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Daniel Bensaïd

Testimony of a revolutionary

- Reviews section -

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Daniel Bensaïd An Impatient Life: A Memoir, Verso: London, 2013; 358 pp: 139781781681084, £25 Reviewed by John McIlroy, Middlesex University, UK for [Capital and Class](#).

Christophe Nick begins his account of the French far left with a half-truth: 'you don't become a Trotskyist by accident' (2002: 19). The processes that prompt political affiliation are usually rooted in an individual's earlier formation; they may be crystallised by chance. [1] Daniel Bensaïd, a child of 1968 and a leader of the Ligue Communiste (LC), the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI), whose memoir may be read with profit and pleasure, is a case in point. Born in Toulouse in 1946, he was the son of an Algerian Jewish father, a waiter and boxer interned under Vichy whose brothers died at the hands of the occupation forces; and a milliner from Blois whose family belonged to the Parti Communiste Français (PCF). Toulouse was a centre of immigration from Southern Europe and North Africa, with a cosmopolitan atmosphere and working-class culture; and until the 1970s, it remained a stronghold of the old Socialist Party (SFIO).

Bensaïd's inherited radicalism was amplified by informal education in his parents' bistro, the Bar des Amis, which was frequented by Italian, Portuguese and Spanish workers, as well as French and which played host to PCF meetings. The Spanish Civil War, the Occupation and the Resistance were all recent memories. Bensaïd grew up in an atmosphere of discussion and argument – over Indo-China and Algeria, and over domestic politics and sport. Marcel Cerdan, the Algerian pied noir pugilist, was his first hero. He thrilled to the exploits of the French footballers Kopa and Fontaine, the Magyar maestros Puskás and Hidegkuti, the athletic achievements of Zátopek and Kuts, and the annual agony and ecstasy of the Tour de France. In the neighbourhood, he mixed with working-class kids; at school, with the children of middle-class families, sometimes with Communist parents. The Cuban revolution exercised an enduring fascination, and the massacre of protestors against the Algerian war at the Charonne Métro in February 1962 proved decisive in his development. With friends, he formed a Jeunesse Communiste group at the lycée.

By chance, he was given a copy of *La Voie Communiste*, produced by PCF dissidents, including Trotskyists. Fortuitously, the Toulouse group encountered Gérard de Verbizier, another heretic and future LC/LCR member. Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon held more appeal than the PCF leaders, Jacques Duclos and Emile Waldeck-Rochet. Through the Union of Communist Students (UEC), Bensaïd and his comrades became partisans of 'the Left Opposition' led by Alain Krivine and Henri Weber. The latter were influenced by the Trotskyists of the Parti Communiste Internationaliste (PCI), the French section of the USFI still operating inside the PCF. Bensaïd added the writings of Ernest Mandel and Pierre Broué to his Third World repertoire. As a student at the Saint Cloud campus of the École Normale Supérieure, citadel of France's educational elite, he became a leader of the Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire (JCR), which broke with the UEC in 1965. The JCR played a key part in the events of May 1968, fusing with the PCI to form the LC in 1969. A range of influences and the roll of the dice made Bensaïd a revolutionary. Conversion is complicated: he still expressed doubts about LC affiliation to the USFI (pp. 91-2). [2]

To become a Trotskyist is one thing, to remain a Trotskyist quite another. Formative events stimulate adherence, but they do not guarantee sustained allegiance. Fidelity or disillusion spring from the lessons we learn from continuing interaction between our ideas and shifting circumstance in unforeseen conjunctures. For the next forty years, Bensaïd remained a fixture of the French left, appreciated for his warmth, talent for friendship and passion for politics. He never lost his Occitan accent. He was prominent in the LCR, which succeeded the LC, dissolved by the government in 1973, and a marshal (steward) of the 'service de l'ordre' of the League. He worked on the daily *Rouge*, one of the group's most important achievements between 1976 and 1979, and took a full part in the USFI, liaising with its sections in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and Spain. Upbringing and experience created an

internationalist, more interested in ideas than in organisation. Advocating guerrilla warfare in the Third World and Guevara's 'two, three, many Vietnams', Bensaïd possessed staying power: he rode the crest of the radicalisation of the 1960s and 1970s, and remained committed through decades of defeat.

