

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3467>



Book Reviews

Astonished by the present – The impatient life of Daniel Bensaïd

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Monday 28 July 2014

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Let us start, like Dante, in the middle. At age twenty-two, Daniel Bensaïd (1946–2010), a French-Algerian-Jewish philosophy student, vaulted eagerly onto the world stage of the international youth radicalization of 1968. His political stardom came by way of a leading role in the actions igniting the largest general strike in the history of France. At the suburban campus of the University of Paris at Nanterre, Bensaïd joined with his German-Jewish classmate Danny (“The Red”) Cohn-Bendit (b. 1945) to form the March 22nd Movement. This was a surprising partnership of anarchists, situationists, Trotskyists, and Maoists who seized an administrative building to proclaim demands addressing class discrimination and bureaucracy in the educational system. Bold for its time, the Nanterre occupation is customarily credited with detonating the chain of student strikes and protests climaxing in the sensational actions in Paris six weeks later: The May 6 demonstration of 20,000 at the Sorbonne and the May 10–11 all-night battle on the Left Bank.

In both instances, the police (“les flics”) attacked and were famously beaten back by a barrage of paving stones heaved from behind barricades by students and faculty who shouted, “Beneath the cobblestones, the beach!” Then came rebellions in the high schools and the May 13 general strike. The latter, proclaimed somewhat reluctantly by the Communist Party-led General Confederation of Labor (CGT), brought out over a million people who marched militantly through the streets of Paris waving red flags. A nervous Prime Minister Georges Pompidou announced major economic and political concessions, yet the protests continued to snowball far beyond the constraints of the traditional trade unions. Eventually ten million workers, two-thirds of the French workforce, were engaged in strikes and factory occupations, and joined by over four hundred popular action committees of French citizens.

Bensaïd, routinely identified as a firebrand agitator in the press, was concurrently a central leader of a new organization called Revolutionary Communist Youth (JCR). Launched in 1967 by a thousand Trotskyist-Guevarists expelled from the French Communist Party (PCF) the year before, the JCR’s original focus had been on the US war in Vietnam. Now, along with his comrades Alain Krivine (b. 1941) and Henri Weber (b. 1944), Bensaïd led the JCR through the intoxicating spring months of 1968 to double its membership, becoming the largest and most effective Far Left organization among young people. By integrating itself into the mass movement, the JCR could pose political problems and make evident the need for organization, starting with its provision of marshals in all the key demonstrations. In mid-June, the JCR found itself at the top of the list of organizations outlawed by the teetering government of Charles de Gaulle.

A few months later, the revolutionary moment having passed, Bensaïd and Weber were hiding from the police in the apartment of French writer and film director Marguerite Duras (1914–96). There they coauthored *Mai 1968: une répétition générale* (1968), the classic argument that the recent events constituted a “dress rehearsal” for a social transformation yet to come. Although operating underground, the former JCR was now publishing the weekly newspaper *Rouge*. In April 1969 it fused with the Internationalist Communist Party (PCI), a historic Trotskyist organization, to call itself the Communist League (LC). Krivine, at this point conscripted into the infantry, was selected as the LC electoral candidate for president of France. After many more battles, arrests, and yet another government ban, the LC reestablished itself in November 1974 as the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) with 5,000 members, 47 percent of whom were between twenty-one and twenty-six years of age. A voluntary process of “proletarianization” had been under way, so that 61 percent were classified as wageworkers and 12 percent as blue-collar workers. In March 1976, *Rouge* went daily with a staff of eighty, selling 12,000 copies per issue.

An autobiographical account of this dramatic episode in French history would seem to merit a weighty tome in itself. Curiously, in Bensaïd’s large-hearted and essential 2004 memoir, *An Impatient Life*, now available in an inspired

English translation by David Fernbach, the events of 1968 are mainly condensed into a ten-page chapter. And Bensaïd inaugurates this section with a disconcerting rebuke: “Enough harking back to 1968, enough generational effusions, memories of youthful companionship at the finest age of life. Too much has been said and too much made. . . . We were not born to political action in '68, and we are not hostages of this imaginary birth” (65).

