

Aldo Mieli

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Albeit through a 'voluntary' exile in a certain sense, Aldo Mieli happened to emigrate even before the racial laws, living in Paris for a decade starting in 1928 and later in Argentina. He was subjected to surveillance by prefects, police officers, and consuls from 1901 to at least 1909, and then from 1929 to '41 for his youth socialist militancy and for his declared sexual orientation. A pioneer in the studies of sexology and gay rights, he became an advocate for the history of science in Italy and abroad, initiating a notable network of international contacts and initiatives.

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Political and cultural militancy: the Italian period

An affluent Jewish man, he was born in Livorno on 4 December 1879 to Moisé and Marietta Belimbau. In 1901, still as a student, he decisively contributed to the establishment of a socialist circle in Chianciano, within the province of Siena, where his father held vast estates; he was later elected to the City Council and was also a correspondent for one of the main socialist publications in Tuscany, «La Martinella». In some notes of the time, belonging to the Prefecture of Siena, he is defined as «of a sneaky character, of reasonable education and culture», «generous and friendly toward countryfolk», whom he urged, however, to class struggle and to despise bourgeois institutions. Moreover, it would appear that he did not behave particularly well toward his family, rich landowners and proprietors of the «La Foce» estate (dating back to the fifteenth century), for he incited his father's employees to demand better treatment. Among other things, in April 1902, Mieli organized a successful strike for the sharecroppers of Val d'Orcia and Valdichiana. A few months later, however, the socialist section of Chianciano, which had dissolved due to an administrative electoral failure but had also quickly reconstituted, expelled him «as a result of verified immoralities»,

since he was known locally as a «passive pederast». The precise classification with which the police documents branded him is striking, as he was forced to distance himself from political activity¹. After this brief political experience, he graduated with a degree in chemistry from Pisa in 1904 with a theoretical-experimental thesis on the speed of chemical reactions. In Leipzig, where he spent a semester of specialization, he was drawn to the teachings of Friedrich Wilhelm Ostwald – one of the founders of physical chemistry, who also held a course on natural philosophy, having endorsed the monism of Ernst Haeckel. He additionally discovered the works of Ernst Mach – still not well-known in Italy – and became passionate about them. Having returned to Italy, Mieli accepted an assistant position in the general chemistry laboratory at the University of Rome, which was offered to him by Stanislao Cannizzaro and Emanuele Paternò, until he obtained his *libera docenza* [certificate needed to teach at the university level] in 1908. While Ostwald had pondered about the validity of the mechanistic model, Mach had warned not to mistake shifting scientific hypotheses with exact photographs of reality. Following their thought, Mieli was convinced that the first decade of the century was experiencing «one of the most decisive crises of the human spirit» in every field, and he repeated this diagnosis while assiduously collaborating on the «Rivista scientifico-industriale», of which he became the editor (1907-1909). He also happened to publish articles on musical and artistic subjects in the Florentine journal «Cronache letterarie» and in «Roma letteraria» (1910-1913).

A link exists between the discovery of a new categorial framework for the scientific enterprise and the choice, reached by Mieli, to dedicate himself to the history of science. It seemed to him that those researching it in Italy had been and still were amateurs, erudite people, and bibliophiles. Among the few to merit his regard was Giovanni Vailati, who died prematurely in 1909. Around the same

¹ ACS, CPC, b. 24106, «Mieli Aldo». The voluminous folder of documents in the Casellario politico Centrale [Central Political Registry] preserved at the Archivio centrale dello Stato takes a peek at the story – public and private – of Mieli from 1901 to 1909, and again from 1929 to 1941. Also see several record cards on their contents in Ivan Tognarini, *Aldo Mieli: contributi per una biografia dello scienziato ed editore della Pirotechnia*, in *Una tradizione senese: dalla Pirotechnia di Vannoccio Biringucci al Museo del mercurio*, edited by I. Tognarini, Naples, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2000, pp. 375-400.

time, Federigo Enriques (1871-1946) – of the same age and later a rival – had just started to combine his work on mathematics with historical-philosophical interests. In 1916, Mieli sought to trace some programmatic boundaries for an independent discipline, understood as «an examination of the development of all those activities of human thought which are aimed at the systematic knowledge of the real, whether in speculative form or in empirical form»². Professional philosophers distanced themselves from the sciences while scientists shut themselves further within their field – a divide destined to widen. Mieli intended to reject such divide without remaining subjected to the declining positivist tradition. His ambition to write a general history of science – with the first volume devoted to the examination of the pre-Aristotelians – stemmed from his initial position³. As for his university career, as a *libero docente* Mieli hoped for a professorship that never came, though, given his marginality and his intemperance in character.

