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Daniel Bensaïd archive

Daniel Bensaïd and the broken time of politics

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I am very conscious of the great honour of being invited to participate in this seminar (2012) as someone who did not belong to the same international current as Daniel Bensaïd and only got to know him in the last decade of his life. But as soon as we met, what drew me towards Daniel was not simply his immense personal qualities—his strength of character, warmth and kindness, and a dry sense of humour congenial to an Anglo-Saxon sensibility (although inflected by Daniel’s strong southern accent, the product of a clime very different from the damp island I inhabit)—but the presence of an exceptional intellect. Reading the flood of writings Daniel produced in his last 15 years I was strongly attracted to a highly original body of work with whose substance I strongly agreed even though it was expressed in a very different philosophical idiom from my own. [1]

One of Bensaïd’s many great virtues was that he was a highly unorthodox Marxist. This was reflected in his vast and unusual range of intellectual reference, but also in the diversity of topics about which he wrote. He must, for example, be the only Trotskyist to have written a book about Joan of Arc. Bensaïd was quite untrammelled by the need to make obeisance to any orthodoxy. This didn’t mean his views were vague or wishy-washy. On contrary, the very strength of his commitment to revolutionary Marxism allowed him great freedom in articulating its content.

Bensaïd was thus an open but very tough-minded Marxist. This was reflected in the fact that he wrote very well about Lenin. I am proud that a key late text of his on Lenin was published in the journal I edit, *International Socialism*. [2] I want here to explore the theoretical roots of his understanding of Lenin.

A preoccupation with Lenin runs through Bensaïd’s writing. Thus, in a celebrated article co-written with Alain Nair in the heat of 1968, he championed Lenin against Rosa Luxemburg in their famous debate over the question of party organisation. Bensaïd came to regard this text as “tainted with juvenile ‘ultra-Bolshevism’” [3] Certainly the idea that the revolutionary party is the “political subject” of revolution, and the working class merely the “theoretical subject”, is open to a substitutionist drift that arguably was realised during the *Ligue Communiste*’s quasi-Guevarist phase in the early 1970s. [4] Nevertheless, the text’s tough polemic against Luxemburg’s “spontaneism” must be seen as a contribution to a much broader effort to turn the generation radicalised by May ‘68 and its counterparts elsewhere, and heavily influenced by libertarian critiques of Leninism, towards the task of building revolutionary parties rooted in the working class. As such, it should be compared with, in the *International Socialist* tradition, Chris Harman’s fundamental essay “Party and Class”, written at much the same time, and for very similar reasons, and, within Bensaïd’s own current, with Henri Weber’s slightly later *Marxisme et Conscience de Classe*, a work whose value should be acknowledged despite the author’s later rightward evolution into the ranks of the Socialist Party. [5]

The primacy of politics

But in Bensaïd’s late writing on Lenin his focus is no longer on the questions of party organisation and class consciousness. This is not because he became indifferent to these issues. Another of Daniel’s many paradoxes was that he remained a strong “party man” despite his singularity as both a person and a thinker. But it seems to me he followed Michael Löwy in seeing as central to Lenin’s thought the primacy of politics. Löwy writes in a text of the mid-1970s:

From the methodological point of view, Lenin’s principal superiority over most of his contemporaries was his capacity to “put politics in command”, ie his obstinate, inflexible, constant and unflinching tendency to grasp and highlight the

political aspect of every problem and every contradiction. This tendency stood out in his polemic against the Economists on the question of the party in 1902-3; in his discussion with the Mensheviks on the question of the democratic revolution in 1905; in the originality of his writings on imperialism in 1916; in the inspired turn which the April Theses represented in 1917; in the whole of his most important work *State and Revolution* and, of course, in his writings on the national question. It is this methodological aspect which explains (among other things) the striking actuality of Lenin's ideas in the 20th century, an age of imperialism, which has seen the political level become increasingly dominant (even though, in the last analysis, it is of course determined by the economic). [6]

