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Daniel Bensaïd

“Daniel Bensaïd fought to the end against a system that knows no bounds in brutality”

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This paper on the political writings of Daniel Bensaïd was given at the Historical Materialism conference in London in November 2015.

I would like to begin this talk by stating the obvious. Daniel Bensaïd fought to the end against a system that knows no bounds in brutality. One problem occupied his hurried writings and interventions until the end: was it still possible to break the vicious circle of domination?

This was Herbert Marcuse’s question as penned in *One-Dimensional Man*; and it haunted Bensaïd. It was not for nothing that his last and unfinished work dealt explicitly with this question. He was uneasy in the face of Marcuse’s question, because this question is unavoidable for anyone serious about radically transforming the relations of power and property.

How can the subalterns go beyond their subaltern position and overturn this asymmetry? How can resistance be tied to one or more political forces so that it is not dispersed in crumbs remaining ineffective? How is it possible to guard an engagement in radical politics without waiting for the miraculous, thus leaving no place for the pre-evental battle for hegemony? [1]

To answer these questions, Bensaïd mobilised what he called the politics of the oppressed. We get an idea of what he meant by this in the following passage:

The vital, urgent question is that of politics from below, politics for those who are excluded and cut off from the state politics of the ruling class. We have to solve the puzzle of proletarian revolutions and their repeated tragedies: how do we spurn the dust and win the prize? How can a class which is physically and morally stunted in its daily life by the involuntary servitude of forced labour transform itself into the universal subject of human emancipation? [2]

In Bensaïd’s hands, the politics of the oppressed is a strategic art. Who can solve the problem of power and politics? It is here that Lenin played a crucial role in Bensaïd’s militancy, for he saw Lenin’s strategic thought as the only way to break the eternal repetition of the commodity. Social resistance is a necessary beginning, everything starts from there, but not everything ends there. We can see repeated waves of struggle but if it doesn’t lead to a transformation of the structures of power, it becomes an endless, infernal repetition. Bensaïd’s strategic starting point was a Lenin that spoke the language of an open political crisis of the system of domination.

In this sense it is a great loss that someone who did so much to salvage the strategic dimension of radical politics passed on before the Arab uprisings and other battles that have raged across Europe against austerity. Revolutionaries today face two challenges. We must deal with political defeat. And we must deal with the *slow impatience* of building durable organisations on a strong political, social and theoretical footing. This means operating within the tragic rifts and fractures of *contretemps*. In an interview shortly before his death, he pointed to the tragic nature of the situation:

The dominant element of the era remains the historic defeat of the 1980s. We are not yet out of it. It is a race against time, which is not yet won. It is clear that at the moment the renaissance of the radical left does not compensate for the decline of the traditional left. [3]

The tragedy is not a figment of his imagination, but indeed part and parcel of a world in which the old is dying and the

new is struggling to be born. Bensaïd’s work can only be understood if we take this response as our point of departure. The problem of ‘a race against time’ over-determines the various avenues his research and writing took.

When we speak about Daniel Bensaïd, it is necessary to speak of the unorthodox nature of his Marxism. He was simultaneously open-minded and hard as nails.

This seems contradictory on the surface. But it was only an expression of his concern to fuel the profound and legitimate aspiration to freedom of thought whilst emphasizing that Marxism only has a genuine future if it succeeds in establishing an organic relationship with the revived practice of social movements. Within these two poles it was also necessary to see that Bensaïd tried to simultaneously untie and re-unite theory and practice. Theory does not develop at the same rhythm that politics does. It is carried out over the long term and does not obey the rule of urgency. It is best not to conflate the time of theory and the time of politics. Marxism is not a closed doctrine but ‘the theory of a practice that is open to several readings’. [4]

Biographically speaking his literary turn was consolidated at the end of the 1980s. This turn speaks to the respect for the time of theory and the time of politics.

On a personal note, he contracted a life-threatening illness. The time of his life was running out. He was conscious of this. Faced with this trauma, it was necessary to write and transmit a heritage, much like ‘Victor Serge’s decision when he was in hospital after surviving a bowel obstruction: to write, write, and write again, whatever the circumstances’. [5]

Politically, the far-left experienced the *triple-big bang* in these years. The left in power under Mitterrand exhausted the political cycle opened by May 68. The ideological-political field was shifted to the right as the bicentenary of the French Revolution demonstrated. Lastly, at the turn of the 1980s, the extraordinary experience of Solidarnosc could still leave some hope in the possible development of a democratic socialism, in the ‘really (in)existing socialist’ countries. But the end of the decade saw nothing of the sort, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the very idea of communism had fallen into deep into ruins.

