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Book Review

Daniel Bensaïd: An Impatient Life, A Memoir

- Reviews section -

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Daniel Bensaïd (1946-2010) was one of the most respected theorists to emerge from the 1960s radicals of Western Europe. Always inclined to think “outside the box,” waving aside venerable dogmas and shrugging-off standard formulations, he found fresh ways, energized with the aura of unorthodoxy, to express and apply truths from the revolutionary Marxist tradition.

Sometimes his creativity could provide insights that opened fruitful pathways of thought and action. “We were young people in a hurry, as is inevitably the case,” he writes near the start of his saga. “As if we had to make up for the wasted time of the ‘century of extremes,’ as if we were afraid of missing our appointments, in politics and in love.” In the end, “we had to learn ‘the art of waiting,’” he muses, yet the author remains an unbowed militant: “We have sometimes deceived ourselves, perhaps even often, and on many things. But at least we did not deceive ourselves about either the struggle or the choice of enemy.”

This substantial volume is a parting gift, sharing memories of what he had seen and done, offering a piece of his mind, exploring the meaning of it all – as befits the image, snapped a few years before his premature death, of the gaunt, frail man whose keen intelligence shines out from his now-bespectacled eyes. Yet a photograph from 1948 reveals an adorable two-year old with long curly hair toddling toward us. We see a boy at ages 5, 9 and 14, with bright and impish eyes, destined to appear (in half a dozen photos from the 1970s) as a buoyant, handsome, charismatic activist of the famed “Generation of 1968.” Daniel was centrally involved in the revolutionary student-worker upsurge that shook France and almost brought down the government of Charles De Gaulle. Out of this experience was born the militant Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) which powerfully impacted the global far left and became a central component of the Fourth International (a network of comparatively small revolutionary socialist parties and groups founded by Leon Trotsky and other dissident-Communists over three decades before). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Bensaïd and his comrades were intimately connected with currents in Latin America utilizing the perspectives of Che Guevara and other revolutionary warriors, generating some of his most searching reflections.

The exciting years of upsurge gave way to disaster, disappointment, defeat. It was during this in-between period that I fleetingly met Bensaïd, at a 1990 World Congress and at a 1991 meeting of the International Executive Committee of the Fourth International, as I represented the smallest one of three U. S. Trotskyist fragments identifying with this “world party of socialist revolution.” It was obvious that his experience was incomparably richer than mine, and that he had earned profound respect from the other comrades who, with him, made up the inner circle of the Fourth International's leadership.

A friend who read this book before I did warned that Bensaïd was quite a name-dropper, and there are certainly scores of names that flow from these pages. But I came upon his description of the cluster of comrades from the 1980s whose labors maintained “the bonsai Comintern” that was the Fourth International: a dozen names of people – many now dead – whose strengths and weaknesses and life-energy had been essential to the world movement to which I was committed. I knew these people, they were important to me, and I felt grateful that their names with brief descriptions are shared with the readers of this book.

History is the lives of innumerable people, not abstractions, and the history of our revolutionary socialist movement is nothing without the amazing number of names (with all-too-brief descriptions) that Bensaïd weaves into his narrative. Distinctive features of this volume include (with a list of abbreviations) twelve pages of descriptions of left-wing organizations, plus extensive footnotes providing information on the dozens upon dozens of activists he mentions – together with the main narrative, making this an essential source on the international left and on world

Trotskyism.

Youth Radicalization

Daniel was born into a working-class family which moved from Algeria to France shortly before his birth – the father a Sephardic Jew, the Gallic mother inclined to self-identify as Jewish. They saved enough money to start a bistro with a predominantly left-wing working-class clientele. Their clever and inquisitive son ascended into the ranks of university students while also, quite naturally, drifting into the youth group of the French Communist Party. But like many of his comrades of the time (influenced by Trotskyists doing “deep-entry” work in the group), partly under the impact of Algeria’s anti-colonial revolution and the tepid response to this by the French Communists, he came to the conclusion that it would be wrong to “confuse the revolutionary project with Stalinism.”

Rejecting the intellectual “ravages of a positivist and authoritarian Marxism” (almost in the same breath he characterizes it as “a glacial Marxism without style or passion”), they turned to heretical texts – Herbert Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich, Lucien Goldmann, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, Daniel Guerin, Henri Lefebvre, Ernest Mandel. Bensaïd adds that for him and many of the young radicals, too, “Lenin was all the rage,” but this was a Lenin having little in common with the immense leaden statues worshiped by older, disapproving Communist Party comrades. The intellectual rebellion quickly culminated in mass expulsions from the mainstream Communist movement, with many of the young rebels (the spirited Bensaïd no less than others) gradually recruiting themselves to a maverick variant of Trotskyism.

