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Marxism

# Thinking politics

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**Eight years ago, on January 12, 2010, Daniel Bensaïd passed away. We republish here a not very well-known but thought-provoking interview, which he gave to the Argentinian review *Praxis* in May 2006. In the piece he develops the idea that neoliberal globalization makes it necessary for anti-capitalists to think again about "a common strategic space [which] presupposes a sort of sliding scale of strategic spaces involving actions at the local, national, and international levels".**

**Praxis:** In the lecture you gave in Buenos Aires, in the offices of CLACSO [\[1\]](#) you mentioned the fact that globalization does not eliminate the paradigms with which we think about politics, but that it does upset the whole system of ideas of the era of modernity that opened up in the eighteenth century. To what extent have these concepts been reformulated, or more precisely, what should we reformulate and with what consequences for the socialist class struggle?

**Daniel Bensaïd:** I only wanted to underline the scale of the change of epoch. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the USSR, historians talk a great deal about the "short twentieth century", as if it was simply a case of a parenthesis opened by World War Two and the Russian Revolution and closed with what they consider to be "the end of communism". This periodization enables Marx to be treated as a dead dog, by presenting the return of the liberal philosophers of the seventeenth century (Hobbes, Locke) and Tocqueville, as well as the founding fathers of the United States, as the last word in political philosophy. Furthermore, it is remarkable that the 1990s were marked in the intellectual debate (in Europe at least) by the return in force of this philosophy, which aims at reducing politics to a moral manager, by suppressing the conflicting charge of the social question. Alain Badiou put great stress on this in *Peut-on penser politique* (1985) and his *Métapolitique* (1998), as well, moreover, as Jacques Rancière in *Au bord du politique*.

In reality, the problem is much more profound. What globalization is shaking up is the whole of the modern political paradigm that was constituted and systematized, from the English Revolution of Cromwell to the French Revolution: the concepts of sovereignty, territory, borders, the people, the nation, interstate international law, national wars, were articulated in order to provide the framework of political thought.

We find a very interesting illustration in Foucault's lecture on "Security, Territory, Population", which deals precisely with this period. What is important is that the (revolutionary) politics of subversion of the established order used practically same approach by turning it round: citizenship – but social; sovereignty – but popular; liberation of territory; socialism, state or national, etc. This is absolutely banal in the relations of subalternity (such as Gramsci very well understood them). But it is also what determined the great strategic hypotheses of the experiences of the Russian, Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions (as well as the defeats of the German and Spanish revolutions in the 1920s and 1930s).

The insurrectional general strike (the hypothesis of October) had as its aim taking control of the seat of a centralized state power: the capital ("head") of the nation transformed into a Commune (not only of Paris in 1871, but of Petrograd in 1917, Hamburg in 1923, Barcelona in 1937, etc.). The prolonged popular war had as its aim the liberation of territories, leading to a territorially institutionalized dual power. It is obviously a case of extreme "models" or ideal types, whose reality always presents us with hybrid variations, and that is why I prefer the more flexible (because subject to the test of practice) term of strategic hypotheses.

However, from the beginning, (the Thatcher/Reagan years) of the counter-attack and the liberal counter-reform, the strategic debate seemed to have fallen to level zero until quite recently (what I would call an eclipse of strategic reasoning) being replaced by on the one hand, stoical rhetoric of resistance ( "hold fast", don't give in, keep the faith, faced with the unacceptable, even without any longer believing that another world is possible); and on the other by what I call a theology of miraculous events (Badiou, and in more nuanced forms, Holloway or Negri). It is precisely because the categories in which the revolutionary experiences of the past have been theorized, without being completely outdated, and especially without having been replaced, are becoming insufficient to think politically about the present. I will take just two examples.

Every strategy implies questions of space and time, and a dialectic between the two (summed up well by Mao's formula: give up space to gain time). For two centuries, the opposing classes have confronted each other (not exclusively, but principally) in a common strategic space, that is, the national sphere delimited by its frontiers and centralized by a state. Of course, we have lived for a long time in a plurality of spaces: domestic, the neighborhood or village, the region, the nation, the continent and the world. But among these spaces, there was in a way a dominant space: the national space.