Compare this with what Bensaïd writes 30 years later: "Lenin was one of the first to conceive the specificity of the political field as a play of transfigured powers and social antagonisms, translated into a language of its own, full of displacements, of condensations and of revealing slips of the tongue". [7] It is important not to misunderstand what Löwy and Bensaïd are saying here. The idea of the "specificity of the political field" should not be confused with the thesis of the relative autonomy of the political associated particularly with Nicos Poulantzas. [8] Marx in the *Grundrisse* talks about "the concentration of the whole in the state". [9] In *Capital* he calls the state "the concentrated and organised force of society". [10] The state isn't autonomous, but—precisely because it is where all the antagonisms of capitalist society are condensed—it is special. This means that politics works according to a specific logic that cannot be reduced to that of any of these antagonisms, even those of capital accumulation and class struggle. The key to the Marxist theory of the state lies in simultaneously grasping this specificity and recognising that it reflects the way in which, under the reign of commodity fetishism, the social whole is fragmented, broken up into distinct, apparently unrelated parts. [11]

Hence politics has to be read critically in the same way that Freud argued the effects of the unconscious had to be scrutinised (condensation and displacement are the two main mechanisms that he identifies at work in producing the apparently meaningless babble of dreams). Bensaïd draws the parallel explicitly:

Revolutionary theory has something in common with psychoanalysis. Political representation is not the simple manifestation of a social nature. Political class struggle is not the superficial mirroring of an essence. Articulated like a language, it operates by displacements and condensations of social contradictions. It has its dreams, its nightmares and its lapses. In the specific field of the political, class relations acquire a degree of complexity irreducible to the bipolar antagonism [of exploiter and exploited] that nevertheless determines them. [12]

The discordance of historical times

This understanding of politics is related to some of the most abstract dimensions of Bensaïd's thought. Stathis Kouvelakis has highlighted the importance—especially in *Marx for Our Times*—of a certain understanding of historical time. [13] This is summed up by the title of another book: *The Discordance of Times*. [14]

This idea involves three propositions. First, time is plural. Thus Bensaïd argues that Marx in *Capital* articulates together different temporalities at work in capitalist economic processes. Indeed, he sees the three volumes of *Capital* mirroring the three moments of Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*, so that production corresponds to "Mechanism", reproduction to "Chemism", and the system as a whole to "Life": "The mechanical time of production, the chemical time of circulation, and the organic time of reproduction are thus coiled and slotted inside one another, like circles within circles, determining the enigmatic patterns of historical time, which is the time of politics". [15] Whatever we think of this (in my view highly dubious) interpretation of *Capital*, the italicised phrase already points towards the connection that Bensaïd sees between time and politics: I'll return to this shortly.

In any case, others have recognised that Capital articulates together different times. Here is a much more orthodox Marxist, Bensaïd's Fourth International comrade Ernest Mandel:

Time appears there as the measure of production, value and surplus value (labour time); as the nexus connecting production, circulation and reproduction of commodities; as the medium of the laws of motion of capital (trade cycles, cycles of class struggle, long-term historical cycles); and as the very essence of man (leisure time, life time, creative time, time of social intercourse). [16]

Secondly, the different temporalities don't align together harmoniously. As Hamlet puts it in a scene that fascinated both Marx and Derrida, "The time is out of joint." Bensaïd expresses the same thought almost as elliptically as Shakespeare: "Time stretched and torn apart; concentrated, staccato, broken time; the worst of time, the best of times". [17] Thirdly, the different temporalities nevertheless form a contradictory unity—though "unity" may not be the right word: maybe it's better to say that they collide.

One can see this conception of historical time as providing a framework that embraces and integrates some well-established specific Marxist themes. There is, for example, Trotsky's conception of uneven and combined development, which has been the subject of much recent discussion among English-speaking Marxists. [18] Gramsci's concept of contradictory consciousness, in which different class-based conceptions of the world uneasily coexist, is another example. What is the following famous passage from the Prison Notebooks if not the discordance of different historical times?