From 1906 to 1919, Mieli participated in the Università popolari [People's University] movement, committing himself to combat illiteracy in the Tuscan countryside. On the eve of war, he declared himself a pacifist and an internationalist, never ceasing to protest war atrocities, angered at the recruitment of men of science who had been incited – willingly or unwillingly – to denigrate the enemy as well as produce increasingly more devastating weapons. During this time period, he pursued the second of his vocations, aimed at challenging «laws, customs, habits, and conventions» related to sexual practices. He therefore founded and directed «Rassegna di studi sessuali» (1921-1928), which had both a scientific and a practical purpose. His first objective was to connect the studies in biology, psychology, and sociology, which were all converging in the new domain of sexology, at that time something almost unknown in Italy. Another objective consisted in disseminating that knowledge to a wide audience, to promote a higher standard of private and social life. Chapter

² Aldo Mieli, *La storia della scienza in Italia. Saggio di bibliografia di storia della scienza*, Florence, Libreria della Voce, 1916, pp. 3-4.

³ Id., *La scienza greca: I prearistotelici I*, Florence, Libreria della Voce, 1916.

groups of the Società italiana per lo studio delle questioni sessuali were assembled in some cities. The society's president was the physiologist Silvestro Baglioni (1876-1957) while the secretary was Mieli, who also launched the *Biblioteca dei curiosi*, pamphlets sold for a lira. The first issue of the «Rassegna» gave news of the research activities in Berlin at the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft – destroyed by the Nazis in 1933 – and a little afterward, presented a report in which the institute's director Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935), a medical doctor of Jewish origin, had inaugurated the first congress for sexual reform in 1921. As the only Italian to participate in the conference, Mieli noted the amount of diligence with which the studies of the so-called «intermediate sexual forms» were conducted in Berlin⁴.

In 1919, he was also able to inaugurate the «Archivio di storia della scienza», which aimed to be the «central organ» of the field in Italy, and the discipline's mouthpiece abroad. Mieli was preparing to do an «enormous work», similar to the work that George Sarton (1884-1956), from Belgium, had undertaken. Sarton, who emigrated to the United States during the first World War, was also a chemist by training but devoted himself to promoting the historical discipline since his founding of the journal «Isis» in 1913. A collaborative relationship arose between the two, evidenced by continued correspondence which was not affected by the hardships that Mieli faced. However, the expenses that Mieli incurred from the publication of the two journals – the «Archivio» and the «Rassegna» – and of his books and the books of others, not to mention some ill-managed affairs, had almost exhausted the capital that he had inherited from family. In Rome, he lived and worked in an elegant apartment building in the San Giovanni neighborhood, where the publishing house «Leonardo da Vinci», which he founded, was also based. In 1924, he sold the «La Foce» estate to Antonio Origo (1881-1976), the illegitimate son of the Marquis Clemente Origo, who went to reside there with his

⁴ On the relationship with the *Sexualwissenschaft*, also see Volkmar Sigusch, *Aldo Mieli's Emigration aus dem faschistischen Italien. Ein bisher unveröffentlichter Briefwechsel zwischen Aldo Mieli und Albert Moll*, «Zeitschrift für Sexualforschung», 22, 2009, pp. 207-226.

Anglo-American wife Iris Cutting (1902-1988). Thanks to the Origo couple, refugee children, displaced people, partisans, and prisoners on the run would find shelter in that estate during the war⁵.