Contrary to what Negri and Hardt tend to say, it has not disappeared, but it increasingly overlaps with continental or global spaces, on the one hand, and on the other it is disaggregated by policies of so-called decentralization. Furthermore, different social layers of the population tend to evolve in different spaces of representation and representations of space: while the European élites who follow the indexes of the Tokyo and New York Stock Exchanges and who feel at home in international airports have a lived experience of the European or world space, it seems likely that young people confined to suburban ghettos and whose families are recent migrants live in another spatial dimension. In particular, it is not sure (given the crisis of the education system and the massive level of precarious work) that they conceive the national sphere as a concrete reference, or that the European space is for them anything else than a monetary space: the space in which they live is probably split between the limited horizon of the neighbourhood or the housing estate and the imaginary space of the country of origin (which most of them have not known and to which they will not return) or a space, just as imaginary, of a religious community.

Defining a common strategic space, in which the national level remains the decisive link, thus presupposes a sort of sliding scale of strategic spaces that closely articulates actions at the local, national and international levels, even more closely than did the theory of permanent revolution (which was, however a pioneer in this field). That is why, having more or less assimilated into revolutionary thought the notions of non-contemporaneity, of setbacks, of the discordance of times, it seems to me just as necessary today to think about the production and discordance of spaces. The work of Lefebvre and David Harvey can help us.

The second example to examine more deeply (there would be others) would be that of the "revolutionary subject".

I do not claim here (I have tried elsewhere) to deal with the plurality and strategic unity of social movements, but rather with representation in terms of the subject, a category which is also a part of what I have called the political paradigm of modernity which emerged, among other things, with the Cartesian ego. This category is to a certain extent in solidarity with classical psychology and its relation to politics (citizenship, civic consciousness, the opinion of the elector, etc.). In fact, the great subjects of revolutionary change – the three capital P's in particular: People, Proletariat, Party – have been fantasized as great collective subjects, with consequently a debatable dialectic of the in-itself and the for-itself, of the conscious and the unconscious. The problem should be posed differently today: how from a multiplicity of actors who can be brought together by a common negative interest (of resistance to the commodification and privatization of the world), can we make a strategic force of transformation, without resorting to this dubious metaphysics of the subject. However, I point out that, for me, the class struggle is not one form of conflict among others, but the vector that can traverse other antagonisms and overcome the closed character of clan, party, race, etc. (I addressed these questions in *Cambiar el Mundo*, published in Spanish).

All this to say that the new cycle, still in its infancy, initiated fifteen years ago, does not aim at a return to pre- (or counter-) revolutionary political philosophies (even the return to the Enlightenment, when we counterpose its abstract humanism to the French Revolution and the Terror, may become reactionary), but a deepening and broadening of Marx's legacy (the actuality of which is that of *Capital* itself) to the test of capitalist globalization. As Derrida said: no future without Marx. With, against, or beyond, but not without him. This does not mean a religious pilgrimage to the sources of an original Marxism, but it does mean that we will not think about the present without passing by it, so true is it, as Deleuze repeated, that we "always start again by the middle".

**Praxis:** How should we think of a "sliding scale of strategic spaces" and how can we associate it with the concept of spatial-temporal reformulation studied by David Harvey?

**Daniel Bensaïd:** I have already referred to the usefulness that Harvey's problematics can have in this regard. But I think it's a matter of drawing the political consequences. I will take an example of this sliding scale, a little mysterious if we remain on the level of generalities, in the case of France and Europe. I believe, unlike Negri, as I said in the previous question, that the national link remains important, because the nation-state is weakened, but it has not disappeared. It continues to structure the relationship of social forces (the labour market remains segmented nationally and does not have the fluidity of the movement of goods and capital). These relationships of forces are partly embedded in legal relations (social rights, social protection systems, labour code) determined by national histories and the corresponding social struggles.

Moreover, even though a growing part of law is produced at European level, it is still the states that must decide (unanimously on most issues, or by qualified majority). Likewise, more than 90 per cent of international law remains treaty law, i.e. interstate law, in the absence of supranational constitutional or legislative power.

