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Interview

# The party and the period

- Features - Daniel Bensaïd archive -

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**The following interview with Daniel Bensaïd was conducted during the Ernest Mandel Symposium held in Brussels on November 19th, 2005 (see IVP n° 372, November 2005). Bensaïd outlines his views on the role of a revolutionary organisation in the present period and recalls his first encounters with Ernest Mandel. The interview appeared in the January 2006 issue of La Gauche, which is published by the POS (Belgian section of the Fourth International).**

**La Gauche:** Some people are talking about a new kind of organization, a new kind of party. What do you think about it?

**Daniel Bensaïd:** Today, a party, in its organisation and in its internal life, has to take into account the diversity of social movements. It can benefit from technological advances: a telephone conference, exchanges on the Internet, which can facilitate horizontal exchanges... That is already very important because one of the powers of bureaucracies was the monopoly of information and of the transmission of information. We are far from the vertical and military conception of the party.

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Delimitation in relation to social movements is a condition for respecting these movements and their autonomy. It is less manipulative than hiding inside them and it also respects democratic life within the political organisations and parties themselves. If we have debates, congresses, if we make the effort to produce bulletins, to exchange contradictory positions, there has to be something at stake, otherwise it is democracy without an objective.

The objective concerns major questions. We are not going fight to the death over questions of local tactics. We can have various kinds of agreements on electoral tactics, when a local branch wants to try out something that is not within the framework of the general orientation at national level.

The famous democratic centralism is often criticised, because we have an image of the way it was practised by bureaucratic organisations. But by approaching the question in this way we forget that centralism and democracy are not antinomies, but that each is the condition of the other. We conduct a democratic debate with the aim of taking decisions to which we are all committed.

I think - I don't know if we'll always avoid this - that what has particularly enabled the LCR to avoid up to now the crises that have destroyed other organisations, is that we didn't have the pretension of founding a theoretical orthodoxy. From the beginning, at the end of the 1960s, there were among us followers of Althusser and Sartre, there were Mandelites, and obviously there is no question of a congress voting on the law of value or on the Freudian unconscious. We agree on tasks, on the interpretation of events and common political tasks. There is a whole space for debate.

**A revolutionary party can be the bearer of historic memory, but that does not prevent it from missing out on things, for example on ecology. How can we act today so as to not miss out on the movement of ethnic minorities or the revolt in the suburbs?**

Every continuity can lead to a certain type of conservatism. There can also be a religion of memory. For me, political memory is necessary, and it is all the more important for the oppressed, who do not have the same institutions to

## The party and the period

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perpetuate memory as the ruling classes do. For the ruling classes, memory is passed on by a whole series of state institutions, and there is a memory of struggles, of the oppressed, of the defeated, which is carried forward by revolutionary organisations.

We have to deal with what is new, but we do not deal with it starting from nothing. The real problem is to know whether we are capable of welcoming what is new without making it fit into the repetition of what we already know. That is the challenge. When we say “we were late, we missed the rendezvous”, yes again. But precise rendezvous, even in love, are somewhat rare.

I make less use of the term vanguard, because the notion has a military connotation that can create confusion. It is rather a question of a metabolism, of an exchange between the social movements and the political struggle. It would be paradoxical to have a certain idea of the vanguard as being more “advanced” than the masses, and then reproaching it with not having invented feminism or ecology. It is after all quite normal that it should come in the first place from social processes on a mass scale, which are then expressed on the political level.

On the other hand today in France we can see very well the specific function of the party. That is why there is for me a “comeback” (of politics). We have had years of social resistance since the end of the 1980s. We almost had, given the bankruptcy of the policies of reform and of the revolutions of the 20th century, illusions in the self-sufficiency of social movements.

They are necessary, everything starts from there, but everything doesn't finish there. We can see the repeated waves of struggle in Argentina, in Bolivia. If that does not lead to a transformation at every level, including on the level of the structures of power, it becomes an endless, infernal repetition. You overthrow three governments in Bolivia, two in Argentina and afterwards you are still where you were before.

So we have to pose the problem in these terms. During the presidential campaign in France, we are going to ask the social movements for a position on feminism, we are going to ask the ecology movement for a position on energies of substitution. At a meeting in Brest, our candidate, Olivier Besancenot, is asked about his position on the size of fishing nets. He can say: “I don't know everything, I have no opinion about that”.

We are a political organisation which seeks to offer an orientation to the country as a whole, but the political organisations and the different social movements are obliged to synthesise at least the answers to the big questions. Today, that is the difficulty that an organisation like ATTAC is experiencing. It is very good that ATTAC is a unitary organisation, an organisation for popular education, but we clearly saw, when we got to the European referendum, that it was the political organisations that were the moving force of the mobilisation.

I think that we are at a turning point, the moment of transition from one cycle to another. We saw it with the German elections. We will see it again with the Italian elections, we will see what happens politically afterwards. Because resistance is a pre-condition that is necessary but not sufficient. If we want to respect the autonomy of the mass movements, then paradoxically, political organisations are necessary. Obviously, we need to have created a culture of pluralism, of respect, but at the same time, we have to firmly defend political positions.

We are also emerging from a period where the key word is consensus. To defend your convictions is not necessarily authoritarian. If you do it correctly, it is rather an expression of respect for others. If you are convinced of what you think, you try to convince others of it, because they are not any more stupid than you, they can reach the same conclusions.

By discussing seriously with others, we also run the risk of being convinced by them. That is in fact the logic of a real

## The party and the period

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debate. On that point, Ernest Mandel was not at all sectarian, but he was very convinced of and very firm about his own positions. That is better than defending sloppy ideas.

My first encounter with Ernest Mandel was here in Brussels: at a meeting during May '68. The meeting had been banned, but I had not been stopped at the border, because I arrived from the Ardennes. Cohn-Bendit had been turned back. It was already a pluralist meeting, because Cohn-Bendit was an anarchist; as for me, I can't say I was a Trotskyist, I was more a Guevarist.

The meeting was finally besieged by the police, who succeeded in getting hold of me and taking me back to the border. It was my first contact with Ernest, but it was ephemeral, because I was immediately kicked out of Belgium. Afterwards we did in fact meet on many occasions. I would like to say that the contact was quite affectionate and respectful. We never had the cult of the personality.

Perhaps we were arrogant and insufferable, because we were young cocks. At the age of 20 we thought we had started a revolution. We discussed on what was really quite an equal footing. Ernest did not entirely persuade us when he tried to convince us to join the Fourth International on the basis of a rather favourable presentation of what forces it had. Well, it wasn't very convincing, because there weren't many forces.

We were more convinced by logical reasoning: the world was - less than today - globalised, an International was necessary, there is one, it isn't what we wanted, but it is very honourable, it hasn't betrayed, it fought Stalinism, so let's go, and it will change with us. We will contribute to its transformation.

At the end of the day, Ernest underestimated the strength of logical arguments. That was unusual for him. He had great confidence in the power of ideas, but he tried to convince me on the basis of the material force of the Fourth International, which was relatively modest. But it worked all the same.