, entitled 'Prague Is Alone'.

For over a decade, Magri had worked in the control rooms of an organization of over two million members, the largest mass party in Europe, in close contact with, but never part of, its leadership. He was essentially expelled, along with the rest of the *Manifesto* group—Rossana Rossanda, Luigi Pintor, Aldo Natoli, Massimo Caprara, Luciana Castellina—for criticizing its inability to respond creatively to a mass upsurge that, for the first time since the war, escaped its directives. Exit from the PCI was never part of their intention. But they miscalculated by placing their journal with a small printer in Bari, who distributed it not in bookshops—as they had envisaged—but on news-stands, where it promptly sold 50,000 copies, allowing the PCI leadership to treat it as a factional broadsheet. The trigger for the purge came from *Pravda*'s denunciation of the Czech

⁶ 'Più a Sinistra e Più Unitari', *Rinascita*, 12 July 1968.

editorial, leading the cupola of the party to fear that if it did not crack down on *Il Manifesto*, a pro-Soviet tendency in the PCI would be fostered by Moscow. But amid the euphoria of the student revolt and the workers' hot autumn, the group was not dismayed, converting the monthly into a daily in 1971,⁷ running candidates in the national elections of 1972, and co-founding a party with dissident Socialists in 1974, the PDUP.

In this move, the *Manifesto* group came up sharply against its own limits, and the character of the rebellion on whose energies it had counted in making it. None had any real experience of mass organization. Magri had worked in the central apparatus, Rossanda had been in charge of cultural tasks in the party, Pintor was a brilliant journalist. They had a lot to learn. Magri underwent the most drastic transformation, serving as the leader of the PDUP for nine years, in Parliament and as General Secretary, criss-crossing the country from one end to the other, organizing branches, addressing meetings, composing reports, holding congresses. But the party never got more than half a million votes, and its hopes of unifying a new left front in Italy foundered on the deep cultural gulf that divided the *Manifesto* group, for whom the PCI, however aberrant its policies—by the mid seventies the party under Berlinguer had embarked on the futile quest for a Historic Compromise with Christian Democracy—remained an irreplaceable experience and reference, and the revolutionary groups that emerged out of the late sixties, most of them uncompromisingly hostile to the party and contemptuous of its legacy. The tensions between generations and sensibilities eventually split the *Manifesto* group itself, the daily and the party—Rossanda and Pintor; Magri and Castellina—going separate ways. But when the last expression of a mass politics connected to its moment of formation came, with the peace movement of the early eighties—the Italian demonstrations were the largest in Europe—they were united, Magri responding with one of the most lucid political reflections of, and on them, that the movement produced.⁸

By this time, it had become untenable for Berlinguer to continue the vain pursuit of the Historic Compromise, and the PCI was lending a new ear to workers' struggles. In these conditions, reconciliation was possible and in 1984 the PDUP voted to dissolve itself into the party.

⁷ For Magri's view of the Italian conjuncture at this point, see 'Italian Communism in the Sixties', NLR 1/66, March–April 1971.

⁸ 'The Peace Movement and European Socialism', NLR 1/131, January–February 1982.

Now, for the first time, Magri entered its leading bodies. His view of Berlinguer was respectful, but critical. A politician of limited imagination, of whom little had been expected on his way up the apparatus, he had gained authority from the party's electoral success in 1976, when it achieved its highest share—some 35 per cent—of the vote, from his relative openness to questions of sexual inequality and the environment, and his personal modesty and probity. By the early eighties, he was conducting a turn in which few of his colleagues had much belief. His dramatic death in 1984, collapsing while giving a speech on a balcony in Padua, was in Magri's eyes a political disaster. He would speak of four strokes of divine malignity: the death of Lenin when he was revising his views on the peasantry; of Gramsci when the Comintern had adopted the Popular Front; of Togliatti when he penned the Yalta Memorandum; and of Berlinguer at the moment of his swing to social struggle and solidarity. For by the time of his death, Berlinguer's popularity and prestige in Italy were enormous because of the contrast between his image and that of Craxi, Andreotti, Forlani and the other rulers of the country at the time. The gigantic popular demonstration at his funeral exceeded even that at Togliatti's—which Magri had helped to organize—when the crowds had been so difficult to control that Brezhnev, jostled and nearly knocked over in the crush, kept exclaiming '*revoliutsiya, revoliutsiya!*' in his astonishment at the experience of a march that was not a military parade in Red Square.