Before his literary turn, he played a key organisational role in building the LCR and *Rouge*, the LCR’s paper, the training courses that the Fourth International hosted and took charge of relations with the Spanish, Argentinean, Mexican and Brazilian sections of the Fourth International. He penned many, many internal bulletins, and was central to a series of key programmatic documents. They are useful to look at alongside his more theoretical writings from the same time.

The organisational side of his writing played a formative role in preparation of his latter literary turn. The atmosphere of polemic necessitates a swift and clear argument. It is here that he developed a combative and clear style, which was to become useful for his latter works that evoked a much wider range of imagery, reference and metaphor.

He also played a key *strategic* role in these organisations, which would remain beyond his literary turn. He put a serious amount of effort into the elaboration of revolutionary strategy, the last of which we see in *On the Return of the Politico-Strategic Question* and *From Marx to the Third International*. But we could just think of his book *The Revolution and the Power*, or the compilation *Strategy and Party*, the *Melancholic Wager* or *In Praise of Profane Politics* to get the idea that strategy was his domain. He spoke of the necessity of a strategic hypothesis, which could regulate a horizon for daily activity so as to ensure that politics does not resign itself to the cynical administration of the market. He wrote:

The problem of politics, conceived strategically and not in a bureaucratic way, consists in grasping the junctures of crisis and favourable moments to overturn this asymmetry [between rulers and ruled – D.R.]. In order to do that, we must accept working in the contradictions and real relations of force, rather than believe, illusorily, to deny them or subtract ourselves from them. Because the subalterns (or the dominated) are not outside of the political domain of struggle and domination is never full and absolute. The outside is always inside. Freedom pierces the very heart of the arrangements of power. Practice brings experience and specific knowledge, capable of providing the arms of an alternative hegemony. And the norms of domination can be broken by an event that results neither from the necessity of the social order, nor from the action of a subject historically predestined, nor from a theological miracle, but from ordering practical political battles, engaging the clutch of the movement that tends to abolish the present state of things. [6]

His strategic writings were infused with the need to think through the spatial and temporal parameters of politics. The recent experience in Greece demonstrates the relevance of these parameters. The quality of his strategic writings is striking, where politics as a strategic art seizes favourable moments and intervenes into weak links. For Bensaïd, ‘strategy is the basis on which we gather, organize, and educate our members; it is a project to overturn bourgeois political power’. [7]

It is crucial to take stock of Bensaïd’s literary turn. Before the end of the 1980s he wrote important works. But this moment was a qualitative leap. With his writings on the French Revolution and Walter Benjamin he embarked upon a new period of writing in which the philosophical dimension of his thought deepened considerably.

We witness the appearance in his philosophic vocabulary of notions like ‘*bifurcation*’, ‘*contretemps*’, ‘*discordance of times*’, ‘*the untimely*’, the ‘*melancholic wager*’, the ‘*slow impatience*’ and ‘*broken time*’. [8]

Coming out of the short twentieth century Bensaïd insisted on the development of a new political lexicon that could give new historical and political meaning to communism. Such a lexicon could only be an immanent product of the struggle for emancipation, shaped over time. Finding new words to break the vicious circle of global capital and the absolute fetishism of the commodity meant to pass through a new cycle of experiences, through a patient attention to the lacerations of domination from where an untimely possibility can emerge, through the preparation of “this exceptional decision that belongs to no historical continuum”, which is precisely the domain of strategic reason’. [9]

The first fruits of his literary turn were his trilogy on history and memory. They formed a forceful ‘*philosophy from below*’, as he described his book on the French Revolution, which wrapped around his political reading of Walter Benjamin. No doubt the question of Messianism could perplex some and raise suspicion with others. Its essence was simple. At a moment of historical defeat we cannot passively wait for political victories in the future. We must be on the lookout like a hunter for possibility. This is an active and permanent political availability towards the eruption of historical possibility.

Bensaïd did a fascinating thing with Benjamin. He tied him to Lenin. What an unorthodox move! We witness Benjamin tied to Lenin as early as *Strategy and Party*, which was a cadre building course he gave in 1986 for the LCR. And his relation to Lenin did not change substantially from this moment.

Earlier I alluded to the fact that Lenin’s contribution to politics made the revolutionary seizure of political power thinkable. This political contribution points a way out of the ‘*eternal return*’ of defeat, a theme that features in Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*. If we speak Lenin’s language of the primacy of politics, we must recognize that politics is always the deciding factor if we wish to answer Marcuse’s question of whether it is still possible to break the vicious circle of domination. The political party is bound up with this language of politics, because the party is at the centre of a conceptual network that structures the political field: class-consciousness, the relations of force, alliances and the revolutionary crisis. It is only with Lenin that the long-term goal of political power can break into the present, so that

strategy becomes possible.

