

Middle Games and Possible Communisms

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Lucio Magri. *The Tailor of Ulm: Communism in the Twentieth Century*, Trans. Patrick Camiller. Verso, 2011. 434 pp.

The trickiest and most demanding moment in chess is the one that separates the middle game—when many pieces are still on the board, forces still appear level in positions not codified in theory, and each player has a plan of action—from the approach to the endgame. This is when a skillful player needs to be boldest in attack, but also most alert to the weaknesses of his position and the strength of his opponent's, foreseeing likely moves ahead and showing sufficient flexibility to adjust his own plans when necessary (Magri 244).

A tailor in Ulm boasted in 1811 that he had invented a flying machine. Challenged by a local bishop, the tailor—entirely confident in his contraption—leapt from the steeple of the village church and fell to his death. His spectacular failure was later celebrated by Bertolt Brecht in a poem that ends with dramatic irony: the triumphant bishop standing over the disgraced tailor and sneering “That man is not a bird/It was a wicked, foolish lie,/Mankind will never fly” (178). And yet, of course, humans *did* invent flying machines, making a mockery not of the ambitious tailor but of the skeptical bishop, who took a single collapse to mean the necessary and eternal impossibility of a project still in its nascence.

Pietro Ingrao, for decades the figurehead of the Italian Communist Party's (PCI's) left wing, quoted Brecht's poem to lift the spirits of Party members deciding in 1989 (a most dispiriting year for communism) whether the Party should remove the word “communist” from its name. Lucio Magri, who was present, begins his book *The Tailor of Ulm* by probing the metaphor of the tailor with difficult questions like, “Can we be sure that, if the fall had only crippled the tailor instead of killing him, he would have immediately picked himself up and tried again, or that his friends would not have tried to restrain him? And what contributions did his bold attempt actually make to the history of aeronautics?” (2). The mere fact that something admirable has been tried does not imply that it should be tried again; indeed, wise and sympathetic parties may be justified in preventing its repetition. Nor does even the advantage of

prescription—the certainty of the stolid Marxist that, despite every innovation of the last century, capitalism *still* cannot survive its self-generated crises—necessarily justify the repetition of a revolutionary project in any form remotely resembling the forms of the 20th century. (They may be like the tailor’s flying machine: technically preceding communism but contributing nothing concrete to the actual form it will take.) It falls to communists to do the hard work of combing through the wreckage beneath the steeple and determining what materials, if any, may help build a contraption *actually* capable of flying—and a subject worthy to commandeer it—if humans are ever to learn to fly.

The Tailor of Ulm shares a commitment—if not an approach—to these tasks with another, much more feted and widely read book: *The Idea of Communism*, which came out just a few months before Magri’s book on the heels of a sold-out £100-a-ticket conference at the Birkbeck Institute in London. It is useful for the purposes of cultural theory to read *The Tailor of Ulm* as a necessary supplement to *The Idea of Communism*, for in both its form and its aims, Magri’s book offers a perspective missing from that otherwise compelling collection: a resuscitation of and practical activity in classical Marxism-Leninism.

The Tailor of Ulm, a last testament Magri was determined to complete before ending his life in a physician-assisted suicide in 2011, is a long book (434 pages in its English edition) and quite dense in historical specifics. Unlike the heavily philosophical collection *The Idea of Communism*, *The Tailor of Ulm* is not a book from which theoretical generalizations may be easily extracted. *The Tailor of Ulm* is historical materialism, as painstaking and unglamorous as it ever was. It is limited and measured in its claims, all of which emerge from and return to the daily grind of politics. Magri seems uninterested in making points that will outlast the specific practical concerns, past and present, of his book. And yet the book is much more than a political memoir or a compendium of “adventures in communism.” Readers who are surprised that a book like *The Tailor of Ulm*, so mired in practicalities, is treated as “cultural theory” may do well to recall Magri’s predecessors in this particular tradition: How much of *What Is To Be Done?*, so indispensable to political theory, is actually a discussion of the intricacies of running a newspaper? Or of the *Prison Notebooks* an evaluation of “Bukharinist” trends in the USSR and the *Risorgimento* in Italy? Indeed, a central claim of historical materialism has always been that the universal—itsself historical—emerges only from the rigorous investigation of the historical particular (something the mature Marx clearly understood). With *The Tailor of Ulm*, Magri plunges us into the details, hoping that therein a devil may be found of use to us in present-day Left politics.

