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Our history

An open history: Blanqui and Bensaïd

- Features - Daniel Bensaïd archive -

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All thinkers have their father-thinkers; none more so than Daniel Bensaïd. The figures of Charles Péguy, Walter Benjamin and Louis Auguste Blanqui recur throughout his work. In this article, Émile Carmes studies Bensaïd's deep engagement over the years with the work of Blanqui.

Lovers of the past generally love it only the better to freeze it (preserving its shadows like insects on a pinning block, whether bitter glories or fossilized nostalgia); revolutionaries, on the other hand, immerse themselves in it the better to rise back to the surface, their lungs filled with the strong breaths of yesteryear. Bensaïd was certainly one of the latter. He summoned up the dead to give courage to the living, and stimulate the blood of a tired and aching age. We are told that history has come to an end, we have only a bickering between democrats and republicans with little to choose between them. All thinkers have their father-thinkers: signposts or lighthouses, compasses or supports, lines of sight or wind roses. Bensaïd never cut himself off from these, and their sometimes ancient lights were never far away; Charles Péguy, Walter Benjamin and Auguste Blanqui accompanied him throughout his life. It is Blanqui who interests us here, the stubborn fellow who died in 1881. He can be found from the founding of the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste through to Bensaïd's final philosophical notes, shortly before he himself died in 2010.

There is a greater chance of coming across Blanqui's name by chance on a street than in the mouth of a political figure. And with good reason: the reference is embarrassing. The indefatigable fighter imprisoned for more than thirty years of his life, who coined that famous expression 'neither God nor master', the prisoner of Thiers under the Commune (that staunch republican who drowned Paris in blood, and who Zola maintained was the 'embodiment of the French spirit'), resistant to rigid doctrine (neither Marxist nor anarchist, maintaining both his communism and a 'regular anarchy'); a man sure to upset the banquets and homages that the Nation likes to render its deceased. The Republic prefers Ferry or Clemenceau, as we've been able to note. Yet this banishment does not authorize absolution: Blanqui never possessed power, but it would be unwise to swear that he would never have abused it, in the context of the 'Parisian dictatorship' that he called for; Blanqui fought without respite, but only piled up defeats – his taste (bordering on obsession) for armed vanguards and the use of force hardly prefigured a happy future, as history has attested.

What Bensaïd prized about Blanqui was clearly his inflexibility, rectitude and passion. But that is scarcely all. Reference to Blanqui's thought abounds in Bensaïd's books and articles. And if Blanqui, the Prisoner, was not strictly speaking a theorist, rather a man of action, the street thinks, and Blanqui left radical socialism grist for the mill. Three main lines stand out: Bensaïd draws from 'Blanquism' (a term which I use here for Blanqui's own work, rather than a movement formed by his disciples) his rejection of the cult of progress and historical determinism, his contempt for utopias, and his propensity to melancholy.

A socialism without Progress

Without this capital 'P' the word has a good reputation – who would be against it? Common sense even believes that progress cannot be stopped. On the other hand, 'progress' gives rise to conflict when made into a concept or an ideology. This is certainly heard regularly from the counter-revolutionary ranks, from Joseph de Maistre through to Éric Zemmour; but also, and this is often ignored, from the socialist and/or critical camp: from radical ecologists (Ariès, Ellul, Charbonneau, Rabhi) to fierce anticapitalists such as Debord, Michéa and Pasolini, by way of Édgar Morin, Albert Camus or Roland Barthes. Unless the world is seen as divided into two blocs, white against black, each eyeing the other from their respective trench and despising all shades in between (in the field of medicine this is

known as achromatia, a pathological condition): 'progressive', 'conservative', 'reactionary', 'modern' and 'anti-modern' do not always enlighten, or at least not sufficiently, the issues and forces involved. Fetish words more useful for proscribing than for thinking. Let us rather use them cautiously, examining them at close quarters, with the eyeglass rather than with mere approximation: there is progress that demeans as well as progress that we cannot do without, conservation that is salutary as well as conservation to be rejected: judging things case by case may have less charm, but it has its merits.