We also encounter the notion of bifurcation where it is ‘impossible to erase an episode or turn back’, for example from the Stalinist experience. We are therefore embarked in an ‘unforeseeable direction’, where history promises us neither salvation nor justice. This is why, he said, ‘we must gauge the extent of the danger’. [10] History is not linear. It is not a one-way street. We must read history as a sequence of fractures and new beginnings. It is for this reason that Bensaïd thought it fruitful to re-read Marx ‘in light of Benjamin,’ thus enlightening certain sides of Marx, like the idea of ‘a history that is completely immanent, open to a plurality of possibles,’ an open causality where determinism is fractured by the aleatory nature of politics and the breakthrough of historical novelty.

Bensaïd was also one of the rare figures to have returned seriously to the basics of theory, in a re-reading of Capital, in order to take his research into a new historical conjuncture. The ‘obscure disaster’ formed the backdrop of this work.

This research led to *Marx For Our Times*, *The Discordance of Times* and *The Smiling Spectre*. These rich works emphasized a Marxism of *possibility*, an *untimely Marx of possibility*. Bensaïd uncovered a Marx staunchly critical of historical, sociological and scientific reason. Marxism is a critical theory of social struggle. It is part of the making of history and the critical theory of its own historical development.

That the time is out of joint is the central theme of these works. Via Walter Benjamin’s critique of ‘empty and homogenous’ temporality and Gramsci’s new immanence, Bensaïd sketched out a compelling path towards Marx. Marx did not found a ‘unidirectional history’. Instead:

What we have [in Marx] is a new way of writing history, whose alphabet is suggested by the Grundrisse. Capital thus deploys a new representation of history, and a conceptual organisation of time as a social relation: cycles and turnovers, rhythms and crises, strategic moments and contretemps. The old philosophy of history thus fades into a critique of commodity fetishism on the one hand, and political subversion of the existing order on the other. [11]

It is vital that we take into consideration the many dimensions of Bensaïd’s interpretation of Marx. We could sketch a narrative as follows. Marx broke with the speculative philosophy of history. History does nothing and neither does time. This took him to the terrain of the critique of political economy, thus uncovering a terrain upon which history is made from the articulation of contretemps, which leads us to a radically different notion of time. In Marx, ‘there is a reconstruction of time that is completely immanent to social relations’. This Marxism rules out any kind of faith in the passing of time. Unfortunately, of itself, the passing of time does not iron out the problems of class politics.

It is on the basis of Marx’s new writing of history and the critique of political economy that strategic projects aim to act within a field of possibility. History is therefore open to many possibilities. Projects aim to transform certain potentialities into reality, a process that can only but take place on the threshold of great historical bifurcations that determine the terms and conditions of political choice.

In fact, an enduring contribution he made to the left was his defence of a political and strategic understanding of history, an understanding in which politics attains primacy over history, to take Walter Benjamin’s formula. History is not the night in which all cows are black. It is the crystallisation of social and political battle. To look back on history is to look for the moments when another road could have been taken on the threshold of a historical bifurcation. One can only do this through political categories, hence politics attains primacy over history. Thus he insisted on making political events intelligible from the point of view of their actors. From this vantage point, critique is destined to take strategic flight. This means that it strives to grasp the contradictions of an epoch in order to hunt for possibilities to overturn the relations of class force. The conclusion of critique is written in the political struggle itself.

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For activists coming of age under the shadow of the obscure disaster, we should look no further than Daniel Bensaïd. He was not just a Marxist for his time. He was a Marxist for the discordance of our times.

[1] This is another way of arguing for hegemony before revolutionary rupture. It is important to keep in mind that Bensaïd was in an implicit polemic with Alain Badiou’s work on the event.

[2] Bensaïd 2002, from [“Leaps! Leaps! Leaps!”](#) republished in *Lenin Reloaded* p. 149.

[3] Interview in 2009, *“It is time to define strategy”*.

[4] This is a brilliant phrase taken from *Marx For Our Times*.

[5] I owe this point to Carmen Castillo, who pointed this out in her interviews about the film *On est vivants*.

[6] His notes from *Le spectacle, stade ultime du fétichisme de la marchandise*.

[7] A greater discussion of this point can be found at *Strategy and Party*.

[8] This point I owe to Isabelle Garo.

[9] *Éloge de la politique profane*.

[10] Bensaïd’s 1990 interview on his book about Walter Benjamin.

[11] *Marx for Our Times*.