In 1984, he returned to the academy, eventually becoming a professor of philosophy at the Paris VIII University of Vincennes – Saint Denis. In the early 1990s, he contracted AIDS. He subsequently combined political activity with publication of a plethora of books and articles – only a handful of which have appeared in English (Bensaïd 2002 ab, 2007, 2009, 2011) – and became well known as a Marxist philosopher. He was, finally, a member of the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA), formed in 2009 through the merger of the LCR with smaller groups. Bensaïd spent his last years battling illness before succumbing to cancer in 2010 (Budgen 2010).

Published in France in 2004, *An Impatient Life* mingles autobiography with meditations on politics, philosophy and history. The thematic thread is Bensaïd's induction into 'a hasty Leninism' in the 1960s and 1970s, when 'history was breathing down our necks'; and his incomplete apprenticeship in patience and a more measured, questioning, strategic approach. He writes evocatively of his origins and lifelong dedication to the oppressed, underlining how intellectual engagement is rooted in identity, emotion and morality:

The people of my childhood were not imaginary but flesh and blood. They were capable of both the best and the worst, the most noble dignity as well as the most abject servility ... But they were my people I had taken their side. I chose my camp very early on. From the heart initially. The reasons for this passion remained to be found. (p. 46)

Memory – and commitment – endured. They suffuse the book, and help to explain Bensaïd. The seeds sown in Toulouse blossomed into a lasting belief in the transformative mission of a class envisioned through the lens of the insurgent moment of 1968. Bensaïd disdains denigration of *les événements* and their reduction to rites of passage by those who long ago made their peace with capitalism, passing into its academic, cultural and political establishments. He interrogates 1968's changing meanings over 50 years: its localisation and restriction to students; the marginalisation of a mobilised working class and a general strike which challenged the state; and '68's co-option as a hiccup in a pre-ordained modernisation which cleared the ground for a neoliberalism that delivered on personal liberation. The 1970s are remembered as years of possibility and magic: '1972 slipped by like a fairytale' (p. 113). He recounts his experience in Argentina, where 'this student from the Latin quarter' (p. 132), as he was dismissively dubbed by orthodox Trotskyists, encountered the realities of the armed struggle. The romantic aura Guevarism had radiated in Paris dissipated. Together with the essays on the enigmas of Mexico and his love affair with Brazil, where Trotskyism once more proved incapable of sustaining an ascending arc, this section stands as among the best chapters in the volume.

The prominence of Jews in the LCR leadership produced the crack, ascribed here to Annie Kriegel, 'Why doesn't the League conduct its meetings in Yiddish? Because Bensaïd is Sephardic.' He writes movingly of the Shoah, and of anti-semitism in its shadow. He rejects Zionism and the fatalism of origins. Denounced in the right-wing press as an Arab and a Jew, he chose to follow Isaac Deutscher as a 'non-Jewish Jew', a universalist who solidarised with persecuted humanity everywhere. He invokes the emblematic figure of the forcibly converted, dissembling, double identity, Iberian Marranos, heretics against both Catholicism and Judaism: 'There have been and probably still will be many Marrano communists' (p. 284). [3]