After Berlinguer came a steady involution of the PCI. Less important than the aimless moderation of its political line, or lack of renewal in its internal structure, was the transformation of its social base, as generations passed, and the party became something else after decades of *sottogoverno*. Those who had known the Resistance died off, workers dropped away, its functionaries were now mostly self-satisfied regional or municipal office-holders, embedded in dubious local coalitions or presiding over corporatist enterprises. If it was now possible, as it had not been in the past, to present alternative resolutions at party congresses—and there were many who were deeply uneasy about what was happening to the PCI—missing was any firm leadership of the opposition to its rightward drift. That should have come from Amendola's historic adversary, Pietro Ingrao—figurehead of the left at the top of the PCI in the sixties—who had survived him, and still enjoyed great prestige among militants within the party. But though in character absolutely honest and pure, he lacked any backbone, craving applause but fearing responsibility.

Seeming to symbolize a left line, he invariably failed to match words with deeds when the inner-party crunch came. In 1969, though close to the *Manifesto* group, he gave them no support when they were expelled. Twenty years later, when the PCI's new leader Occhetto decided to scuttle its name and nature virtually overnight, Ingrao—after signing a resolution against the dissolution of the party in 1991—remained in the rump formation to emerge from Occhetto's operation, that would soon abandon even the self-designation 'left' as an anachronistic burden.

When the final hour of the PCI arrived at Rimini in 1991, a third of the delegates to its last Congress voted against winding it up, and from this opposition came the formation of a successor organization, *Rifondazione Comunista*.⁹ When its first General Secretary subsequently resigned, Magri could have become its leader. But the transmogrification and scission of the PCI had been too great a disaster. A party that still numbered 1,400,000 in 1991 lost 800,000 members who joined neither side in the split. The tide of mass politics was going out. By 1993, Magri was too sceptical about the future of a Refoundation to which he was still committed to think he was the right person to lead it. Two years later, when RC declined to support the Dini government, spatchcocked together to deny Berlusconi a victory at the polls, he left it and withdrew from public activity.¹⁰ But it was not quite his final throw. On the eve of the millennium, he revived the journal of which he had been a founder thirty years before, this time regrouping different currents of the left in an ecumenical spirit, to confront the realities of a new age of capitalist triumph, unipolar hegemony and scattered resistance, and develop a project capable of passing beyond them.

To this he brought undiminished gifts of political acuity and synthesis, with a broader international vision than ever before. But analytic achievement had never been enough for him. The purpose of the journal was to help work out a programmatic alternative to the ominous status quo. Yet 'programmes truly develop only through social and political struggles, to which they can offer coherence and vision', and when it became clear these were still wanting—in Italy and at large—he closed the journal he had recreated, at the end of 2004, because there was no longer a

⁹ For Magri's account of this moment, see 'The European Left between Crisis and Refoundation', *NLR* 1/189, September–October 1991.

¹⁰ See his text, written around this time, 'The Resistible Rise of the Italian Right', *NLR* 1/214, November–December 1995.

movement to which it could relate, with an exceptionally fine envoi—a luminous panorama of the economic and political scenery of the world a year after the invasion of Iraq, and a farewell to the hope that a vision of another order might yet be in sight.¹¹ The immediate causes for his decision were the myopic tacticism of the various components of the Italian left, and the sudden abjuring of any connexion with a revolutionary past by some of its former lights. But the ultimate reason lay in an intransigent coherence with himself. The unity of theory and practice, once a touchstone of historical materialism, had long since disappeared from the annals of Western Marxism. Magri was the strange exception, who lived by it, and would die from it. Political thought, without a ‘real movement’ to guide it, could not bear fruit.

Counterfactuals

There remained only one possible task. In his final years, cut off from the popular struggles that were the permanent landscape of his mind, he nevertheless completed—in a tragic personal situation—the only memorial of the communist experience in Italy, and its implications for the world, intellectually worthy of it. He conceived this as a memorial for future generations. In the preceding years, citing Eric Hobsbawm, he had become more and more impressed by the collapse of the older moral supports of capitalism—family, school, church, barracks—and the extent of cultural disintegration that had followed from it. The ‘mother of all reforms’, he had argued, would be a new educational system, adapted to a time when some of the traditional associations of age and knowledge were being reversed, the young, growing up on the frontiers of technique and science, in advance of their elders, not instructed but instructors of them. Magri, who could not use a computer and scarcely even touched a typewriter, writing everything by hand, was himself an illustration of that. But certain kinds of teaching could, as before, only be a transmission in the other direction.