The Parisian decade: l'Académie internationale d'histoire des sciences

In Italy, with the fascist regime in full force, Mieli had to continue to «go up and down the stairs of others» – his words,– barely tolerated for being non-conforming⁶. During the International Conference on Historical Sciences (Oslo 1928), he proposed the establishment of a committee on the history of science, which the following year took form as the Académie internationale d'histoire des sciences, based in the Centre de Synthèse, in Paris. He became the perpetual secretary of the academy, an appointment which entailed his first migration, accompanied by the transfer of his rich library. The historian Henri Berr (1863-1954) had instituted the Center in 1925 to remedy the excessive specificity of individual disciplines; in 1928, he instituted a chapter on the history of science, entrusted to Mieli's guidance⁷. Almost fifty years old, Mieli proved his remarkable organization skills, leaving a lasting impression of his presence, while being assisted by Pierre Brunet (1893-1950) and Hélène Metzger (1889-1944). He also moved the «Archivio di storia delle scienze» to Paris, which was released with the new title of «Archeion». While «Isis» prospered, transplanted to the United States by Sarton, Mieli's journal traversed serious financial misfortunes. Mieli always saw the Belgian historian as a companion in adventure, who was admired and much more fortunate: their correspondence spanned almost twenty years, offering

⁵ From 1943 to '44, the writer and protagonist Iris Origo kept a diary, *War in Val d'Orcia. A Diary*, London, J. Cape, 1947, later translated into Italian: *La guerra in Val d'Orcia*, with a preface by Piero Calamandrei, Florence, Vallecchi 1968 (printed 1967) and republished many times.

⁶ Quoting from canto 17 of Dante's Paradise. See the pages on Mieli in Lorenzo Benadusi, *Il nemico dell'uomo nuovo. L'omosessualità nell'esperimento totalitario fascista*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2005, pp. 69-87.

⁷ Michel Blay, *Henri Berr et l'histoire des sciences*, in *Henri Berr et la culture du xx^e siècle. Histoire, science et philosophie*, under the direction of Agnès Biard, Dominique Bourel and Eric Brian, Paris, Albin Michel, 1997, pp. 121-137; see Lucia Tosi, *La Trayectoria de Aldo Mieli en el Centre international de Synthèse / CIS*, «Saber y Tiempo», 1, 4, 1997, pp. 449-462.

precious information on both of their enterprises⁸. During the Parisian years, he also devoted much of his time to burdensome work as the secretary of the Académie, which permitted him to stabilize and maintain a notable network of international contacts. Approaching the end of his life, Mieli would develop nostalgia for that period in his life, during which he could travel around Europe and pursue his own studies.

More than once, however, he felt the need to complain about the inattention by the corresponding members, who left all the duties to him or did not regularly procure the necessary subsidies. In 1933, while in Spain by chance and undergoing surgery, he warned his friends that the secretary, though *perpetual*, was not *immortal*⁹. Meanwhile, he resumed his grand project of a general history of science, which had stopped at the end of antiquity, but even the fourth version of the work would not go beyond Boethius, almost indicating that the enterprise was, after all, a labor of Sisyphus. Mieli's life had much the same fate as the one to which Zeus condemned the audacious king of Corinth.

While giving notice of Hirschfeld's death in 1935, Mieli happened to express horror in the face of the «national-socialist triumph» and protest «against sentiments and methods that drive a great country back toward the darkest barbarity»¹⁰. It could be surprising, therefore, that Mieli – recounting a trip to Romania a few months later – regretted the «stupid and heinous sanctions against our country» willed by Great Britain and France:

Sanctions, however, with which in retrospect we could also be pleased, because they permitted total victory and the establishment of the empire, an occurrence that international negotiations would certainly have hindered and possibly prevented¹¹.

⁸ See the forty-four letters in the Sarton Papers, Houghton Library (Harvard University): *Carteggio Mieli-Sarton*, in *Scienze e storia nell'Italia del Novecento*, edited by Claudio Pogliano, Pisa, Plus - Pisa University Press, 2007, pp. 293-351; Claudio Pogliano, *Concordia discors. Sul carteggio Mieli-Sarton*, *ibid.*, pp. 275-292.

⁹ Aldo Mieli, *En attendant mon départ*, «Archeion. Archivio di storia della scienza», 15, 1933, pp. 426-427.

¹⁰ *Id.*, *Notitias*, *ibid.*, 17, 1935, pp. 111-113.

¹¹ *Id.*, *Un viaggio in Romania*, *ibid.*, 18, 1936, p. 193.