Magri himself was an anachronism in European politics, a type of political intellec-

tual prevalent in the generation of the Great War but scarce in recent times. Today the very form on which his thinking relied—the mass Party with all of its ideal (if never realized) features: “collective individuality,” “conscious and voluntary discipline,” “revolutionary agency”—has all but disappeared. Horizontal consensus-based movements have replaced the “democratic centralism” of the Party; single-issue and “no demand” politics, with their celebration of spontaneous action, have replaced the exhaustive elaborations of program and strategy at annual Party congresses. Magri nevertheless turns his focus toward the possibilities that exist today for an institution—for he never stopped believing in the necessity of institutions—capable of what Antonio Gramsci called the “unity between ‘spontaneity’ and ‘conscious leadership’ or ‘discipline’” which alone constitutes “the real political action of subaltern classes, insofar as this is mass politics” (198). Gramsci’s ideas were so much a theoretical touchstone for Magri and the entire PCI that Magri calls them “the Gramsci genome . . . a part of the genetic material” (38). And Gramsci, like Lenin before him and Magri after him, always insisted on the absolute requirement to dialectically reconcile daily politics (the “spontaneity”) with the science of history (i.e. Marxism, which demands “disciplined” action).

This reconciliation—praxis in its purest form—is necessarily messy and requires constant improvisation: re-thinking as well as re-organization. But it cannot occur without a stable locus committed over the long term to the *work* of reconciliation. The question for politics today is *where*, if not in the old Party form, such a locus can exist. Magri, for his part, is not at all interested in a restoration of the PCI or any other 20th century mass Party, nor is *The Tailor of Ulm* an apologia for the many failings of the PCI, which Magri takes pains to catalogue. It is, however, a historically grounded defense of the basic Marxist-Leninist principle that, on the path to communism, the stage of proletarian control over *existing* institutions—the means of production and the structures of state power—during which time these institutions are re-tooled and re-directed to create a material basis for communism, cannot be foregone. Disconnected acts of destruction and negativity are insufficient; merely destroying the state or the factory will do nothing to usher in non-exploitative social relations, and it risks, moreover, wholesale acquiescence to the barbarism that already exists in current social relations as modernity’s (“enlightenment’s”) dialectical twin. This was the truth of the old Wobbly slogan “building a new society in the shell of the old” and what prompted Gramsci to theorize the “historical bloc” in the first place. Magri says it this way:

To challenge and overcome such a system [21st century global capitalism], what is required is a coherent systemic alternative; the power to impose it and the capacity to run it; a social bloc that can sustain it, and measures and alliances commensurate with that goal. Much as we can and should discard the myth of an apocalyptic break-

down, in which a Jacobin minority steps in to conquer state power, there is still less reason to pin our hopes on a succession of scattered revolts or small-scale reforms that might spontaneously coalesce into a great transformation (10).

The difference between Leninism and Jacobinism, of course, is that Lenin never saw the February 1917 overthrow of the Tsar or the October 1917 Bolshevik seizure of power—both accomplished, Jacobin-like, at unique moments when the existing regimes were in terminal crisis—as expressing the full meaning of “revolution.” If communism had any chance of being built, revolution would occur not only in pre-industrial Russia but also in the industrialized countries of the West, where capitalism was fully developed. The failure of these revolutions to materialize was precisely the catalyst for the (fully Leninist) extension of Leninism undertaken in Italy by Gramsci, which produced the theory of hegemony. As Magri points out:

Among the Marxists of his time, [Gramsci] was the only one who did not explain this failure [of revolution] only in terms of Social Democratic betrayal or the weakness and errors of the Communists. [. . .] Instead, he looked for the deeper reasons why the model of the Russian Revolution could not be reproduced in advanced societies, even though it was a necessary hinterland (and Leninism a priceless theoretical contribution) for a revolution in the West that would unfold differently, and be richer in results (41).

Equally unwilling to explain political realities by moralizing (via the Left’s cherished narrative of “betrayal”) or by self-flagellation (blaming communist weakness and indecision), Magri adopts the Marxist-Leninist stance. And here we can see the meaning of this review’s epigraph (from Magri, a famously skilled chess player): the October Revolution of 1917 offered only the opening moves in a long game—a set of moves not to be simply repeated later in the game. In the middle game, different strategies, and a different kind of Party, would be (and are) needed.