This historical moment was one of a youth radicalization sweeping through Europe and other continents. In France, the young Trotskyists-in-the-making were caught up in the swirl – along with anarchists and Maoists and activists without clear labels – of students pushing for radical educational reforms and sexual freedom. The wondrous days of May 1968 saw huge demonstrations, endless meetings, student strikes and school occupations. Struggles for educational transformation blended into a more general anti-authoritarianism, opposition to imperialist wars, romantic identification with “third world” insurgencies, and the rights of the working class. This last element took on special meaning as many workers – to the horror of Stalinist and moderate-socialist trade union bureaucrats – threw their support to the “crazy” students and began organizing militant strikes, matching the student barricades and street battles against brutal police repression. The question of power was being posed – the overturn of the old order seemed on the agenda.

It soon became apparent, however, that the May uprising had neither the strategic vision nor the organizational coherence nor sufficiently deep popular roots to bring on the thoroughgoing revolution that the young radicals dreamed of. This was, many agreed, simply a “dress rehearsal.”

Struggle, Violence, Principles

As the newly-crystallized LCR grew, Bensaïd and its other leaders felt that “history was breathing down our necks.” If May 1968 was the dress rehearsal for revolution, these revolutionary militants had a responsibility to see that an actual revolution would, indeed, be produced. “We were in a hurry,” he writes, and with others he developed theoretical reference points of “an (ultra-) Leninism, dominated by the paroxysmic moment of the seizure of power.” But it had taken the Bolsheviks decades to develop experience and revolutionary seasoning in pre-revolutionary Russia that would be sufficient for the 1917 revolution. As Bensaïd describes it, the group and its young cadres were far from that. Nonetheless, their most respected revolutionary Marxist mentor, Ernest Mandel, was assuring them that “revolution is immanent,” and both in the LCR and the Fourth International they felt a responsibility to make it so. It was a time of “hasty Leninism,” whose “fearsome burden” he poignantly describes:

“Our feverish impatience was inspired by a phrase from Trotsky that was often cited in our debates: ‘The crisis of humanity is summed up in the crisis of revolutionary leadership.’ If this was indeed the case, nothing was more urgent than to resolve this crisis. The duty of each person was to contribute his or her little strength, as best they could, to settle this alternative between socialism and barbarism. It was in part up to them, therefore, whether the human species sank into a twilight future or blossomed into a society of abundance. This vision of history charged our frail shoulders with a crushing responsibility. In the face of this implacable logic, impoverished emotional life or professional ambition did not weigh very heavy. Each became personally responsible for the fate of humanity.”

In North America, in Asia, and especially in Latin America there was also such “hasty Leninism.” A substantial minority in the Fourth International fiercely opposed the course which Bensaïd and others advocated – initially calling for a continent-wide strategy of rural guerilla warfare in Latin America (a perspective soon “modified” to include urban guerilla warfare as well), with similar impulses theorized for elsewhere. This led to a factional battle in the Fourth International, with a substantial minority projecting a more patient orientation grounded in classical Marxism. A prestigious former secretary of Trotsky’s, Joseph Hansen, labeled his 1971 oppositional polemic “In Defense of the Leninist Strategy of Party-Building” (which can be found on-line, as can some of Bensaïd’s writings, through the Marxist Internet Archive). After several years of experience, most of the “hasty Leninists” would more or less swing over to Hansen’s position.

But Bensaïd, a dedicated representative in Latin America from the Fourth International’s “center,” is compelled to share haunting memories: “Our comrades were young and intrepid, full of confidence in the socialist future of humanity. Three years later, half the people I met at these meetings had been arrested, tortured and murdered.” It becomes a poetry of horror:

“We were running headlong into an open grave. . . .
So many faces wiped out.
So many laughs extinguished.
So many hopes massacred.”

He draws the lessons: “It was clear that we were on the wrong path. . . . Armed struggle is not a strategy. . . . The armed struggle we voted on at the 9th World Congress [1969] was an ill-timed generalization . . .” Bensaïd emphasizes that “weapons have their own logic,” elaborating: “Buying and storing and looking after weapons, renting safe-houses and supporting underground activists is an expensive business and needs money. To obtain this, you have to rob banks. And to rob banks, you need weapons. In this spiral, an increasing number of militants are socially uprooted and professionalized. Instead of melting into a social milieu like fish in water, their existence depends ever more on an expanding apparatus.”