In 2006, Bensaïd wrote, together with the philosopher Michael Löwy, an article 'August Blanqui, heretical communist'. The two authors saw the Prisoner as an avatar of the 'third left'. If the first left was statist and rigid, and the second left reformist and democratic, this third and more radical left moves forward outside established institutions. It rejects parliamentary charades, napkin rings on ministerial tables, compromises and deals that are a bad fit, and is content neither with crumbs nor with scraps. It is not a structured movement run by salaried executives, but, they wrote, a 'constellation': the areopagus of restive souls, the bric-a-brac of shooting stars – the names are not many, but they include Sorel, Péguy, Lazare, and indeed Blanqui. Bensaïd unreservedly embraced him in the Marxist tradition: for him the question was not to supersede this but to enrich it, to embellish it, to fertilize it with heterodox and misunderstood forces, more used to umbrage than to homilies. Bensaïd and Löwy maintained that Blanqui bore on his shoulders – along with his uncertain brothers, hobbling along on this third way – this anti-progressive tendency of socialism. And they confessed: 'His image constantly obsesses us.'

“The years pass but promise nothing”

Auguste Blanqui was a staunch opponent of positivism (which divides humanity into stages, from the irrationality of early times to the summit of science), of scientism (science as unsurpassable horizon), of determinism and the supposedly linear character of historical becoming. No, he insisted, the future does not bear in it the elevation of the species. Is the past just a bitter memory, and the present a springboard for a future finally freed from ancient evils? Stuff and nonsense! Time does not climb the steps of evolution, from the animal sod to the radiant cities of Free Man. “The years pass but promise nothing,” Blanqui wrote. “I am not one of those who claim that progress happens of itself, that humanity cannot go backward.” [1]

There is good reason why Bensaïd cites the sulphurous Sorel. His famous essay *The Illusions of Progress* appeared in 1908. The French thinker, champion of revolutionary syndicalism, traced here, page after page, the origins of the ‘dogma’ of progress, which he seen as ‘a bourgeois doctrine’.[2] Four decades later, the former Trotskyist Dwight Macdonald, converted to libertarianism by the crimes of Trotsky (towards which, we must say, Daniel Bensaïd showed himself rather indulgent) published *The Root Is Man*(translated into French as *Le Socialisme sans le Progrès*), in which we may read:

He who makes so free with the charge of ‘metaphysician’ and ‘Utopian’ is actually the arch-metaphysician of our time, quite prepared to sacrifice indefinitely and on the most grandiose scale the real, material, concrete interests of living human beings on the altar of a metaphysical concept of Progress which he assumes (again metaphysically) is the ‘real essence’ of history. [3]

And Camus repeats in *The Rebel* how the present is sacrificed in favour of a hypothetical future, and how ‘Progress, the future of science, the cult of technology and of production are bourgeois myths’. [4]

Bensaïd's entire work is suffused with the idea that History is not a straight line obeying any kind of design (Aristotle's telos, St Augustine's City of God, Comte's positive age, Hegel's rational process, the final and universal revolution, etc.). It does not unfold mechanically, and has no conclusion. The Marxist militant, drawing on Blanqui,

Benjamin and Marx (Bensaïd radically rejected the widespread idea that Marx was a dyed-in-the-wool champion of historical-economic determinism) left the door open to chance and hitches, the unforeseen and the random. For Blanqui, the world laughed at vain and arrogant laws that believed they could describe it – and still worse, circumscribe it scientifically. The world spins and rushes forward, making a mockery of schemas and prospectuses. A capricious globe, a naughty child walking against the consecrated wind. Every moment bears its weight of doubts and possibilities, attempts and maybes. And if nothing is written in advance, nothing is fatal; a fact is never accomplished, except in the minds of the victors who declare it so. In his essay *Marx, mode d'emploi*, Bensaïd quotes a sentence that seems a favourite of his, since it recurs several times in his work: ‘History does nothing.’ [5] A remark of Engels. People alone make and shape history, in the endless everyday struggle. And if revolutionary explosions do not fall from the skies, they remain none the less unexpected, unrehearsed and untimely (we know the particular use Nietzsche made of this last adjective, again one that Bensaïd often employed). Whoever predicts is lost: action will always have the final word.