Of course, Magri had an uneven relationship to the PCI, which expelled him in 1970 over his participation with the far-left journal *Il Manifesto*, only to re-integrate him—and merge with the party (the Partito di Unità Proletaria, or PdUP) he had founded in the meantime—in 1984. It is often remarked today that *Il Manifesto* and the PdUP were much closer to *Autonomia* and the Italian anarchists than to the PCI in their commitments to the social unrest of 1968, which the PCI (among other communist parties) handled clumsily, losing a generation of activists. This is true, but also misses the point: Magri and the *Il Manifesto* group fell out of step with the PCI after 1968, yes, but they did not forsake the conviction that the Party (*not* the PCI *per se* but the Party as a theoretical construct, occupying a structural position) needed to exist as a place wherein a social formation—a collective revolutionary subject—could

take root and become disciplined if it were ever to successfully revolt in a developed capitalist country.

Regarding the 1968 student movements, with which he sympathized, Magri writes, “Am I saying the radical character of the student movement should have been accepted and encouraged [by the PCI] just as it was, and used as a battering ram for a general revolutionary breakthrough? Quite the opposite. What I mean is that a ‘revolution’ in education could have been aligned with the workers’ struggle and brought in still other social subjects” and that “the PCI’s failure even to attempt this, at a time when the mass revolt was seeking a way forward, prevented it from acquiring an important role” and perhaps, we might add, likewise prevented the student movement from *finding* the way forward that it sought (234).

Despite his frustration with the PCI, the sobering insistence of Marxism-Leninism on a counter-hegemonic (and internally contradictory) historical bloc, which alone during the “middle game” had the power to seize existing structures and usher in new social relations for the “endgame,” prevented Magri from aligning with other Left movements in Italy, such as *Lotta Continua* or Antonio Negri’s *Potere Operaio*, and to repeatedly side with the PCI (where he was *persona non grata*) in its clashes with these and other *Autonomia* groups. Far from a political strain of Stockholm syndrome, Magri’s defense of the PCI during the period of his expulsion was the defense not of a specific ossified body (which he believed the PCI was), but of a *mode* of political organization he himself was still pursuing in the foundation of the PdUP. (One of the most important revelations of *The Tailor of Ulm* comes when Magri writes that the proposal “for rapid unification of the various New Left groups” made in *Il Manifesto* was immediately rebuffed by those groups, not only because they were, unlike *Il Manifesto*, suspicious of institutions and unity, but because “our expulsion [from the PCI] meant that another possible rival had appeared on the scene” (242)). But even *Il Manifesto*, Magri hastens to point out, was never intended to undermine the PCI or to create division within it. On the contrary, Magri and his collaborators hoped “to contribute by various means . . . to a renewal of the whole PCI” by creating “a journal that would not organize forces but produce ideas” (240).

In relating the episode of the *Il Manifesto* purge, Magri is careful to note that the PCI went wrong not by acting to discipline Party members (for there will never be a historical bloc without internal discipline), but by failing to recognize the role *Il Manifesto* could have played *within* the PCI: “to help the Party through the difficult 1970s . . . it would have been good for the PCI to allow a space within its ranks for left-wing dissent that was culturally undogmatic” (243). His attitude is similar toward the other highly controversial action of the modern PCI, namely its participation under General Secretary Enrico Berlinguer in the “historic compromise”: a government

in which the PCI agreed to terms of “no no-confidence” in the minority Christian Democrats (DC) while not forming a coalition with them (and therefore not receiving any cabinet or other leadership positions). While Magri does not defend the historic compromise, he does highlight the objective factors that led Berlinguer to accept it (avoiding “betrayal” stories) and laments most of all that “neither at the time nor later, neither internally nor with one another, did the Left parties open a debate or engage in public reflection on the experience. Each went its merry way” (277).