As in the revolutionary canon of an earlier age, the typical forms of Magri’s writing had been the article, the speech, the report, the resolution, the polemic. Books were a comparative rarity in this tradition. Marx only ever published two, Lenin four, out of vast bodies of writing. *The Tailor of Ulm*, subtitled in Italian ‘A Possible History of the PCI’, and

¹¹ ‘Parting Words’, NLR 31, January–February 2005.

in English, at his request, 'Communism in the Twentieth Century', is a fully meditated and composed book. Calm and balanced, unflinching in its historical intelligence, it is also a work of poignant personal reflection and political imagination. The narrative runs from 1944 to 1991, covering the record of the PCI from its rebirth at the end of the Second World War to its dissolution at the end of the Cold War, set against the larger background of the destiny of the world communist movement as a whole.

The join between the two is not perfect. No author escapes local limitations. Culturally, Magri was confined to Italian and French as languages of fluency. Politically, like most Communists in Europe, he was far more familiar with the Russian than the Chinese Revolution, and his handling of each was uneven—too inclined to absolve Stalin from any responsibility for the onset of the Cold War, and to mitigate the costs of the Cultural Revolution launched by Mao, but giving full and accurate weight, as is very rarely done by any camp today, to the fatal consequences of the Sino-Soviet split for everything that followed. In Italy, Magri's treatment of the Historic Compromise, though critical, avoids drawing the obvious conclusion that it was responsible, not only for the 'Lead Years' of state and anti-state terrorism, but also for the abyss it fixed between the established culture of Italian Communism and the mutant forms of dissident culture—that could be at once radically hostile to capitalism and casually collusive with it—of younger generations: a scission that had direct repercussions in the ranks of the *Manifesto* itself. A bedrock loyalty to the Communist movement as a collective homeland, to be reproved but not deserted, makes itself felt in such blind spots.

They scarcely diminish the strengths of the book as a whole, where Magri brought together nearly all the themes of his prior writings into a single powerful account of the ways in which a mass party arose and declined, amidst changes in the structure of economy and society, upsurges of social and political struggle, ideological and international collisions, until its impetus finally ran out. Could the peculiar debacle of its end have been averted? Magri suggests that it might. His book ends by reprinting a strategic document he drafted in 1987, before the collapse of the party, as an indication of what kind of alternative there was. But by then the objective correlate on which his thought had always depended had gone. Programmatic ideas without popular forces behind

them, he had always believed, were vain. He was by nature a strategist; without an army, there could be no meaningful strategy.

Italian Communism was part of the larger history that gave the title to his book. Half a century earlier, Brecht had ended his poem on the tailor of Ulm—who claimed he could fly and fell to his death from a cathedral—by observing that human beings did eventually learn to move through the air. After 1989, Ingrao quoted the poem in consolation for the failure of Communism. Magri reports that he rejoined: but did the tailor's fall contribute to the development of aeronautics? The reply was in character. He had never believed in automatic progress. He wanted to pass on something of the experience of Communism, he once said in conversation, from a time he was happy to have lived through, seeing that of today. But it would be at least two generations before anything comparable arose again. Revolutions—French, Russian, Chinese—typically accomplish only twenty per cent of what they set out to achieve, at a cost of sixty per cent. But without them there is no leap of society in history.

Not long after he started work on *The Tailor of Ulm*, his wife, Mara Caltagirone, fell mortally ill, and most of it was written in conditions of private agony. When she died in early 2009, he wanted to accompany her, as André Gorz had done with his wife two years before. But the book was still unfinished, and she made him promise not to kill himself before it was complete. After it finally appeared, to a uniformly respectful reception in Italy, he told those closest to him that he had arranged to put an assisted end to himself in Switzerland. All entreated him not to, and for two years he delayed. But existence had lost its meanings for him. The epigraph to *The Tailor of Ulm* speaks for the considerable political solitude he felt. It comes from Joseph Roth's novel *The Emperor's Tomb*, in which the scion of a military family of the Habsburg empire—now vanished—that had believed in Austria as a religion, asks himself on the eve of the Second World War: 'Where should I, a Trotta, go now?' The private solitude he suffered was more absolute. He did not want to repair it. Deep within him was what Luciana Castellina, who had loved him and remained his staunchest friend to the end, called his integralism—an all-or-nothing sense of things, that had repeatedly informed his engagements and disengagements, and finally his exit.

What determined its timing this November can only be surmised. It coincided—pointedly, or otherwise—with the arrival of a bankers'

government in Rome, installed by a former Communist president, to the applause of virtually the entire political spectrum; that can hardly have been a discouragement. Fixation on Berlusconi was overblown, in his eyes: not crypto-fascism, but neo-centrism was the drift of the time, of which Berlusconi was one more variant—a point demonstrated still more conclusively by Monti and the consensus around him. It was against this background that Lucio Magri went to his death, in the style of stoic antiquity. *The Tailor of Ulm* will live on.