The unrepentant revolutionary Bensaïd, weary of complacent and careerist veterans marketing their long-ago heroics for publicity and nostalgia, knows the extent to which 1968 has been hijacked. He shrewdly elects to bookend his own rendition of the May events with a more capacious and complex narrative: “a story of an apprenticeship” “an apprenticeship in patience and slowness” “however incomplete” (11).

As befits a memoir, there is a loose chronological arrangement to this 350-page volume. The early chapters treat Bensaïd's family background, childhood, and radicalization; the latter his mature political thinking and intimations of mortality. Bensaïd crafts each chapter with a painter's hand, stroke by stroke, offering us musings, vignettes, and reflections that are intricately argued, sometimes speculative, and always subtly insightful. Nonetheless, like the Renaissance essayist Michel de Montaigne, Bensaïd prefers to tackle philosophical and political questions both big and small in no compulsory order, and each section has an unfinished or unfinishable quality, often alive with potentially contradictory meanings. The effect is as if to say that the story isn't over when it's over, and it is really up to the readers to put the next touches on this work in progress through our own lives. His intelligently transgressive prose is at times a little conflicted about its focus, but in the end Bensaïd turns out to be one of those rare authors who delivers even more than he promises. What's a poor reviewer to do?

Tracking a selection of his leitmotifs may be the most rewarding approach. One thread, from which all of us can learn, is how common it is to be fashioned by forces not fully grasped. Bensaïd's childhood and adolescence in the southern town of Toulouse were rooted firmly in the postwar period, haunted by the Holocaust and antifascist resistance. But only in chapter 18 does he forthrightly declare: “I grew up with these ghosts, the shadow of the Judeocide on my heels” (271). For starters, his life had been indelibly marked by his Sephardic father's personal history. Haim Bensaïd, the one-time amateur welterweight boxing champion of North Africa, opened a bistro bar in Vichy France, only to face repeated internment and see his brothers deported and killed. The family friends and neighbors of Bensaïd's schooldays included Jews from Central and Eastern Europe who fought in the International Brigades in Spain, and then in the foreign workers section of the Partisan Irregular Riflemen (the military branch of the PCF during the Resistance) in France. Their actions were in defense of Jews, but not only Jews, and never limited to a framework of Jewish nationalism. Jewish more by history than by theology, their opposition to anti-Semitism was of a piece of an opposition to all forms of racism, colonialism, and class oppression.

It is not surprising, then, that Bensaïd's inherited “lack of belonging” (273) to either the Jewish establishment or the Christian majority, and a fidelity to his own subjugated forerunners, would lead to an embrace of communism at the time of the February 1962 police murders of nine PCF and CGT members at the Charonne Metro station. The assassinations occurred during a follow-up protest to the October 1961 Paris Massacre when as many as two hundred partisans of the Algerian National Liberation Front were similarly gunned down. From then on we discover with the young Bensaïd the thrill of an intellectual and political awakening as he assembles his own “elective genealogy” from “non-Jewish Jews” such as Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky, Abram Leon, and Isaac Deutscher. A gallery of splendid ancestors, yet we can also see them as a constellation growing out of a hidden community of shared values.

Always marked by an interest in the reexamination of earlier traditions by taking old things apart and putting them back together in new ways, Bensaïd increasingly challenged the official Communist movement for its uninspired response to anticolonial movements in North Africa, Cuba, Vietnam, and the domestic class struggle in France. After his transit to Paris in 1966, he and his new comrades found themselves all the more to be “young people in a hurry. . . . History breathing down their necks” (18). Breaking definitively with a bureaucratic and tedious Stalinism, they forged a New Left/Old Left hybrid deferential to revolutionary history but full of a youthful exuberance and a

willingness to discover suppressed traditions of dissent because they could no longer wait: “We wanted a world in which the right to existence prevailed over the right to property, popular power over commodity dictatorship, the logic of needs over that of profits, public good over private egoism” (77). A decade later, Bensaïd again evoked his generation’s fervor against capitalism: “We had set out to close the parentheses of their great theater of cruelty” (286).