Thus, if the referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty (which is indeed a treaty ratifiable by states) had taken place by majority vote in a common European space, it is likely that the "yes" to the liberal treaty would have won and would have been law for all member countries, including those (such as France or Holland) where it would have been in a minority. On the other hand, the "no" victory in France and Holland reveals (more than it produces) a crisis of the liberal software of European construction, modifies the balance of power, de-legitimizes liberal policies, and can serve as leverage or encouragement for the struggle in neighbouring countries whose population unenthusiastically perceived the treaty as a fatality to be resigned to. The national level remains important, especially as a point of support for the defence of social benefits, and is not necessarily "nationalist" or "chauvinist" as Negri seemed to believe.

On the contrary, in France, the "left no" prevailed over the "right no", opposing it in particular on the issue of immigration, solidarity with undocumented migrants, opposition to the war in Iraq and counterposing a project of a social and democratic Europe to liberal Europe. But at the same time, when it comes to formulating, beyond the "defence of social gains", transitional proposals for a counter-offensive – on public services, on the common currency, on budgetary policies, on harmonization of social rights, ecological policies, etc. – we must take the initiative at least at European level, because it is at that level that we can today effectively implement an economic and social relaunch, an ecological development of the territory, a public transport network, an energy policy, etc.

At the same time, competitive liberal decentralization at the regional level (transferring budgetary responsibility in the fields of education or social amenities to the regions) must be opposed by self-management and democratic decentralization. And also on questions such as health policies, environmental agreements, and even more so military issues.

In fact, the discordance of spaces does not only concern a political scale, but the dissociation of different spatial functions. Let us take the space of the European Union. There is an institutional space (the Brussels Commission

and the Strasbourg Parliament), a judicial and police area (called Schengen), a military space, more than one, even (NATO, but also intra-European pacts), a legal space (the Luxembourg Court), not to mention the "enhanced cooperation" which associates a variable number of partner countries according to the themes concerned. These different spaces are not superimposable. They cover in each case different territorial units and associate different state partners.

That is why it seems to me, even though the level of the national states remains decisive in the chain of powers, that we must get used to a kind of strategic gymnastics in order to intervene simultaneously at these different levels and to make strategic alliances from the point of view of the oppressed.

**Praxis:** In recent years, two very different theoretical spaces have had a significant impact. One refers to what is usually called autonomism, which has emphasized the idea of "dispersion of power," anti-power and the idealized celebration of disorganized and horizontal spontaneity. The other values political action as the moment of the contingent event. Post-Marxism, in particular, structures its theory through discursive articulatory spaces, constitutive of hegemonies, but refuses any social anchoring for its articulatory practices. What remains as spaces between the spontaneous and anti-state territory of autonomism and politics without social anchoring or structural determinants, expressed both in the unexpected and a-conditional event of Badiou, and in the previously mentioned "contingent pluralism" of Laclau?

**Daniel Bensaid:** I have often written, especially in controversies around the books of Negri and Holloway, that there is, in these rhetorics of anti-power (or changing the world without taking power) rather the sign of a difficulty (or powerlessness) than the beginning of a solution. The "dispersion of powers" has a part, but only a part, of truth, insofar as the formula records a multiplication of forms, places, and power relations. But in this dispersion, all powers are not equivalent: state power and the power of property are not soluble in networks (or rhizomes) of powers, and they remain central strategic questions. Moreover, while these discourses on spontaneity, decentralized action, a "logic of affinities" opposed to the "logic of hegemony" (this is the theme of a recent book by Richard Day in Canada), liquid society against solid society, etc., while all these discourses pretend to thwart the pitfalls of the hegemony of capital over the forms of opposition of the dominated, in reality flexible network movements only reflect again the flexible and reticular organization of globalized capital.

Beyond your question about Badiou (I published in a recent issue of *Contretemps* a critical interview with him on this theme), it seems to me that two types of philosophical issues have, since the 1980s, valiantly expressed a refusal to capitulate and submit to the (liberal) climate of the times. On the one hand, a categorical imperative of resistance (in France among writers inspired by Foucault, such as Françoise Proust – and myself if you look at the titles of some of my books: *Eloge de la résistance À l'air du temps*, *Theorèmes de la Résistance*, *Résistances*, *Essai de taupologie générale*...). On the other hand, taking a bet on the unconditioned event, appearing suddenly from nothingness, resembling a miracle, which seems to me present in Badiou even if he sometimes qualifies this approach. Besides, many of Negri's and Badiou's writings have a clearly theological tone. The important thing is that if the event comes out of nothing, if nothing announces it or prepares it, if there are only post-event and not pre-event subjectivities, then all strategic thought and organization become impossible. Only "fidelity to the event" remains, once it has happened.

