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Book Review

Daniel Bensaïd's Slow Impatience

- Reviews section -

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This absorbing, affecting memoir is a beautiful testament to a richly productive and dignified life. Daniel Bensaïd spent over forty years as a partisan of the revolutionary left in France, writing, campaigning, organising and agitating. Drawn into Communist politics as a young man and then radicalised, along with a significant section of his generation, by anti-colonial struggle abroad and the events of 1968 at home, Bensaïd was a leader and theorist in the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire, a Trotskyist party that emerged, as a libertarian, free-thinking and inventive gathering together of the best of 1968. He represents so much of what is admirable about the militants of his generation. As well as being a fine writer, if David Fernbach's elegant translation is any indication, Bensaïd was a thoughtful and reflective strategist. Too many memoirs of 1968 grub about in complacent nostalgia; Bensaïd's interest was always in our possible future.

1968 in France was, of course, an extraordinary year, seeing one of the biggest mass strikes in history, workplace occupations, widespread student unrest and the revival of revolutionary hopes and ideas. Bensaïd was at the centre of all of this, and narrates a lively, sometimes sardonically funny, story of his generation's political awakening. 'We had all grown up in the historical sequence opened by the Great War and the Russian Revolution, on a continent that was now almost submerged,' he writes; the events of 1968 shook up the stuffy certainties of the Left in France, smothered by a bureaucratic and tedious Stalinism that had, in the powerful influence of the Communist Party, dominated trade union, intellectual and political life for decades. Bensaïd and his co-thinkers re-discovered the libertarian, free-thinking and open traditions of the Russian Revolution, debating Trotsky, Lenin, Serge, Rosmer and Luxemburg as anti-imperialist rebellions abroad and mass strikes at home made the revolutionary tradition come alive again.

Theirs was a generation coming into adulthood with history 'breathing down their necks' – the inspiration and example of Che Guevara and the Cuban revolutionaries; the urgent demands of Vietnam, its people fighting heroically against the US empire; Black Power; the first re-stirrings of women's liberation, all of this made History feel alive and present after childhoods spent in conformity and relative political stability. The LCR – banned by the French state early in its life, and needing renamed as its leaders came out from underground hiding – combined youthful flair and exuberance with a willingness to re-discover suppressed traditions of dissent.

So far, perhaps, so familiar. There are plenty of memoirs of ageing baby boomers about, most eventually rounding on the failings of the generations since their own. Bensaïd's book is different, almost an anti-memoir. 'Enough harking back on 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 1968, and we are not hostages of this imaginary birth.' Bensaïd is more interested in what comes after, the years of 'hasty Leninism' as the new groupings of radicals and revolutionaries face the challenges of organising in the 1970s, their young excitement turning into lives shaped by commitment to a cause.

Bensaïd's work as a leader of the Fourth International takes him to Latin America, Argentina and Brazil in particular, making contact with militants and organisations, arguing politics, thinking through strategy. These parts of the book are particularly affecting – many of the political friends Bensaïd makes he loses to torture and shooting by US-backed dictators – and self-critical. Bensaïd does not avoid reckoning with what he calls the 'Guevarist voluntarism' of the Fourth International, and its acts 'of faith in the virtues of exemplary action.' Inspired by the example of Che, and taking seriously his demand that the job of revolutionaries was to make the revolution, Bensaïd and his co-thinkers romanticised armed struggle, seeing in it a test of revolutionary seriousness. They needed to learn, and paid a high price in the process, that reformists can carry guns, too, and that there are no substitutes for independent workers'

activity. Their Latin American co-thinkers learned these lessons often at the cost of comrades' lives; Bensaïd pays tribute to them through a sombre reckoning with these defeats and setbacks. The excitement of the times – the forces that would create the PT (Workers' Party) in Brazil defying the Generals; the left resurgent in Argentina; the example of Cuba still energising the continent – is evoked alongside its aftermath. They were 'running headlong into an open grave,' he writes, their obsession with armed struggle hastening their own organisations' disintegration and disorientation.

As the revolutionary offensives of the 1970s were beaten back by the neo-liberal reaction of the 1980s, many of Bensaïd's generation made their peace with the system, seeking comfortable careers and promotions inside France's Socialist Party, or going over to the side of open reaction and empire, in the case of the 'New Philosophers.' Radicals who a decade ago had expected revolution around every corner decided now that, having turned the corner and found more struggles to come, History was finished: liberal capitalism was the horizon. Bensaïd is quietly scornful of this kind of impoverished view: *No one chooses their historical moment. You have to be content with the challenges and opportunities that the era offers [...] When great hopes have lead in their wings, little ones spring up like mushrooms on the ground, in everyday resistance and miniscule conspiracies.*

The choices that a revolutionary makes are not to do with whether revolution is likely any time soon, but to do with what humanity needs, what answers exist for the urgent questions – questions now ecological, economic, social – facing us:

Bad faith claims that the world is doing fine, and above all that nothing need be changed. Resignation murmurs that there is cause for concern, but that nothing can be done, the market being natural and inequality eternal. The senile cynic, finally, admits that not all is for the best in this best of worlds, but goes on to add right away that humanity is too mediocre to alter the course of things.