This impatient new movement, he ultimately came to realize, was itself disproportionately led by “sons and daughters of survivors” (276), women and men with names like Recanati, Harrari, Rubinstein, Landau, Baruch, Meyer, Rosenfeld, Blum, Dreyfus, Tauber, Cohen, Samary, Krivine and Weber. Similar to Bensaïd, they were Jews out of fidelity to the persecuted and in defiance of persecutors; Jews who chose their own struggle as internationalists “rather than be subject to the fatalism of origins” (277). Their intransigence against anti-Semitism led to resolute anti-Zionism, especially at the time of the 1967 war in the Middle East. They were deeply convinced that the two positions were compatible: “Refusing to accept the pariah status of the Palestinians essentially meant remaining faithful to the history of Jewish suffering” (277). Any notion of allowing the Judeocide to serve as an alibi for the politics of colonization, conquest, or apartheid was anathema, although the neo-Trotskyists also differentiated themselves from Maoist simplicities by maintaining that the de-Zionization of the Israeli state must be the outcome of a Jewish-Arab political movement from within (281).

A second leitmotif governs the latter part of the book, one critical with the benefit of hindsight of the “hasty Leninism” (109) that disoriented Bensaïd and his comrades throughout the 1970s. The JCR and its successors, in their embrace of the revolutionary movements of Latin America, Vietnam, and Palestine, tilted excessively and unwisely toward a strategy of armed struggle. Even in France, they pushed the envelope when it came to militant confrontation. In a chapter called “Restrained Violence,” Bensaïd reflects on the movement’s service d’ordre (stewards or monitors responsible for maintaining order), which he also links to the tradition of Jewish armed resistance. “Our war had not yet ended” (277), he explains. While there was a sense of humor, and even a “Hollywood imagination” (157) in some of its actions (LCR members launched a paintball directly at the official car of South Vietnamese dictator Ky), others were riskier as they were designed to be “exemplary actions” (178) that could have gotten dangerously out of control.

Given that Bensaïd is anything but dull, it is a shame that the enthralling chapter detailing the role played by the French Trotskyists in relation to the Argentinian guerrillas in the 1970s (“Crying for Argentina”) is a willfully frantic narrative that may be hard to follow. And the succeeding material on the Workers Party (PT) of Brazil (“E agora, Zé?”) may also be baffling to those lacking a background. In the case of the former, the LCR supported a well-meaning but delusional Guevarist voluntarism, in which armed struggle became the test of revolutionary seriousness. Eventually, Bensaïd and his comrades came to the realization that “we were running headlong into an open grave” (134). Subsequently, the transformation of the Brazilian PT “into a transmission belt for government policy” (228) by 2003, was a blow of a different kind—the profound realization that the necessary and the possible were no longer conjoined.

Faced with the collapse of former perspectives, the confident certainties of initial commitments are put to a severe test. The breakdown of so many projects emanating from 1968 induced many on the Left to make their way back to the folds of once-abandoned careers in the professions, and to rotate from internationalism to identitarian communities that were often religious and ethnic. Bensaïd, in contrast, turned to the ideas of political heretics in whose works and lives the filaments of a different trajectory seemed possible. As the twentieth century ended, the thought of the German-Jewish Marxist philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin arrived to arouse Bensaïd from what he now saw as a long dogmatic sleep in a world of anachronistic spatial frames and teleological narratives rooted in the Enlightenment.