**Praxis:** In your book *Marx for Our Times* [\[2\]](#) you come back to fundamental themes addressed by Lenin on national crises, decisive opportunities and finally you save politics as an art, against social determinism or the philosophy of history. But does this insistence on revalorizing the validity of revolutionary political action not to a certain extent weaken politics as spaces of everyday power?

Let me explain myself: the fashion of contingent, timeless, unforeseen policies neglects to the point of making them disappear, the power struggles in which every moment of the day-to-day class struggle is located. Rancière, for example, rejecting the idea that "everything is political", considers that the domination of capital in everyday life falls

within the sphere of norms of government, but not, properly speaking, politics. In the camp of Marxism, do we not run the risk of depoliticizing the forces and resources of permanent power, giving especially importance to decisive moments and revolutionary conjunctures? After all, according to Gramsci only an accumulation of long-term social and political forces, political education and the constitution of hegemony can resolve an unexpected revolutionary crisis favourably. How can we combine the patient accumulation of political fields of force and the violent irruption of the revolutionary crisis?

**Daniel Bensaïd:** Your question is huge and raises a lot of problems at the same time.

1. Benjamin's formula that "politics now takes precedence over history" is, in its brevity, fraught with major consequences. It eliminates a deterministic conception of history, or a secularized form of predestination towards a paradise regained. If politics takes precedence over history, the outcome of the struggle is never decided in advance. The present is not a simple link in the temporal chain that would necessarily flow from the past and prepare an equally necessary future. It is a moment, fully political, of decision between several possibles. Hence the importance of the event. But the event is not a miracle coming from nowhere (from the "Void", according to Žižek or Badiou). It fits into a field of possibilities that is historically determined. That is why the concept of crisis (unlike the "Void") is an essential strategic concept that articulates the necessary and the contingent, the historical conditions and the unpredictable event, etc. As Gramsci aptly pointed out, we can only foresee the struggle, not its outcome.

2. From this follows the answer to the relationship (the link) between the movement and the goal, the daily struggle and the strategic target of the struggle for power. When Rancière and Badiou talk about the scarcity of politics as opposed to the "police" of ordinary management (Rancière), or as opposed to any institution whatsoever (Badiou – in the same way that he counterposes truth, which is precisely of the order of the revelation of the event, to knowledge), they reduce politics to exceptional moments, to intermittent illuminations, which make it difficult to conceive permanent action in everyday life, the accumulation of forces, action on the relationship of forces, in short the articulation between strategy and tactics. In Badiou's case, for example, there is the principled opposition to any electoral participation, whereas, although the electoral terrain is full of traps, it is nevertheless a constituent of the overall relationships of forces.

Marx sometimes flirts, in his own way and in a very different context, with this intermittent conception of politics reserved for moments of a rise of the social movement or moments of open crisis (1848-1852, 1864-1872). That is why, in periods of ebb, he dissolved organizations that had become nests of petty intrigues (the League of Communists, then the First International). One can say that his thought, extraordinary in its powerful critique of the existing order, remains in an embryonic state – in relation to the nascent state of the labour movement in his time – on the strategic plane (*The 18th Brumaire*, the writings on the Commune...). The "revolution in the revolution" is Lenin, thinker of the continuity – political and organizational – between the movement and the ultimate goal (I refer you to this point in my article on politics as a strategic art in *Cambiar el Mundo*). It is he that systematizes the concepts of revolutionary crisis, dual power, the party as a strategic operator. The debates of the Third International on the united front and transitional demands (and the decisive contribution of Trotsky on these questions) and the problematic of hegemony with Gramsci fit directly into this legacy.

You ask: "How to combine the patient accumulation of political forces with the violent irruption of the revolutionary crisis? That is our problem. There is no recipe or instructions to use. Here we should bring into the equation the sociology of organizations. Every organization generates its routines and its conservatisms, its more or less developed forms of bureaucratization. We can find ways to resist them, but we do not completely escape them, because they are the effects of fetishism, alienation, the division of labour, which characterize the societies in which we struggle. And we always struggle on the terrain, and partly in the terms of the dominant classes. That is why the question "how, from nothing, to become everything" is so perilous.