The 20th-century affirms the illusion of time as unilinear progress. Disowning determinism, Bensaïd conceives history as contradictory and discordant, characterised by advance and retreat, impasse, bifurcation and forked roads. Time is neither empty, homogeneous, nor linear. A strategic understanding uncovers multiple temporalities, economic time, moving between production, circulation, realisation and crises, political time passing from eras of stability to forward surges and regressions. Revolution represents a leap into a future which demands strategic conceptualisation. We need a 'hot', methodologically open Marxism which rejects facile progressivisms and history

as a one-way street, recognising its complexities and the need for strategy in order to master it (pp. 419–20). This may be read as critique of his past practice; and he registers further reservations: ‘we responded to the tyranny of impersonal structure by a subjectivisation (going as far as a characteristically ultra-left voluntarism)’ (p. 81). Experiences in Argentina ‘inoculated me against an abstract and mythical view of armed struggle’ (p. 141). He concludes, ‘another left is needed ... not a “lite” or dehydrated left but a left of struggle’ (p. 313). Much of this is uncontentious; it is sometimes terse, rhetorical and abstract. Politics, he reflects, is decisive. Yet *An Impatient Life* provides no satisfactory balance sheet of the politics of which its author was a leading protagonist.

Bensaïd rarely reaches the heart of the USFI’s political problems. By 1968, its French representative, the PCI, had experienced a decade-and-a-half of entryism in the PCF. This was based on the conclusion in 1951 that impending war between the USA and USSR would stimulate revolutions. In the light of the overthrow of capitalism in Eastern Europe and China, and a timescale which prohibited creation of Trotskyist parties, revolutions would be spearheaded by the Stalinists. [4] Substitutionism was never uncritical: it became ingrained as it moved from Stalin to Tito and Mao, and then Castro, Guevara and Ho Chi Minh. The USFI’s dominant thinker, Ernest Mandel, purveyed an objectified, deterministic Marxism in which the revolutionary process was advancing relentlessly across the globe, although its epicentre had allegedly shifted to the Third World.

Working-class revolution, Marx’s emancipation of the workers by the workers, and classical Marxism’s replacement of capitalism by workers’ power, were reduced – at least in the first instance – to the destruction of capitalism by non-working-class forces, and bureaucratic dictatorship over the working class. Mandel’s theoretical writing was wide-ranging and sometimes rich in insight (Achcar 1999; Stutje 2009). He was less successful in applying theory to practice, and a poor strategist – a verdict that may be recorded against many of his comrades in the direction of the USFI. [5] The problems lay as much with Mandel’s own politics as in any tendency to compromise with ‘the new youth vanguard’. He himself was ‘a hasty Leninist’: in Bensaïd’s account, ‘Ernest Mandel promised us a revolution in Europe within five years’ (p. 100). [6]

Voluntarism attempted to bridge the gulf between determinism and political reality. The USFI presented May 1968 as ‘a dress rehearsal’, comparable with February 1917. The LC/LCR’s project for a French October was based on blue-sky accelerating decline of the reformist and Stalinist parties. It turned on eschewing entryism and fostering economic and democratic struggles through which the League would develop into a mass party; sectional struggles would culminate in an ‘insurrectional general strike’, ushering in dual power and workers’ councils. Until the mid-1970s, activity centred on building in the unions and workplaces, challenging the state on the streets, and fighting the far right. Internationally, the League advocated guerrilla struggle in Latin America, based, with urban variations, on Che’s failed experiment in Bolivia. This was posed as a strategic orientation on a continental scale. At best, it confused tactics with strategy. It exaggerated the impact of real moves to the right and the possibility of mass mobilisation sparked by the exemplary violence and political propaganda of small detachments of armed revolutionaries. The ‘new strategic orientation’ minimised the potential of legal political action, work in the labour movement and Leninist approaches to party-building across the continent for a prolonged period. It glossed over the difficulties of combining violent resistance with labour movement agitation, and the tendency for all activity to become militarised.

Powerfully expounded by their US co-thinkers, the Socialist Workers Party, and the Argentinian leader Nahuel Moreno – although both over-estimated democratic openings – such arguments deterred neither Mandel nor the LC/LCR from supporting groups like the Tupamaros and Roberto Santucho’s Workers’ Revolutionary Party – Revolutionary Peoples Army, a USFI affiliate; and bank robberies, kidnappings and assassinations. Violence failed to call forth a mass movement (see, for example, SWP 1972, Germain 1973). Bensaïd’s rather peremptory disavowals – ‘the armed struggle voted at the 9th World Congress was an ill-timed generalisation’ (pp. 141, 143) – and thoughtful philosophising about violence, fall short of rigorous political appraisal.