When one's conception of the world is not critical and coherent but disjointed and episodic, one belongs simultaneously to a multiplicity of mass human groups. The personality is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over. [19]

More broadly, a major function of the idea of the discordance of times is to help articulate a Marxism that rejects determinism. Bensaïd writes, "Determinate historical development remains full of junctions and bifurcations, forks and points". [20] This points to an obvious influence on this conception of historical time—Walter Benjamin. Indeed, like James Connolly in Terry Eagleton's novel *Saints and Scholars*, Bensaïd's Marx often sounds suspiciously like Benjamin. Jacques Derrida's treatment of time in *Spectres of Marx* is evidently another reference point (hence the tribute implied by the name of the journal—*Contretemps*—that Bensaïd helped to found): "We no longer realise the wear, we no longer take account of it as of a single age in the progress of history. Neither maturation, nor crisis, nor even agony. Something else... *Contretemps*. The time is out of joint... The age is off its hinges. Everything, beginning with time, seems out of kilter, unjust, dis-adjusted". [21]

But within the Marxist tradition one can also point to Louis Althusser's account of differential temporality in *Reading Capital*:

The model of a continuous and homogeneous time...can no longer be regarded as the time of history... We can argue from the specific structure of the Marxist whole that it is no longer possible to think the process of development of the different levels of the whole in the same historical time. Each of these different "levels" does not have the same type of historical existence. On the contrary, we have to assign to each level a peculiar time, time relatively autonomous and hence relatively independent, even in its dependence, of the "times" of the other levels. [\[22\]](#)

But these times in Althusser seem simply to coexist—he tends to reduce contradiction to unevenness. [23] Whereas in Bensaïd they intersect: “Non-contemporaneity is not reducible to the material unevenness of its moments. It is also their combined development in a novel historical space-time”. [24] Interestingly, we find a very similar conception of historical time as the intersection of temporalities in a recent essay by the American Marxist Fredric Jameson:

Yet the appearance of Time or History as such depends not on the multiplicity and variety of these trajectories, but rather on their interference with each other, with their intersection now understood as dissonance and as incommensurability rather than as conjuncture which augments them all, in the fashion of a synthesis, by the central space of some harmonious meeting and combination.

We must therefore retain this violence and negativity in any concept of intersection, in order for this dissonant conjunction to count as an Event, and in particular as that Event which is this ephemeral rising up and coming to appearance of Time and History as such. Nor is this a purely textual or philosophical matter: for it is the same discordant conjuncture that constitutes the emergence of time and of history in the real world, the world of real time and of real history. [25]

Jameson criticises “the absence of negativity in the Althusserian concepts”, which:

seem now to suggest a kind of pluralism and relativism more appropriate for liberal and bourgeois views of history than for any Marxism... The central mechanism of the dialectic—contradiction itself—is still somehow here lacking or at least is hardly underscored and foregrounded by the concept itself.

It is this negativity which the notion of intersection is meant to restore. [26]

Jameson’s idea of a “dissonant conjunction”, a “discordant conjuncture” informed by negativity, seems very close to Bensaïd’s conception of historical time. Yet there is a crucial difference: in Jameson’s highly Hegelian version of Marxism, which views history from an almost cosmic perspective, politics plays no role. For example, in a text first read at a conference on Lenin (in which Bensaïd and I also participated), he declares: “The very force and originality of Marxism was always that it did not have a political dimension.” Interestingly, Jameson is also quite dismissive of Lenin as a political thinker (the title of his text), condemning “Lenin’s divisive, aggressive, sectarian recommendations for tactics”. [27]

Bensaïd’s approach is very different: it is precisely politics where the different temporalities intersect. Hence his stress on the present: “The present is the central temporal category of an open-ended history”. [28] Why? Because the present is what matters from the perspective of an interventionist political practice. “In struggle, the present permanently commands the past and the future”. [29] Or again, in a crucial passage that merits quotation at length:

The present is no longer a mere link in the chain of time but a moment for selecting among possibilities. The acceleration of history is not that of a time intoxicated by speed, but the effect of the furious turnover of capital. Revolutionary action is not the imperative of a proven capacity to make history, but engagement in a conflict whose outcome is uncertain. Hypothetical and conditional, bristling with discontinuities, the impossible totalisation of historical development opens out into a multiplicity of pasts and futures. For every epoch the historic present represents the result of a history that has been made and the inaugural force of an advent that is beginning anew. At

issue is a specifically political present, strategically identified with the notion of the “given and inherited circumstances” by which “men make their own history”. [30]

The activist orientation of this conception of “a specifically political present” is explicit in the phrase “a moment for selecting among possibilities”. The openness of history—the forking paths that define its potential courses—requires a politics that actively intervenes by taking one path rather than another. Thus: “This historical present is not a link in some mechanical sequence of causes and effects but a contemporaneity full of possibilities, where politics takes precedence over history in deciphering tendencies that do not possess the force of law”. [31] There is an element of voluntarism—in a good way—that seems implied here. Politics seems to act as the forcible conjunction of discordant temporalities that might not otherwise have collided.