Marx, Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky had envisioned revolutionary cadres facilitating the self-organization and self-activity and revolutionary consciousness of various working-class and oppressed sectors. Central to this was the building reform struggles for democratic rights and economic justice, creating a movement “of the great majority, for the great majority” that would culminate in “winning the battle of democracy” and bring a transition from capitalism to socialism. For revolutionaries – Bensaïd tells us – such a working class implantation also provides “a reality principle” to counterbalance “leftist temptations.” He and others, including seasoned guerrilla fighters, “drew the conclusion of a necessary return to more classical forms of organization and the primacy of politics over military action, without which the logic of violence gets carried away and risks becoming uncontrollable.”

A strength in Bensaïd’s searching exploration of violence, to which he devotes a full chapter, is his understanding that violence is at the very core of capitalism and all forms of class society, quoting poet André Suarès: “Wealth is the sign of violence, at every level.” He shows that the violence of the status quo is intensifying: “the tendency to a privatization and dissemination of violence is accelerating. Ethnic cleansing and religious massacres are proliferating.

The world is collapsing into the hyper-violence of armed globalization.” Yet he sees the contamination of violence manifesting itself again and again in struggles against oppression and exploitation – liberators can become criminals, in some cases devolving into common gangsters, in the worst cases bringing in their wake the gulag and the killing fields. Surveying revolutionary experience for over a century, he concludes: “Violence and progress no longer marched together, at the same pace, in the supposed direction of history.” He insists on the need for a practical-ethical regulation of violence in the perspectives of revolutionaries. He finds it in Trotsky’s 1938 classic *Their Morals and Ours*:

The “great revolutionary end” thus necessarily spurns “those base means and ways which set one part of the working class against other parts, or attempt to make the masses happy without their participation; or lower the faith of the masses in themselves and their organization, replacing it by worship for the “leaders.””

Exhaustion and Affirmation

Exhaustion can afflict a revolution, a struggle, an activist, an idea. A variety of such things are traced for the twentieth century’s final decades. His own intensely activist organization, the LCR, was able to endure, weather more than one storm, making important contributions to liberation struggles. Yet, “we had worked wonders, exhausting ourselves in running faster than our own shadow.” He describes excellent comrades finally asking “what it’s all about” and falling away.

Amid all of this, there appears a fleeting pen-portrait of an important mentor to innumerable Fourth Internationalists, Ernest Mandel – “a tutor in theory and a passer between two generations . . . who set out during the 1950s to conceptualize the new features of the era, instead of piously watching over the political legacy of the past. . . . This daily contact with Ernest was a wellspring of knowledge and a permanent initiation into the foundations of Marxism.” As time went on, there was a partial exhaustion of the relationship between Mandel and “the Generation of ‘68” – a relationship always inspiring “more in the way of respect than affection,” and “rarely reciprocal and egalitarian.” Bensaïd saw him as at least a partial prisoner of a belief in “the emancipating powers of science and the historical logic of progress,” elaborating: “Ernest was an exemplary case of stubborn optimism of the will tempered by an intermittent pessimism of reason: for him, permanent revolution would win the day over permanent catastrophe. And the socialist prophecy would (almost) always defeat barbarism.” Yet for many of Mandel’s political children, this seemed increasingly inadequate for the realities they were facing.

This shifting mood went far beyond the ranks of the Fourth International. Wearying leftists with an ambitious bent began proclaiming a set of “farewells” – to Marxism, to the working class, to the passionate logic of revolutionary struggle. Sanctuary could be found, sometimes with considerable comfort and impressive careers, in the power structures which their younger selves had militantly confronted. Among “third worldists” and Maoists who had once enthusiastically proclaimed that “the wind is blowing from the East,” there was a growing conviction that “it was the west wind that now prevailed over the east,” blowing ever stronger thanks to the Reagan and Thatcher Revolutions. Some activists migrated from revolution to reformist politics, and some (perhaps frightened by totalitarian impulses they discovered in themselves) veered more sharply to the right.

This reflected a deeper exhaustion – of Maoist China’s revolutionary élan, of the Central American revolutions, of many hopeful aspects of the Cuban Revolution, and finally of the so-called “bureaucratized workers’ states” of the Communist Bloc and the USSR itself.