This “Proustian awakening” (290) points to the third and final leitmotif worth pursuing here, the one leading to Bensaïd’s advent as prominent public intellectual and the main theoretician of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA)

launched at the initiative of the LCR in early 2009. According to the foreword by Tariq Ali, Bensaïd contracted HIV from “an imprudent sexual encounter” around 1994, but retained his remarkable exuberance, grace, and appeal during the following sixteen years that he “was dependent on drugs to keep him going” (xi). Moreover, as professor of philosophy at the University of Paris VIII, Bensaïd, now enthused by Benjamin above all, would in the end author more than thirty books. The most vital came after 1989, including a startling Marxist study of Joan of Arc, *Jean de guerre lasse* (1991); an argument for emancipatory action derived from the French Christian philosopher-mathematician Blaise Pascal and the Romanian Jewish philosopher-sociologist Lucien Goldman, *Le pari mélancolique* (1997); and the widely admired *Marx l'intempestif : Grandeurs et misères d'une aventure critique* (1996), translated into English for Verso as *Marx for Our Times: Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique* (2002).

It was from efforts to navigate the dense and troubled waters of an opaque present following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 that Bensaïd came to the conclusion that “only a beginning is able to hear other beginnings” (290). He becomes committed to an activist scholarship founded on the “complicit comparison of intellectual trajectories that mixed mutual attraction and genuine divergence, not to mention misunderstandings and miscognitions” (3). His view was that one might be more faithful to the revolutionary tradition “in infidelity than in the bigotry of memorial. For fidelity can itself become a banally conservative routine, preventing one from being astonished by the present” (3). Thus, by 2001, when he decided to defend his habilitation (a post-PhD requirement involving an independently prepared second thesis at a more advanced level) to conduct research in philosophy, he was fully committed to fomenting a revolutionary movement seeking new resources to confront the rationalism of the Enlightenment with other paths of knowledge.

How else but to describe the writings that followed except as a palimpsest of echoes, a version of interfaith dialogue in which he borrows from the classics to cite scraps of thought and anecdotes? The result was twenty-five years of a centrifugal spray of creativity, an exuberant lyricism comfortable with contradictions and the coexistence of antithetical elements. The library in Bensaïd's head is on display in *An Impatient Life*, revealing him to be the very opposite of those political propagandists who write in a way that doesn't ask you to think too hard. Anyone purchasing *An Impatient Life* with the hope of simply hearing the “correct line” on the nature of the period or instructions about what every true revolutionary should do next needs to ask for his or her money back. Bensaïd is mainly out to remind us of “the fearsome duty of deciding fallibly” (287).

Bensaïd's resplendent gifts include a genius for aphorisms, locating them in the work of others as well as creating his own. From the French poet Paul Valéry, he quotes: “What is a theory for, if not to preserve the practice of the possible?” (293). From Friedrich Engels: “History does nothing” (296). The nineteenth-century French socialist Louis August Blanqui, the Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, the French social theorist Michel Foucault, and the Polish-British novelist Joseph Conrad are among the many from whom he extracts literary passages to illuminate political discussion. Although there is an extraordinary breadth of reading, and a quality of thought that can be truly astonishing, no one should be intimidated by all the erudition in *An Impatient Life*. French literary and philosophical analysis has a reputation for convoluted abstraction and opaque comment, but Bensaïd usually takes us around the edges of this dense forest of scholarship. Moreover, his references are at the more lyrical end of the spectrum, and the verdict is always open to appeal.

Bensaïd's own phrases are unforgettable: “As long as one claims that right to start again, the last word is never said” (11); “One always recommences from the middle” (11); “a new struggle against the shame there would have been in doing nothing” (277); “The hasty Marrano is patient” (284); “An escape toward the excluded third option” (284); “The dialectic of faithless fidelity” (284); “the calm fury of Spinoza” (286); “only the forks in the road still seemed open for hope” (287); “temptation . . . of a fetishism of the event without historicity” (287); “Rediscover the categories” (287); “love lives. . . in the present tense” (288); and “No longer await the Messiah. It is we who are awaited” (288). Such lyric prose-poetry, which after reflection become watermarks placing a unique brand on his work, inspire the reader to think about and link material and immaterial things. For most of *An Impatient Life*, there is a near perfect symmetry of this style and its subject, a deft balance between scholarly discourse and the personal

observation of an insider. If one's object is to break through the vicious circle of infernal repetition that has marred revolutionary efforts of the past, one can do no better than follow after Bensaÿd as he kicks open so many doors of perception, slicing through analytical tangles to read the essence.