The 1973 fusion of the USFI’s Spanish supporters with a faction of ETA, the Basque separatist movement, fuelled

dreams of 'Euskadi, the Cuba of Europe' (p. 235, Alexander 1991: 716-20). Peaceful transition to bourgeois democracy in Spain and thwarted revolution in Portugal highlighted the resilience of reformism, the traditional parties of the working class and the limits of an ultra-leftism which sought to outflank them. The LCR turned towards demanding a Socialist Party-PCF government as a stimulus to working-class radicalisation. Its identification with '68 and its solidarity work over Vietnam and Latin America; its proscription by the state for fighting the police and the far-right *Ordre Nouveau*; a secret apparatus modelled on the Comintern; agitation in the army; coverage in *Le Monde* and *Libération* – in short, its radical chic, provided a public profile denied its competitors, notably the Lambertistes and *Lutte Ouvrière*. [7] The League recruited few workers; it never had more than 2,500 members. Bensaïd says little about the French working class, union strategy (pp. 167–8) or the unsuccessful 1979 attempt to implant LCR activists in the factories (Fichaut 2003). This coincided with revolution in Nicaragua: cheerleading for the Sandinistas provoked the loss of a quarter of LCR members to a breakaway led by Lambert and Moreno. The same year, the USFI condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. But it did not demand the withdrawal of Russian troops.

An Impatient Life never comes to grips with the method exemplified in many of the USFI's positions. Bensaïd and his comrades embellished the radical credentials of national bourgeois and peasant forces confronting imperialism. Out of national liberation struggles which demanded support, they conjured a potential for progress towards socialism they simply did not possess. All too often the result was adaptation and a compromise of political independence. The first beneficiary of this had been the Soviet bureaucracy. A half century later, Bensaïd still seemed confused by Stalinism and the USFI's baggage of 'degenerated and deformed workers' states': he considered the Soviet Union 'post-capitalist', and its collapse in 1989 a 'historic defeat for the working class' (pp. 370-71).

By the 1980s, the LCR was overtaken by the Lambertistes and LO. The USFI put immense effort into building a section in Poland, but to little effect (Stutje 2009: 224-30). Its rapidly growing Mexican affiliate parted company with its two mass leaders (p. 235; Alexander 1991: 614–17). The International turned towards new broad left parties which permitted revolutionary factions. They included *Die Linke* in Germany, *Rifondazione Comunista* in Italy and the Workers Party (PT) in Brazil (Bensaïd et al. 2011). Bensaïd was involved in advising the USFI's Brazilian supporters in the PT, *Democracia Socialista* (DS), which decided to participate in the 2002 coalition government headed by the PT leader, Lula. In a book published in 2004, the problems that climaxed in that year are perforce treated cursorily. But the episode further illustrates the vicissitudes of 'soft' Trotskyism, 'non-sectarianism' and reluctant leadership.

In 1964, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party had been replaced as the USFI's Ceylonese section when its leaders entered Sirimavo R.D. Bandaranaike's coalition already branded as 'capitalist' (Richardson 1997: 176-217). Brazil was different: the PT had left-wing politics and a union base (Bourne 2008). Nonetheless, as early as 1994, Mandel had doubted whether a Lula administration would confront capitalism to pursue policies that would significantly benefit Brazilian workers, and underlined the danger of participating in it. Bensaïd visited Brazil several times in the new century, and communicated similar reservations. It was only after the DS split in 2004, with the majority supporting the government and 25 per cent of members forming the new *Partido Socialismo e Liberdade* (PSOL), that the USFI explicitly criticised the majority (Machado 2012). Yet the accommodation to neoliberalism Lula demonstrated from 2002 – and its impact on the PT, which disciplined critics – was eminently predictable. By 2002, it seemed indisputable that participation in government could not be justified by the possibility of appealing to a mass movement capable of changing its course.