Yet eternity does not exist, so it is necessary to wager [...] The notion of commitment clumsily evokes this logical wager on the uncertain. A secular, everyday wager, launched anew each day. The wager, unavoidable as long as the necessary and the possible remain in disagreement, is made by countless people across the world, however discreetly.

This wager never involves dogmatism. *An Impatient Life* splices chapters of memory with chapters of speculation and theoretical summary, thoughts on everything from the nature of historical time to Jewish identity to the role of theory. 'A theory proves its vitality by the fruitfulness of the controversies it arouses': Marxism retains its relevance as a guide to action, a method and means for strategising, thinking through the world. History and tradition, in this memoir, are offered as things to think with. 'These historical references furnished, if not models, at least valuable strategic reference points': an anti-Stalinist Marxism looks to the examples of past revolutions to learn and to reflect for next time. Bensaïd's fidelity to 1968 is in a different thought-world from most exercises in nostalgia. He stresses imaginative, experimental, open thinking not – as many on the left now suggest – because historical questions have somehow become irrelevant, or because theoretical controversy is out-dated, but the better to be able to think with the intensity the moment requires:

This non-doctrinaire critical theory is constantly fuelled by social struggles and practices whose impersonal logic it unravels. The question then is to know whether there still exists, in this ticklish plurality of a thousand Marxisms, a common denominator that can justify the generic name they still claim. Too generous a proliferation of 'Marxisms' could in fact lead to their dissolution pure and simple, in a cultural broth lacking heuristic vigour or practical pertinence.

Particularly interesting are Bensaïd's reflections on his Jewish heritage, an identity he had little interest in reflecting on until Zionist terror in Palestine – carried out in the name of Jews everywhere – forced him to make a different

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account. *The strong component of Jewish origin among the rebel youth of the 1960s is hardly a sociological mystery. They were, for the most part, sons and daughters of survivors [...] Our war had not yet ended. [...] From being intransigent against anti-Semitism, we now came out also as resolutely anti-Zionist, deeply convinced that, far from being incompatible, the two things went together. Refusing to accept the pariah status of the Palestinians essentially meant remaining faithful to the history of Jewish suffering.*

Bensaïd's reading and writing in Jewish radical traditions – and, wonderfully, in and around the writing of Walter Benjamin – links these personal and familial connections, and the history of Jewish suffering in Europe, with the urgent anti-imperialist task of standing alongside Palestinian resistance: *We too have had to learn this biblical patience, this old Jewish patience going back more than five thousand years, and transformed today into the patience and endurance of the Palestinians.*

Reading this memoir was a strangely exciting, unsettling experience. There is much to learn from these pages, and much pleasure to take from their unsentimentally emotional fidelity to the cause of revolution and human liberation. Bensaïd was an immensely stylish figure, too, unafraid of writing an allusive, richly philosophical prose, alert to historical ironies and dialectical humour. Too often on the left in Aotearoa we veer between staid and boring writing – worrying whether it is accessible or not – and an equally dull academic style, anxiously establishing respectability. Bensaïd is intellectual without ever seeming academic; the divisions and gate-keeping of university life were totally foreign to him. He is partisan militant and committed whilst keeping up a sprightly, delightful writing style, seeming to insist in this that beauty and aesthetics are too precious to hand over to the other side.

Most of all, this is an energising book, a book that reminds us of the rightness of refusing the inevitability of capitalism and war, of the promise of international solidarity and socialism, of our responsibility to all those who have made sacrifices in this struggle. Fidelity, in politics, does not mean monogamy: ideas and parties are right only so long as they are useful for human liberation and advance that cause. Fidelity itself, however, is essential. This is a long struggle.

Bensaïd died, much too young, weakened by AIDS, in 2010. The original French edition of this book came out in 2004, before the Global Financial Crisis, the deepening radicalisation in Venezuela, the Arab revolutions. I wish we had Bensaïd still with us to offer the insights and provocations of his free-thinking Marxism for the current age. The example *An Impatient Life* offers is the next-best substitute:

I have no religious sense of redemptive suffering. I have never conceived of my commitments as asceticism or reparation. I have never taken vows of intellectual poverty or chastity. As a young Communist, I took an immediate dislike to the bureaucratic bigotry of the Stalinist priests and its Maoist counterpart. The young red guards in their French version, hymning the thoughts of the Great Helmsman, were odious to me – these little monks who gave their person to the Cause (of the people or the proletariat). The Cause? It never occurred to me to sacrifice to such ventriloquous idols. Political militancy for me is the opposite of a sad passion. A joyous experience despite its bad moments. My party, like that of Heine, is the party of flowers and nightingales.

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