In his memoir, *An Impatient Life*, Bensaïd commends Blanqui's view of positivism as ‘an execrable doctrine of historical fatalism’. [6] ‘Blanqui's strategic “bifurcations” made it possible to glimpse a different relationship between history and event, rule and exception’, infernal repetition of catastrophe and messianic eruption of the possible.’ [7] And again, nothing ‘authorizes us to let ourselves be lulled to sleep by lullabies of progress, as if, like in the operettas of the Belle Époque, everything would be sorted out in a final apotheosis of spangles and songs’. [*Ibid.*, p. 323.] He hammers the same point home in his book on Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Un nouveau théologien*, summoning up Blanqui once more: no, definitively no, History is not at an end and the Revolution not its final point, its letter Z, its long-awaited terminus. There is no definitive mechanism, no paralysing logic, but at any time possible and conceivable openings, breaches and breakthroughs to be seized or attempted, cracks in the great walls of order. We are not held back by lead-soled shoes, by an unrelenting fate. The term ‘bifurcation’, borrowed from Blanqui, recurs time and again in Bensaïd's writing: change, deviation – unquestionably, ‘everything is still possible’. [8]

In his uncompleted article ‘Walter Benjamin, thèses sur le concept d'histoire’, Bensaïd returns to the critique of positivism. The same contention, differently expressed. He develops here the idea that for Blanqui (and Benjamin), the past is like an oil deposit, a buried magma ready to surge up. He speaks of a ‘category of Resurrection/Reawakening’, a past that can, may and must shake off its dust to arm the present dreaming of a near future. History is uneven, with ridges and furrows, leaps forward and back; it swells up, rushes, shakes itself, then retracts, takes its distance, seeks a foothold, makes attempts and falters, then starts again before collapsing or winning a round. The present, for Bensaïd, must reawaken the ‘unexplored potentialities’ of the past. Here the Trotskyist meets the republican Régis Debray, with whom he crossed swords in good spirit more than once: memory is revolutionary, and the fantasy of a white sheet, a clean break, is a game for only songs or tyrants. For Blanqui, Bensaïd declared in 2007, ‘the past remains a battlefield on which the judgment of arrows, the fate of arms, and the fait accompli prove nothing as to the divide between just and unjust’: in other words, it makes possible an ethical approach to socialism, rather than just a strategic one. [9] (In his text ‘La dialectique et l'action’, published in *Pour et contre Marx*, Édgar Morin emphasizes this point: when there is only determinism, there is ‘no longer evil, no longer good, no longer ethics or the power of action’.)

On the death of Bensaïd, Michael Löwy maintained: ‘Among all Daniel Bensaïd's contributions to the renewal of Marxism, the most important, to my mind, is his radical rupture with the scientism, positivism and determinism that have so profoundly marked “orthodox” Marxism, particularly in France.’ [10]

Revolution is not a utopia

Etymologically, the word ‘utopia’, coined by Thomas More in 1516, means ‘nowhere’. It divides the ranks of oppositionists, and has done for some time. If, in our own day, Löwy or Autain celebrate its emancipatory power, its

potentialities and the hope that it bears, others, like Bensaïd, refused to include it in their critical lexicon. The social struggle is a matter of short terms, times when it is possible to get a grip. Bensaïd preferred buildings here and now to castles in Spain, improvisation to waiting for the comet. To the dreamers who erect ideal societies, the weavers of chimeras and peddlers of mirages, he opposed reality and its implacable humility:

Here on earth, I am a Blanquist to the tips of my fingers: it is tiring to look too far ahead. [...] We are here, we have problems to resolve, and we shall not resolve them all. We live in an age in which what is called barbarism has taken several strides forward; let us try and tackle that. What will humanity be tomorrow? Will there be chronic dissatisfaction? Will there be other ways of being unhappy? Perhaps. Even very probably. But in the end, this is a line of questioning with no answer. I remain down to earth, if it is down to earth to wonder what to do in the next two centuries to avoid catastrophe! [11]

Utopians of personal change

Engels, in his day, had already made a distinction between 'utopian' and 'scientific' socialism. In a pamphlet that is now rather dated, he scoffed at the former (far too imaginative, fantastical and phantasmagoric) and praised the second: the materialist socialism of his faithful friend Marx. One hundred and twenty-seven years later, Bensaïd opposed utopias (ecological, libertarian, petty-bourgeois or liberal) with 'strategic reason': [12] the old utopias – those of Owen, Saint Simon, Fourier and the like (precisely those that annoyed Engels) – at least had in their favour, Bensaïd argued, that they aspired to change the world; today's utopians think only in terms of fragments and crumbs, bits of string and second-best – they want change for 'themselves', or 'at their own modest level', they prefer small alternative workshops and secessionist micro-resistance to the overthrow of structures and institutions, in other words, the hard kernel of the political. Our age of 'little treatises and little mouthfuls of beer', in his ironic expression. [13]

Elsewhere, Bensaïd adds:

Marx, Blanqui, Sorel, defied the manufacturers of too-perfect utopias, ever ready to sell off their plans for the future city piecemeal, on the black market of accommodating reforms. Stripped of its chimeras, freed from its spatial assignation in the inaccessible elsewhere of a perfect city, strategic utopia on the contrary acts in the miseries of the present. Its shoots are reborn at ground level, in the basic defence of thwarted rights, the rights to work, housing, hospitality, health, knowledge. [14]

Communism, Blanqui adjured in 1870, 'must beware of the look of utopia and yet never cut itself off from politics'. [15] One of his biographers, Maurice Dommanget, wrote that Blanqui displayed a 'healthy realism' in refusing to anticipate the future more than necessary: will and organization were worth far more in his eyes than 'the dreamers of social paradises'. [16]

Daniel Bensaïd preferred the idea of secular messianism to that of utopia. What does that mean? 'The awakened inquiet of the possible', he explained in his article 'Obscures lumières d'août'. The messianism he promoted was not one of apathetic expectation, religious hope, the desire for a saving and redeeming Messiah: his messianism was metaphorical, secularized. He suggests, following Walter Benjamin, that we must keep watch, be ever ready 'for the eruption of the possible'. [17] He develops this theme in his book *Éloge de la résistance à l'air du temps*: in the wake of Blanqui and Sorel, he asserts once again his hostility to utopianism, and maintains, with an eye to the Jewish tradition, that the Messiah may arrive at any moment, that he may 'slip through the narrow gate of the unexpected event'. [18] In ordinary language, an uprising leading to a revolutionary rupture may happen, but nothing ever presages it, and if it happens (Bensaïd's whole meaning is crystallized in this subordinate clause) we

must be there and, above all, be aware in advance of its possibility, though without any certainty. The Revolution is not a destiny or an unrealizable dream; it is a possibility, a breach, which is born only from actions.

In praise of melancholy

From dandies to poets lost in their spleen, phrasemongers to aesthetes languishing in their egos, melancholy is generally associated with the gatekeepers of obscurity, the guardians of immobility. Yet there is also a revolutionary tradition stamped with melancholy: in 1992, Sayre and Löwy published a penetrating study, *Révolte et mélancolie*, on this rather subterranean current. The authors rejected the idea that romanticism is inevitably counter-revolutionary, and praised its anticapitalist force: romanticism defies modernity and all that this carries with it – calculation, disenchantment, the hegemony of rationalism and the bureaucratic stranglehold. ‘The memory of the past serves as a weapon in the struggle for the future,’ [19] they argue, going on to cast light on the upholders of this kind of revolutionary melancholy: Marx, Engels, Lukács, Rosa Luxemburg, Péguy and Ernst Bloch. Bensaïd, however, makes a further precision: the melancholy he celebrates is classical and not romantic. The former is not given to emphasis or pathos, not burdened by violins or tears beneath the moon: it is, to cite Péguy’s *Clio*, ‘more healthy’. In *Le Pari mélancolique*, Bensaïd depicts it as lucid, frugal, controlled. It does not pour its heart out, even while maintaining the pessimism that pervades it. It risks, wagers. Blanqui, like Saint-Just before him, was one of its best representatives, he believes.

The sociologist Philippe Corcuff, a friend of Bensaïd incidentally, relates in one of his texts how melancholy, as a theme, runs through the entire political and philosophical work of the thinker of the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste. It is a melancholy of fear and trembling, of eyes grazed by defeats, of bodies on the cobblestones, hope at the end of the road, exhausted and bare-chested, the melancholy of flags now flying only over coffins, the melancholy of the cold breath of the forgotten, the defeated, the lost, that of common graves faced by the satisfied smile of the bastards. ‘That sadness, in 1939, was Germany, Spain (the sadness of the gnawing and alcoholic culpability of Geoffrey Firmin in Malcolm Lowry’s *Lunar Caustic*). It was the unmistakable imminence of war.’ [20] It was the sadness – to paraphrase Nietzsche – of the eternal recurrence of defeat that the Prisoner had experienced (1830, 1839, 1848, 1871...), that of revolutions betrayed – and here Bensaïd links Blanqui to Trotsky – that of Che Guevara, fully aware of the difficulties but fighting none the less. ‘Melancholy for me is not an alibi for inaction, but on the contrary a lever for action without illusion (not to be confused with passion), a commitment that seeks not to tell itself stories, not to rely on faith.’ [21]

That, Corcuff made clear in the collection of his friend’s writings that he edited, *Une radicalité joyeusement mélancolique*, in no way contradicted Bensaïd’s ‘radiant Marxism of flesh and blood’: [22] good humour and simple pleasures were the theorist’s everyday fare (characteristics it would be hard to apply to Blanqui, whom Vallès, in *L’Insurgé*, described as a cold mathematician of rebellion).