The USFI was not, by this time, a democratic centralist organisation. It is necessary to consider national specificities and sectarian pitfalls. Prudence requires patience, persuasion and dialogue. There remains the question of leadership. That starts and continues with argument and education, and it ends in forcefully opposing opportunism – although the DS minority did little to project any compelling alternative to economic orthodoxy. Bensaïd was a leader with little confidence in that vocation: 'the task of leadership inspires in me a holy repulsion' (p. 317). Like his fellow USFI leaders, he 'preferred to go along with the experiment so as to draw up the balance sheet alongside comrades, rather than give lessons from a distance' (Bensaïd 2007: 150). He had gone a long way to

settling accounts with impatience and ‘a hasty Leninism’. His contribution to strategy and affirming the value of international organisation was another matter.

There was, at least in Bensaïd's lifetime, a final dawn for the LCR. In 2002, its presidential candidate Olivier Besancenot, with Arlette Laguiller of LO, polled 10 per cent of the vote, outstripping the PCF candidate, Robert Hue. Another good result in 2007 stimulated the launch of the NPA. The *dénouement* was familiar: the party foundered amidst splits and recrimination. None of this should deter those interested in the past and present of the revolutionary left from reading this rich, engrossing text. *An Impatient Life* answers the questions with which it begins: Bensaïd's odyssey was neither quixotic nor wasted, but personally fulfilling and politically valuable. Passionate, joyous, faithful to his vision of communism and the community of communists as ‘the party of flowers and nightingales’, his memoir affirms that lives lived against the grain are indispensable in ensuring that the last word has not been said. The future remains open; there is time to start again.

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[1] Recruitment was particularly complicated during the entry into the PCF. Nick himself (2002: 226-7) describes the mixture of accident and design that was sometimes involved. Jean-Michel Krivine came upon Trotskyist papers by chance in a hotel. He worked with Trotskyists in the SFIO Youth, but joined the PCF independently and through conviction. When his Trotskyist views revived around 1956, he discussed them with a PCF member who, unbeknown to Krivine, was an entryist who introduced him to PCI leader, Pierre Frank. Krivine never sought to recruit his brothers, Alain and Hubert, who became Trotskyists independently.

[2] This is also the recollection of Shepherd (2005: 229).

[3] BensaÃ's fascination with the Marranos and the metaphor of the mole is applied by Nick (2002: 223-4) to entry work in France whose iconic figure is the ex-Lambertiste, Parti Socialiste prime minister, Lionel Jospin.

[4] These perspectives produced the 1953 split in the Fourth International between the International Secretariat, led by Michel Pablo, Frank and Mandel, and the International Committee, headed by Jim Cannon's US SWP and the British and French sections of Gerry Healy and Pierre Lambert. The SWP regrouped with the International Secretariat to form the USFI in 1963.

[5] Stutje 2009 discusses Mandel the politician incisively but episodically. The Belgian's former comrades have demonstrated little desire to fundamentally reassess his, and their, political contribution as a preliminary to future directions. Achcar (1999: 12) justified his collection of essays by academics' confinement to Mandel as theorist on the grounds that, 'not everyone interested in discussing Mandel's contribution to Marxist theory is interested in assessing his militant career'.

[6] Stutje (2009: 187, 252) claims that Mandel compromised politically in order to unite the USFI – even when, as in the case of Latin America, his position 'took no account of reality'. He does not negotiate the task of demonstrating that the positions the USFI arrived at differed greatly from Mandel's personal predilections. On the contrary, from 1968 to the 1990s, USFI policy was usually congruent with its leader's adaptationism, over-optimism and ultra-leftism. If, as Stutje asserts, Mandel succumbed to the European youth over Latin America, this helped to divide, not unite, the International.

[7] For a survey of books on French Trotskyism, see Birchall (2005). See also Salles (2005).