This is not to suggest that Bensaÿd is an unproblematic secular prophet of what he sees as strategic and conditional hypotheses. In the world of his writings it seems as if anything can be compared to anything else, bringing the danger that what we learn is so multifarious as to be self-cancelling. One of his aims is to return to the question of communism via the byways of heresies. Nevertheless, what we are told about the rise and fall of the Left's most agonizing experience (the Soviet Union) is beautifully written but airy: "the proclaimed death of communism was in reality no more than the second death of a corpse that had long decomposed . . . what if the bureaucratic parasite only disappeared after having gnawed to the bone the body it had laboriously destroyed" (289)?

By Bensaÿd's own account, his Marxism is an "archipelago of controversies, conjectures, refutations, and experiences" (301). This may be appropriate for a world that is fragmented at the same time that it is globalized, requiring revolutionaries who more than ever must engage in "dialogue with renewed practices of social movements" (300), and where authors prove their dynamism by the richness of the controversies they provoke. In normal Marxist discourse every argument quickly finds a counterargument. But such debate can go on forever, while, behind the curtain of empire, horrors lurk.

The drawback is that there is no theory that cannot be further subdivided, no concept not apt to generate a succession of further variants; to read Bensaÿd puts us into a prolonged chess match whose endgame might be infinitely deferred. In this primordial resolve to push forward to see the story played out to its last exhausted measures, one might even be reminded of the legendary page proofs of French novelist Honoré de Balzac, on which the printed text was very nearly obscured by his rewritings. With Bensaÿd we are never reading a finished work, but merely the latest form of something he would be reworking still, were it not for the limitations of mortality that resulted in his death from cancer four years ago.

There is also the matter of autobiography versus biography. Only by couching radicalism in human terms can we hope to approximate the essence of its legacies, and there are few revolutionaries who have confronted their own vertiginous complexities in the manner of Bensaÿd. Too often they write memoirs that trample over the twists and turns of frequently capricious political evolutions, requiring the later correction of less partisan researchers. Even if facts are remembered accurately, the telling of one's own story can be a way of foregrounding certain events while smudging over others. Often the memoirist is not even aware of the manner in which dangerous self-delusions are mixed up with our altruistic dreams, or our boasted assertion of independence is entangled with a need to belong. Although Bensaÿd surely has axes to grind, much of his account sounds unexaggerated and credible, and he is willing to place blame where it belongs. There is little risk here of a warm embrace muffling certain of the edgy and less comfortable notes concerning his generation.

Even though *An Impatient Life* contains confessions, Bensaÿd is nowhere as self-revealing as a Robert Lowell, the New England poet who wrote *Life Studies* (1960). Like many of us who lived through the 1960s and beyond on the Far Left, Bensaÿd conjured up ecstatic fantasies of self-destructive excess about which there are only a few suggestive references. From the photograph on the book's cover, a *Paris Match* shot of Bensaÿd leading a 1971 demonstration, one can easily imagine him as the stereotyped revolutionary "bad boy" with a female following; but the issue of sexism in the movement seems to be off limits as a topic. And surely membership in some sections of Bensaÿd's Fourth International was to be at the crux of experiments in the youth rebellion, yet this channeling of wildness into revolutionary praxis is treated only in relation to politics and very little concerning culture.

What, then, are the legitimate experiences of private life to be disclosed in a book of this kind? Did he not have a deep intimate existence to explore? While he may never have been able to present a fully coherent picture of his

secret nature, more self-revelation might have helped to unlock the mysteries to the very shifts that he aspires to foreground. Nonetheless, one must admire that manner in which he continually renews his life as a quest, seeing himself as more pilgrim than visionary; the existential enigmas of his youth never evaporated into complacency, but upgraded their status from tormenting questions to accustomed themes.