A marginal, an outsider, a heretic. [23] That is how Bensaïd liked to describe a man whom so many others covered with insults (Larousse called him a demagogue and fanatic, Victor Hugo a hateful and violent man incapable of love; for Tocqueville he was nasty, dirty and disgusting, and the historian Jeannine Verdès-Leroux sees in him a forerunner of the Baader-Meinhof gang. [24] Bensaïd saluted Blanqui’s virtues without ignoring – seen through his particular political prism – Blanqui’s weaknesses and faults. ‘At the heart of Blanqui’s writing,’ he maintained, ‘we find an unstable balance between authoritarian illuminism and a profound libertarian sensibility.’ [25] A genuine tension in the life and work of the imprisoned revolutionary. (In his essay *L’Émancipation des travailleurs*, Mathieu Léonard offers a sharper and less anarchistic description of the Prisoner.) If his authoritarian side is manifest and open to view, the other, libertarian side is heard in his praise for a plurality of doctrines and currents within socialism, even the necessity of these (Blanqui deplored the battles between Proudhonists and Marxists), and by his rejection of institutionalized Terror. Blood was not his language: he proposed exile for traitors and

counter-revolutionaries, rather than Robespierre's guillotine. [26]

We can end on a formula of Blanqui's that Bensaïd particularly prized, as it best synthesizes his own attachment to the memory of his predecessor: 'The call is always open.'

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[1] Quoted by A. Decaux, *Blanqui l'insurgé*, Perrin, 1976, p. 484.

[2] G. Sorel, *The Illusions of Progress*, University of California Press, 1969, p. 14.

[3] Dwight Macdonald, *The Root is Man, Autonomedia*, 1994, p. 120.

[4] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, New York: Vintage, 1992.

[5] Quoted by Daniel Bensaïd, *Marx, mode d'emploi*, Zones, 2009, p. 74.

[6] Daniel Bensaïd, *An Impatient Life*, Verso: 2010, p. 66.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 287.

[8] Daniel Bensaïd, *Tout est encore possible*, La Fabrique, 2010.

[9] Daniel Bensaïd, 'Temps historiques et rythmes politiques'.

[10] Michael Löwy, 'Daniel Bensaïd, communiste hérétique'.

[11] Interview, 'Pensée stratégique et utopie', *Mortibus* no. 1, spring 2006.

[12] Daniel Bensaïd, 'Socialismes utopiques d'hier et d'aujourd'hui', 2007.

[13] Daniel Bensaïd, *Éloge de la résistance À l'air du temps*, Textuel, 1999, p. 60.

[14] Daniel Bensaïd, 'L'arc tendu de l'attente', *Le Monde de l'éducation, de la culture et de la formation*, 1997.

[15] Auguste Blanqui, *Maintenant il faut des armes*, La Fabrique, 2008, p. 216.

[16] Maurice Dommanget, *Blanqui*, EDI, 1970, p. 75.

[17] Interview, 'À propos de Walter Benjamin, sentinelle messianique', *Petit Périgord rouge*, 1990.

[18] Éloge de la résistance À l'air du temps, p. 59.

[19] Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy, *Révolte et mélancolie*, Payot, 2011, p. 39.

[20] Daniel Bensaïd, 'Walter Benjamin, thèses sur le concept d'histoire'.

[21] Interview, 'La Politique et l'histoire', *Libre choix*, Brussels, February 1998.

[22] Daniel Bensaïd, *Une radicalité joyeusement mélancolique*, ed. Philippe Corcuff, Textuel, 2010, p. 14.

[23] 'Visages et mirages du marxisme', *Quatrième internationale* no. 46, September-November 1993.

[24] Cf. Maurice Paz, *Un révolutionnaire professionnel. Auguste Blanqui*, Fayard, 1984.

[25] Daniel Bensaïd and Michael Löwy, 'Auguste Blanqui, communiste hérétique', 2006.

[26] On this subject, cf. Blanqui's 'Notes inédites', published in *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 28, 1928.