Political clarity was evidently not among his qualities. In 1938, the last year that he spent in Paris, the preface to the 21st volume of «Archeion» contained a couple of peculiar assertions. Mieli offered an evaluation of the «twenty-year period of productive work» that he had carried out after the establishment of the «Archivio di storia della scienza». Recalling amongst other things the battle against prejudice and injustice that he had undertaken as the director of the «Rassegna di studi sessuali», he did not shy away from an unexpected acknowledgment of the regime that would soon after introduce the racial laws:

this attitude of mine and the campaign that followed it was [sic] generally supported by everyone, by doctors and hygienists, by prelates and philosophers, by sociologists and artists; moreover many, if not all, of the proposed and supported reforms now form the basis of the current regime of Italy, for example the struggle against sexual diseases, the support for motherhood, the work toward the amelioration and reinforcement of the race.

Furthermore, speaking of the obstacles that had impeded him from an academic career and the realization of a large institute for the history of science (with a library and a museum), he lamented how his project was never communicated to *il Duce*, who «certainly, in the expansive vision that he has for both social matters and the interests of Italy, would have immediately comprehended all that was important and vital in my proposal»¹². It is unclear what he hoped for in March 1938 when he directed this veiled address to the authorities, a signal that in fact went unheeded. The final lines of the preface seem to contain a coded message, alluding to «the need to eat», to «small children to raise» (although not his own children), and to other gloomy circumstances left unexplained.

His final years activity in Argentina

Toward the halfway point of that same year, almost foretelling the imminent outbreak of the upheaval in Europe, Mieli turned to the Spanish mathematician

¹² Id. *Passato ed avvenire. Considerazioni poste come prefazione al volume xxi dell'Archivio di storia della scienza (Archeion)*, «Archeion. Archivio di storia della scienza», 21, 1938, pp. 2 and 4.

Julio Rey Pastor (1888-1962) - who a few years prior, together with the engineer of Italian origin Umberto Paoli (1876-1953), had created the Grupo Argentino de Historia de la Ciencia - in order to propose to him the creation of a research center «that could possibly be the first of its kind in the world, if they give me the means»¹³. In February 1939, the Universidad Nacional del Litoral in Santa Fe, the youngest of the six existing universities in Argentina, announced the birth of the Instituto de Historia y Filosofía de la Ciencia. Just as Europe descended into the chasm of war, Mieli began the third phase of his life over there, a phase - an obituary reads - «sown with increasingly sharper thorns until the final moment»¹⁴. There he also found a trusted collaborator in the engineer and mathematician José Babini (1897-1984), who would compile Mieli's bibliography on the centennial of his birth¹⁵.

Exiled again, Mieli disembarked in Buenos Aires in poor condition due to a pulmonary abscess and had to spend a few months at the hospital in Rosario before dedicating himself to his new task. Fourteen cases of books followed him, while some remained in Paris, and in April 1940, a new series of «Archeion» began publication. Three years later, however, already tormented by physical pain, he was suddenly fired by an order of the new Argentine military government, which shut down his institute and forced him to suspend the publication of his periodical. With him, many other professors lost their positions as a painful result of the coup d'état. Local friends procured him a small salary, while the Basque socialist José Iturrat, owner of a small paper mill, secured him a monthly pension¹⁶. In solitude, Mieli lived his last years in a small house in Florida, a

¹³ Cortés Plá, *El Instituto de Historia y Filosofía de la Ciencia de la Universidad Nacional del Litoral. Trabajo presentado al Segundo Congreso Argentino de Historia de la Ciencia*, Buenos Aires 1972. An earlier version of the text appeared as an obituary: *Aldo Mieli en la Argentina*, «Archives internationales d'histoire des sciences», 29, 1950, pp. 907-912.

¹⁴ Andrea Corsini, *Aldo Mieli*, «Rivista di storia delle scienze mediche e naturali», 41, 1950, p. 111.

¹⁵ José Babini, *Para una bibliografía de Aldo Mieli*, «Physis», 21, 1979, pp. 357-424, followed by *Breves apuntes biográficos*, pp. 418-424.

¹⁶ On the Argentine period, see Miguel de Asúa, *Morir en Buenos Aires. Los últimos años de Aldo Mieli*, «Saber y Tiempo», 3, 1997, pp. 275-292; Cecilia Gargano, Diego Hurtado, *Entre la historia y la Historia: la trayectoria de Aldo Mieli en la Argentina*, «Studi Italiani - Estudios Italianos», Número especial 150° Aniversario de la Unidad de Italia, 2011, pp. 223-235; Eleonora M. Smolensky, Vera

suburb of the capital, proposing again in Spanish some topics very dear to him: Lavoisier, Volta, modern chemistry. It was in large part thanks to him that a tradition of historical-scientific studies began in Argentina¹⁷. However, he wrote to Sarton that in a country like the new Peronist Argentina, demagogic elections had «brought to power the worst kind of politicians and profiteers»¹⁸.