Disappointing as well is the informality with which he addresses aspects of the political movement to which he gave his entire life. How should one tackle the story of an organization in which individuals and collectives are constantly intertwined? Group biography accentuates the lived experience of the Left, and Bensaïd certainly moves beyond the hagiographies of the past to present fallible comrades. Of these, however, only brief cameos are to be found. Some are wonderful, such as Krivine having “the look of a romantic doctrinaire” (92), or the adventurer-Trotskyist Raymond Molinier as a “cosmopolitan buccaneer” (139). But of the Trotskyist economic theorist Ernest Mandel, now in danger of becoming an all but forgotten polymath, the repeated comparison to Marcel Proust’s fictional cook Françoise (21, 354) seems glib; Mandel may have resembled her in being more humane in dealing with people at a distance than those near at hand (never my own experience), but he hardly recalls Françoise’s reincarnation of a shrewd medieval peasant.

Updating Trotskyism in the 1960s was always going to be tough, and Bensaïd is on target in his observation that it is impossible to claim indefinitely “that ‘objective conditions’ had reached the point of being over-ripe for revolution,” requiring only a subjective factor (108). The LCR had little in common with those Marxist vanguardists who rush to fit the epic contours of unruly revolutionary history into the cookie-cutter configurations of correct programs, their search for a usable past leading to the reduction of a variegated legacy down to their own size. But the main challenge to the LCR within its international organization was not sectarian Trotskyist groups of the Spartacist League variety, little more than megaphones devoted to sneering attacks on the rest of the Left.

The main rival was the US Socialist Workers Party (SWP), barely mentioned, but which Bensaïd must have felt to be hampered by a dinosaur vision that would never allow it to understand what the 1960s radicalization was truly all about. He surely had some basis for looking askance if he compared the multitendency organizational openness of the LCR to the monolithic putative Leninism (most now call it “Zinovievism”) of the SWP. It was not just that the retirement of the 1930s–1950s Trotskyist working-class veterans allowed a run of subpar student cadre to take over the SWP leadership. It was also that, in comparison to Rouge, the quality of too much of the writing for the SWP’s weekly Militant hovered somewhere just above religious pamphlets. Nevertheless, the SWP pulled back quickly from the Latin American guerrilla orientation almost as soon as it took root in 1969, and, if the SWP missed the boat in regard to a timely implantation in the unions, it was in advance of the LCR in its understanding of socialist-feminism and women’s liberation. Bensaïd’s unappreciative view of the rest of US radicalism may be suggested by his limited grasp of “identity politics,” of which there are many versions, as simply a substitute for serious critical thought. What he actually thought about the self-organization of women, gays and lesbians, and people of color, so crucial to US social movements in the mid-twentieth century and new millennium, might well have been condescending, but it is scarcely expressed.

There are several endings to *An Impatient Life*—the penultimate chapter is “End and Continuation” and the last is “And Yet . . .”—but scarcely anything that would pass for a resolution of the political contradictions that remain to haunt us yet. One is that, if another world is possible another operational Left is needed; yet effective mass organization for social revolution seems as impossible as it is necessary. Still, in Bensaïd one will find no mood of complacency in the vicinity of evil. His world of intellectual debate may be understood in the context of a transfigured materialism open to strands of iconoclastic religious thought, but should not be imagined as persisting in some eternity of hungry ghosts. He is never deceived “about either the struggle or the choice of enemy” (10), and he is unrepentant in his “loyalty to persons unknown” (16).

I’ve often been asked what I mean in my advocacy of an open Marxism for the twenty-first century, one that brings out the radical originality of the Left tradition and is not blinkered by doctrines and schools. Hitherto I had to say,

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“Well, it ought to have a bit of the existentialist ethics of Simone de Beauvoir, the surrealistic imagination of Michael Löwy, the anticolonial psychological insight of Franz Fanon, and. . . .” Now I can drop composite illustrations and simply say, “Oh, I mean the work of a thinker like Daniel Bensaïd.”