The collapse of Communism was soon accompanied by other exhaustions impacting on Bensaïd and his comrades. In the 1980s, the LCR had been joined by the large, growing, vibrant Mexican and the Brazilian sections as “the big three” in the Fourth International, seeming to promise much in the rebuilding of the global left. Yet the Mexican organization, “with wind in its sails,” had insufficient theoretical grounding and organizational strength to

prevent success from corrupting some of its most prominent militants – soon leading to betrayal, demoralization, and fragmentation. The Brazilian comrades, with whom he worked closely for many years, had thrived as an integral part of the glorious and multifaceted working-class upsurge that finally pushed aside the military dictatorship. In the form of the massive Workers Party headed by the working-class militant Lula, the insurgents finally won the Presidency of the country. But a majority of the comrades found themselves pulled along into the new reformist trajectory and even neo-liberal policies of the Lula regime, with a dissident fragment expelled and others splitting away amid exhausted hopes. (There was, obviously, no time for Bensaïd to offer a balance-sheet on the LCR's 2009 decision to dissolve into a broader New Anti-Capitalist Party.)

Many activists, not inclined to join the well-heeled legions of the status quo, sought more resources to help them endure the new realities. Those who were Jewish (as he was) felt a need to explore the meaning of that identity and its complex and often horrific history. In such explorations, while in no way turning away from this identity (and joining in “not in my name” protests against Israeli oppression of Palestinians), Bensaïd affirmed his rejection of “the Chosen People” concept – having no desire “to feel chosen in this way, whether to share the blessings of this election or to bear the crushing responsibility according to which Jews are supposed to be better than common mortals.” Some, in this troubling period, explored new pathways of spirituality and even mysticism (as he did), as a means to transcend the “instrumental rationality [that] has stubbornly set out to empty time of its messianic pregnancy, to dissolve the surprises of the event with the regularity of the clock.” There is need for transcendence, “when revolution becomes the name of the inconstant event that has refused to arrive, or –still worse – has appeared in the form of its own rebuttal.” Such transcendence of “practical” and “instrumental reality” can open the way “to a new representation of history.” He insists that “the ancient prophet was neither a divine, nor a sorcerer, nor a magician. He or she was someone who switched the points of the present into the unknown bifurcations of the future.”

Yet for Bensaïd revolutionary Marxism remained the essential ingredient in his identity as a political person. A remarkable chapter in the book – “Spectres in the Blue House” – focuses on the final, Mexican years of Trotsky's exile, eloquently tracing the revolutionary's meaning for his time and for ours. “From Marx to Trotsky,” Bensaïd writes, “permanent revolution . . . welds together event and history, moment and duration, rupture and continuity.” Marx is primary. In some ways the most powerful chapter is “The Inaudible Thunder,” offering an elegant explication of the three volumes of Marx's *Capital* – “inescapable, always uncompleted, constantly recommenced, it is an unending project.” The profound influence on Marx of the philosopher Hegel accounts for this chapter's title: “the still inaudible thunder of Hegelian logic” challenges the “instrumental rationality” used to “explain” and justify the capitalist status quo.

Marx's method shatters such ideological facades, providing an in-depth analysis of “generalized commodity production” revealing the exploitation and mutilation of human labor and creativity at the system's very heart. His intricate exploration of the “capital accumulation process” reveals the impact of bending society and culture and the environment to the voracious and destructive need for maximizing profits more and more and more, forever. “The important thing,” Bensaïd insists, is “not to bend, not to give in, not to submit to the proclaimed fatality [inevitability] of the commodity order.”

The very nature of this system is such that “the world still has to be changed, and still more profoundly and more urgently than we had imagined forty years ago. Any doubt bears on the possibility of succeeding, not on the necessity of trying.” Inaction in the face of doubt is not a choice. Given the dynamics of capitalism, the oppressed and exploited majority does not have the option of “not playing the game,” and for revolutionary activists “the only compass in this uncertain work is to take the part of the oppressed, even in defeat if need be.”

“Knowing oneself to be mortal – we all do, more or less – is one thing,” Bensaïd muses in the memoir's penultimate chapter. “Something else is to experience this and really believe it.” Seeing his own impending death as the book comes to a close, and impelled to pass his torch to us, he conveys multiple insights:

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“Revolts against globalised injustice are multiplying. But the spiral of retreats and defeats has not been broken. Number and mass are not enough, without will and consciousness. . . . A resistance without victories and perspectives of counter-attack ends up being worn out. There is no victory without strategy, and no strategy without a balance of forces. . . . Is it possible to be truly democratic without being truly socialist? . . . Today’s political landscape is devastated by battles lost without even being fought. . . .”

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