He felt that by then he was «on the list of the nearly dead». Nevertheless, he still expressed «extraordinary joy», announcing in 1947 the rebirth of «Archeion» – «mon enfant chéri» – now sponsored by UNESCO with a new look as «Archives internationales d'histoire des sciences». He also served as the journal's director, but as a debt of gratitude, which the editorial board felt it ought to settle with him. In 1948, the journal published a short account of his life, which he had written a few years earlier in Spanish and that the Argentine editor of *Panorama general de la historia de la ciencia* had refused to include in the preface of the first volume. There Mieli evoked those «fuerzas del mal» – totalitarianism, Nazi-fascism, nationalism – that had seized upon various countries, and reported that in his youth, he had been an evangelic socialist, similar to Camillo Prampolini, due to an innate feeling of empathy toward all of mankind.

Mieli died on 16 February 1950 of a stroke. Reprinting a photo portrait of him on its frontispiece, «Isis», whose issues had almost always hosted bibliographic cards signed by him, dedicated a very short and anonymous obituary to him. Since his books and articles were too numerous to list - the obituary reads - it sufficed for the journal directed by Sarton to recognize the value of the work that the exile accomplished for the international organization of the History of Science¹⁹. In eulogistic tones, Andrea Corsini (1875-1961), the founder and director of the Institute and Museum of the History of Science in Florence, remembered Mieli in a page and a half:

Vigevani Jarach, *Tante voci, una storia. Italiani ebrei in Argentina 1938-1948*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1998, pp. 233-234.

¹⁷ See José Babini, *Aldo Mieli y la historia de la ciencia en Argentina*, «Physis», 4, 1962, pp. 73-84.

¹⁸ Mieli to Sarton, 18 November 1946, in *Carteggio*, cited, p. 337.

¹⁹ *Aldo Mieli (1879-1950)*, «Isis», 41, 1, 1950, p. 57.

I believe that to very few others does the History of Science owe as much than Aldo Mieli. We, his peers and colleagues, cannot indeed think of such discipline without the distinct figure of this enthusiastic scholar coming to mind, who dedicated himself entirely to it. Lacking family, he in fact made the History of Science his life goal, and toward it he lavished the large part of his wealth, going so far as to establish the publishing house «Leonardo da Vinci» with all its expenses and risk, whose first aim was the publication of historical-scientific works [...] And so much more could Aldo Mieli have produced scientifically had he not been struck by a series of misadventures, not the least being among them racial persecution and unsteady health, in spite of his flourishing physical appearance²⁰.

A few months after Mieli's death, the VI^e Congrès International d'Histoire des Sciences convened in Amsterdam. This was the first occasion which the community had to listen to a more extensive biographical commemoration presented by Pierre Sergescu (1893-1954), a Romanian mathematician who had met Mieli twenty years earlier in Paris, and whom Mieli had directed to undertake historical studies. Sergescu also succeeded him for a brief time in the position of secretary of the Académie internationale d'histoire des sciences²¹.

His books, preserved through various vicissitudes, arrived ultimately at the Biblioteca Central de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Buenos Aires, where they can be found to this day, while a Fonds Mieli [Mieli Fund] exists at the library of the Centre Alexandre-Koyré (Paris), which is currently being transferred to the Campus Condorcet of Paris Aubervilliers.

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- *La storia della scienza in Italia. Saggio di bibliografia*, Florence, La Voce, 1916.
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- *Gli scienziati italiani dall'inizio del Medio evo ai nostri giorni. Repertorio*

²⁰ A. Corsini, *Aldo Mieli*, cit., p. 112.

²¹ Pierre Sergescu, *Aldo Mieli*, in *Actes du VI^e Congrès International d'Histoire des Sciences. Amsterdam 14-21 Août 1950*, Paris, Hermann, 1951, vol. I, pp. 79-95, also in «Archives internationales d'histoire des sciences», 12, 1950, pp. 519-535.

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