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Reviews

Mourn, then organise again

- Reviews section -

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This brilliant essay is an attempt to recover a hidden and rather discreet tradition: the tradition of "left-wing melancholia." [1] This state of mind does not make up part of the Left's canonical narrative: the Left is more given to celebrating glorious triumphs than tragic defeats. Nonetheless, the memory of these defeats – from June 1848 to May 1871, January 1919 and September 1973 – and solidarity with the defeated nourish revolutionary history like an invisible underground river. In the depths of resignation, this left-wing melancholia is a red thread that crosses revolutionary culture, from Auguste Blanqui to critical cinema, passing by way of Gustave Courbet, Rosa Luxemburg, and Walter Benjamin. Traverso forcefully – and counter-intuitively – reveals the full subversive, emancipatory charge of revolutionary mourning.

The history of socialism over the last two centuries has been a constellation of tragic and often bloody defeats. Yet this does not lead to acceptance of the established order – quite the opposite. In her last article in January 1919, Rosa Luxemburg wrote "The road to socialism is paved with defeats... from which we draw historical experience, understanding, power and idealism." The same spirit animated Che Guevara when he told his murderers in October 1967: "we have lost, but the revolution is immortal." However, according to Traverso this dialectic of defeat could lead to a kind of secular theodicy, with a near-religious faith in the final victory. It is better to recognise, as Luxemburg herself did in 1915, that the future remains uncertain: either "socialism or barbarism."

Unlike the glorious defeats of the past – 1848, 1871, 1919 – the defeat of 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall, followed by the restoration of capitalism) was a gloomy defeat that generated disillusionment. Hence the development, from those years onward, of a melancholic Marxism of which Daniel Bensaïd was one of the most eminent representatives. According to Enzo Traverso, its art resides in what Walter Benjamin called the organisation of pessimism: namely, coming to terms with failure without capitulating to the enemy, in the knowledge that a new beginning will adopt unprecedented forms.

Left-wing melancholia better expresses itself in the creations of the revolutionary imaginary than in theoretical controversies. The book thus explores how this sensibility figures in cinema, by way of the works of Chris Marker, Gillo Pontecorvo, and Ken Loach. Unlike when we write history, cinema's aim is not precision. But it does display the subjective dimension of events, and this makes it a barometer of the revolutionary experience. An anti-colonialist Marxist, Pontecorvo was the film-maker *par excellence* in portraying the glorious defeats that prepare the future, as he did in *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) or *Burn!* (1969), which Edward Said considered a "masterpiece." In a certain sense the same evaluation could also apply to Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom*, which projects a melancholic view of the Spanish revolution of 1936–37 and yet is "anything but resigned." His film is intended as a monument to the revolutionaries of the twentieth century, an epic monument coloured by mourning and which is neither dogmatic or sentimental.

Another masterpiece, Carmen Castillo's *Calle Santa Fé* (2007) is an epitaph dedicated to the memory of her comrade and partner Miguel Enríquez and the Latin-American revolutions of the 1970s. As distinct from Ken Loach's film, it above all documents a deep feeling: Carmen Castillo does not investigate the reasons for the defeat, but rather the emotions that this defeat produces, as well as the reactions of the Chilean youth today, who themselves "adopt the memory of the defeated." The pages that Enzo Traverso dedicates to this film are among the finest in his book.

These three directors' films, as well as those of Theo Angelopoulos and Patricio Guzmán, describe the twentieth century as a tragic age of broken revolutions and defeated utopias. Their left-wing melancholia expresses a generation's collective mourning.

Traverso dedicates one chapter to what he calls "post-colonial melancholia," which takes two forms: 1) disenchantment faced with failed decolonisation processes and 2) disappointment at the failed encounter between Marxism and anti-colonialism. He very finely analyses Marx's writings, picking out both his initial Eurocentric vision and its gradual transcendence starting in the 1860s. Over the course of the twentieth century, the history of Marxism was inextricably linked to national liberation movements, however much the Western Marxists (Lukács, the Frankfurt School) ignored the colonised peoples' struggle. In my view such a limitation is undeniable, but I do not believe that it produced a "left-wing melancholia," unlike in the case of the first form of "post-colonial melancholy" – the failed independence processes – which Enzo Traverso talks about very little, but which weighed heavily on a generation of anti-colonial militants.

The book's last chapter is dedicated to our friend Daniel Bensaïd. In the new conjuncture created by the 1990s (the restoration of capitalism in the USSR and Eastern Europe), Daniel tried to rethink history on the basis of Marx and Trotsky but also the "melancholic galaxy" – Baudelaire-Blanqui-Péguy-Walter Benjamin – as the terrain of the uncertain and the possible, of bifurcations and the growth of new branches. We could criticise Bensaïd's reading of Benjamin's writings – and in particular as concerns his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* – because he leaves to one side their theological dimension and relation with utopia. Nonetheless, this atypical and unconventional reading was one of the first to pick out Benjamin's political dimension. More than a scholarly interpretation of the texts, Bensaïd's essay *Walter Benjamin, sentinelle messianique* (1990) is a reflection that (starts out from Benjamin, whom it used as a compass for revolutionaries in the storm of 1989-90. The revolution cannot be set up as something "inevitable": as a strategic hypothesis and regulating horizon, it must necessarily be the object of a melancholic wager (Pascal's wager, revised and corrected by the Marxist Lucien Goldmann).

In conclusion, Enzo Traverso criticises the normative discourse of the present moment which presents the liberal regime and the market economy as the world's natural order and stigmatises the utopias of the twentieth century. This dominant discourse holds left-wing melancholy guilty because of its links to the subversive engagements of the past. But the Left itself often rejected melancholia, in order to avoid "disheartening Billancourt" [i.e. the workers at the vast Renault plant at Billancourt, a historic "bastion" of the French Communist Party]. It is time that we discover this rebel melancholia, which distinguishes itself from both resignation and mere "compassion" for victims. This is one of the attributes of revolutionary action, and it is inscribed in the history of all the movements that have tried to change the world over the last two centuries. For it is "through defeats that revolutionary experience is transmitted from one generation to another." I believe that the author of *Le Pari mélancolique* (1997) [Daniel Bensaïd] would agree with this conclusion...

[Against the Current](#)

[1] <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/left-wing-melancholia/9780231179423>