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Obituary

Lucio Magri: Co-founder of the leftwing Italian journal “Il Manifesto”

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Lucio Magri, political activist and journalist, born 19 August 1932; died 28 November 2011..

Lucio Magri, who has died aged 79, was a veteran of the Italian new left of the 1960s and 70s. His last book, a history of Italian communism, published earlier this year in English, is titled *The Tailor of Ulm*, after an 18th-century German who claimed to have invented a flying machine – and, challenged to prove it worked, jumped from the cathedral and crashed to the ground. Bertolt Brecht, who retold the story, pointed out that the tailor was simply ahead of his time, but this would hardly have been a consolation for Magri, who became manifestly disappointed with a life spent pursuing a vision of a socialist society in Italy that failed to materialise.

He was born in Emilia-Romagna, one of the most leftwing areas of Italy, but grew up in Bergamo, Lombardy, a stronghold of Catholicism. His first foray into politics was with the Christian Democratic party. A born dissident, Magri belonged to its leftwing fringe, whose criticisms of what they considered to be the unacceptable face of capitalism were tolerated even as the party itself was busy developing capitalism, warts and all.

In the world of political Catholicism in Italy, there were many like Magri: intellectuals passionate about politics, strong on principles and unwilling to submit to discipline. In 1958 Magri was one of those Catholic intellectuals who joined the Italian Communist party (PCI) after hundreds of intellectuals had left it following Khrushchev’s 1956 speech denouncing Stalin’s purges. The increasingly influential Catholics tended to be on the left of the party, rather than on the social-democratic wing. It was the leader of this strand, Giorgio Amendola, who advised Magri to get some solid experience with the rank and file in Bergamo. Magri agreed, and having proved himself in Bergamo, was called back to Rome.

If Amendola had hoped to instil a dose of buon senso in the firebrand, he would have been disappointed. Magri quickly became part of a group of young communist radicals who included Rossana Rossanda and Luciana Castellina, the latter being Magri’s partner for many years. The group started a journal, *Il Manifesto*, which Magri edited with Rossanda. This was in June 1969, less than a year after the crushing of the Prague Spring, in the midst of the Chinese cultural revolution, and a few weeks before the union struggles of Italy’s Hot Autumn.

Il Manifesto was a great success – too great for the Communist party leadership. It took the cultural revolution too seriously, was too enthusiastic about the Prague Spring, and, above all, had committed the sin of making public issues that should have been discussed through “normal” channels – ie, behind closed doors. By the end of 1969, Magri and company had been expelled. But

there was no excommunication. Old friendships remained.

The *Manifesto* group and the party that eventually formed around it in 1972, the PDUP (Partito di Unità Proletaria, or Proletarian Unity party), never ceased to regard the PCI as the only political structure that could take the country in an anti-capitalist direction. Unlike many of the other radical parties springing up, they saw themselves as a ginger group rather than as the vanguard of the revolution.

Il Manifesto, which became a daily paper after 1970 and is still extant, continued to criticise the reformism of the PCI. By the 1970s the PCI was becoming more liberal, more self-confident, more willing to tolerate dissent while the various “vanguard parties” (Avanguardia Operaia, Potere Operaio and Lotta Continua) were at a dead end. Magri and the PDUP merged back into the PCI in 1984, and stayed until the PCI itself, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, changed its name and abandoned even the pretence of fighting for a socialist society. Magri opposed the decision, in vain. For a few years he was a member of Rifondazione Comunista (the Communist Refoundation party), the rump of the old PCI. In 1995 he abandoned party politics altogether.

Magri was a handsome and elegant man who was popular in the radical, chic salons of Rome. He could have achieved far greater renown and visibility had he espoused the political cynicism prevailing in high circles and epitomised by Silvio Berlusconi. But he was the genuine article – a revolutionary without a revolution.

In later years he suffered from depression, exacerbated by the death of his wife, Mara, three years ago. Life had become unbearable to him, he told his friends. He decided to end it in Zurich, Switzerland, with the assistance of doctors.

He is survived by a daughter, Jessica, and a granddaughter, Emma.

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P.S.

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/dec/07/lucio-magri>

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