In any case, this conception of politics helps to provide a principled foundation for Daniel’s Leninism. As a very different writer on Lenin, Tony Cliff, stressed, central to Lenin’s practice of politics was his conception of strategy and tactics, where tactics are the various political methods that, responding to ever-changing circumstances, are selected to achieve the goal of socialist revolution. [32] Daniel stresses on numerous occasions that strategy is a necessity imposed by a history whose contradictions are mobile and uncertain in outcome. Strategy is a means of navigating these contradictions while not losing sight of the ultimate objective. Hence the intrinsic unity of “the broken time of politics and strategy”. [33] In other words, Bensaïd’s distinctive reading of Lenin and the understanding of politics that flows from it only make sense in the context of his conception of historical time. And the politics makes this conception more than just another philosophy of history. It is here, I believe, that we find Daniel’s great originality as a Marxist.

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- [1] This article originated as a presentation to the seminar organised by the Fourth International, "Daniel Bensaïd: L'internationaliste", at the International Institute for Research and Education, Amsterdam, 13-15 January 2012. I am grateful to the organisers, Penny Duggan and François Sabado, for inviting me.
- [2] Bensaïd, 2002b.
- [3] Bensaïd, 2008. I would like to pay tribute to Pierre Rousset's efforts to put as much as possible of Daniel's writing in various languages online at the Europe solidaire sans frontières website: www.europe-solidaire.org.
- [4] Compare Bensaïd, 2002a, p270, where he calls into question conceiving either party or class as subjects. A brief account of Daniel's role in the substitutionism of the early 1970s will be found, along with much else, in Sebastian Budgen's tribute-Budgen, 2010.
- [5] Harman, 1968-9, and Weber, 1975.
- [6] Löwy, 1976, p97.
- [7] Bensaïd, 2004, p121.
- [8] Poulantzas, 1973.
- [9] Marx, 1973, p105.
- [10] Marx, 1976, p915 (translation modified).
- [11] This view of the state is developed further in Callinicos, 2009, chapter 2.
- [12] Bensaïd, 2002a, p112. See more generally Bensaïd, 2002a, chapter 4.
- [13] Kouvelakis, 2010.
- [14] Bensaïd, 1995.
- [15] : Bensaïd, 2002a, p77 (italics added). See also Bensaïd, 2002a, pp213-221.
- [16] Mandel, 1978, p20.
- [17] Bensaïd, 2002a, p87.
- [18] Dunn and Radice, 2006, and Anievas, 2010.
- [19] Gramsci, 1970, p324.
- [20] Bensaïd, 2002a, p23. More or less simultaneously I tried to develop a very similar conception of historical materialism as a theory of determinate historical possibilities, and invoked Jorge Luis Borges's wonderful short story "The Garden of the Forking Paths", where all possible worlds actually coexist (but which surprisingly Daniel seems never to have mentioned)-Callinicos, 1995, pp151-165.
- [21] Derrida, 1994, pp77-78. See the discussion of Spectres of Marx in Bensaïd, 1995, chapter 11.
- [22] Althusser and Balibar, 1970, p99.

[23] Althusser, 1975, pp219-223.

[24] Bensaïd, 2002a, p24.

[25] Jameson, 2009, pp543-544.

[26] Jameson, 2009, p545.

[27] Jameson 2009, pp297, 300.

[28] Bensaïd, 2002a, p55.

[29] Bensaïd, 2003.

[30] Bensaïd, 2002a, pp71-72.

[31] Bensaïd, 2002a, pp103-104 (*italics added*).

[32] Cliff, 1975, chapter 14.

[33] Bensaïd, 2002a, p23.