This “going of the merry ways” was in fact disastrous for the Left, both because it further atomized the Left, which was already fragmented and powerless, and because, in conditions of frustration and factionalism fragmentation, the far-left Red Brigades became violent, eventually kidnapping and assassinating the Italian Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, destroying the historic compromise and justifying a massive crackdown on all Left groups. Magri did not as a matter of principle oppose the use of violence. He strongly condemned the Red Brigades not for their militancy but for their thoughtlessness and most of all their isolation, their refusal to act in concert with the mass Left movement: “A life apart, the imperative of secrecy, the constant danger, the use of weapons and exemplary gestures to communicate a message to the people . . . makes the organization itself increasingly self-referential, so that its analysis becomes distorted and instrumental” (287). Again, for Magri there cannot be proper political theory apart from active participation in mass politics (it becomes necessarily “distorted”); no more can there be proper political action apart from the collective determination of a historical bloc. This is a severe and often halting stance, one whose practical limits Magri personally confronted and urges us to confront. It brings to mind Gáspár Miklós Tamás’s statement: “It is emotionally and intellectually difficult to be a Marxist since it goes against the grain of moral indignation which is, of course, the main reason people become socialists” (233).

Given the insights of Magri’s firsthand experiences, what, if anything, may be salvaged from the Marxist-Leninist (and Gramscian) mode that animated worldwide communist politics for six decades before falling out of favor and giving way to New Left, syndicalist and single-issue “anti-oppression” movements, which continue to dominate Leftist thought and politics today? Marxism-Leninism was always a peculiar and formidable theoretical construction, requiring for its coherence some philosophical gymnastics and a few mini-leaps of faith. A theory—even a materialist theory—that tackles the question of building a better world could not be otherwise. Unlike the abstruseness of the “all-star” theory to be found in *The Idea of Communism*, however, Marxism-Leninism’s primary features are its specificity and its essential practicality. It has no use for “concepts” of the State as amorphous as Badiou’s or Negri’s; it deals with actual state apparatuses (cf. *The State and Revolution*). It finds notions like Rancière’s “self-management,” which inspired so many Occupy “people’s

libraries” and “people’s schools,” too vague to engage, focusing instead on existing libraries and schools and the means required to overtake and re-make them. This practicality is not vulgar; it is not a glorification of leaping from steeples without great thoughtfulness and detailed planning; it is far from the current meaning of “action-driven” politics (in which we are constantly told that an “action” is taking place on such-and-such corner or at such-and-such bank). It is a formal as much as a practical proposition: concerning the dialectical relationship of thought, action and organization. This is why the *kind* of book Magri has written, and not only the content of the book, matters.

There are two good discussions of Lenin in *The Idea of Communism* (in essays written by Bruno Bosteels and Slavoj Žižek), but the collection lacks a contribution that is actually *Leninist*. *The Tailor of Ulm* fills that gap. At the end of his book, Magri concludes that “the question of an activist party that not only has a ‘mass’ character but operates as a collective intellectual should absolutely not be consigned to the archives” (423). Here, unwavering, he is at his most Gramscian, and he is in basic agreement with at least Žižek (who was the only participant at Birkbeck to unapologetically defend the Party form). What follows Magri’s statement, however, is something not found in Žižek: a discussion of present-day Italian demographics (age composition, class composition, etc.) and a series of concrete suggestions for the construction of an efficacious counter-hegemonic bloc. These include the need for communists to work inside existing non-mass movements (especially the women’s movement) where nevertheless “a capacity for self-organization still exists” as well as “to create the minimum structural and institutional conditions for the growth of an organized democracy” by taking over or supplanting existing systems of mass education and mass media, which are concrete obstacles to the emergence of a “collective subjectivity” (426). Here, in a Marxist-Leninist way, the form of *organization* is connected to material conditions, and from the necessary formal configurations come *actions* that enable new types of collective *thought*, with the aim (in a dialectical return) of *re-organizing* society.

The Italian title of *The Tailor of Ulm* was *Il Sarto di Ulm: Una Possibile Storia del Comunismo nel XX Secolo*. Here a concept is raised that is missing from its English subtitle, namely *possibility*. *The Tailor of Ulm* works as “a possible history of communism” by maintaining that, whatever the failings of the organized Left, the *possibility* of communism always existed in an objective sense: the trajectory of communism in the 20th century was only one of its *possible* trajectories (it could have gone otherwise, and still could). But it also enacts as well as prescribes the form of political thought that could once again make a middle-game communist project possible. Whatever our own readings of the 20th century’s mass Parties and their legacies, we who refuse to accept the impossibility of flying machines would do well, in addition to engaging

the substantial body of current communist “theory,” to consider as a *possible* model the theoretical propositions of *The Tailor of Ulm*.

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