The most intransigent revolutionary discourse does not guarantee anything about the behaviour of those who hold it in critical situations. As proof, the divisions of the Bolshevik Party and its most experienced cadres at the time of the decision of October. At the same time, without the accumulated collective experience, without the education of a network of cadres, etc., the Lenin of the April theses and the insurrection could not have prevailed against the inertia and the routine of the "committee-men" trained for clandestine action. The crisis is a sudden change of pace. That is why I talk about the party as a "gearbox".

**Praxis:** Neoliberalism with its planetary globalization is very similar to what Marx described in the *Communist Manifesto*. In these new circumstances, it is possible that the conditions of the revolutionary struggle are different than in the past. You said that strategic thinking has disappeared from the programme of the left movement. Under what conditions should we think revolution today? On what basis can we think of the idea of rupture, which would be able to take into account the experiences of the past and to preserve the idea of plurality as the essence of the revolutionary capacity of the working class? I am thinking mainly of the "professional dangers of power", of the authoritarian hyper-politicism of Stalinism, which instrumentalized from the soviets to socialist ideology, according to its caste interests. In short, how can we combine the struggle for power with the libertarian aspiration that Lenin expresses in texts like **State and the Revolution**? At the same time, how can revolutionary politics be conceived while globalization reconstructs globalized terrains of political action?

**Daniel Bensaïd:** Another huge and multiple question.

1. I did not say that strategic thinking has "disappeared" from the agenda. I spoke of an "eclipse" of strategic reason since, say, the 1980s. How to go beyond that? That will require accumulating new founding experiences. No answer will spring from the fertile brain of a genius. It is enough to think of the time it took, and the accumulated experiences (1848, the Commune, 1905, 1917, the German revolution of 1918-1923, the republic of the councils in Bavaria, etc.), so that the strategic problematic of the Third International could take shape. However, we are only at the beginning of a new cycle in a new context. We already see, under the effect of the situations in Venezuela and Bolivia, the – negative – assessment of the Lula government, the 2001 explosion in Argentina, that the debate is taking on colour again. Holloway's somewhat hollow rhetoric, for example, already seems in part very dated and old. In any case, it hardly allows us to enter into the concrete discussion of the present situations. The turning point of the Zapatista's Other Campaign, whatever the immediate result, is another indication of this revival of political questions of orientation, both at the national level (what to do in Bolivia, in Venezuela, in the concrete context of the global relationships of forces?), and regarding what could be a continental alternative to ALCA, etc.

2. You raise more widely the question of the very idea of revolution. The term already has a long history, and a complex one. It is part of the political paradigm of modernity that I evoked (dynamic conception of acceleration, the new semantics of time analyzed by Koselleck, the relation to the idea of progress...). It becomes problematic when the paradigm itself is shaken. That is why it seems useful to me to distinguish different contents evoked by the notion of revolution.

The most general is the millennial aspiration to another possible (better) world, an uprising against injustice and inequality. The revolutionary aim is the expression in the framework of modernity of this great hope of long duration. It became charged with of a more concrete content during the nineteenth century, with the birth of socialist movements, as evidenced by the distinction established by Marx, from *On the Jewish Question* (1844) between "emancipation that is only political" or civic (the political revolution), and human emancipation" (or social emancipation), to which the French revolutionaries of the time responded with the theme of "the Social Republic" opposed to the Republic itself, which can be a Thermidorian or colonialist republic.

This programmatic content of the social revolution crystallizes, beyond the differences between libertarian, socialist or communist currents, around the question of ownership and social appropriation (cooperative, self-managing,

nationalized) as an alternative to the despotism of the market and of private property. This question remains more relevant than ever, it even extends from the problematic of enterprises and public services to the crucial questions of the common goods of humanity and intellectual property. This is in my opinion the strong point, the discriminating content of a revolutionary policy today, which gives meaning to the word revolution, while our adversaries want to make it a synonym for violence. The third dimension, more specifically strategic (the forms of struggles for power), of the word revolution is today obscured by both the avatars of the twentieth century and the consequences of globalization. On this point, it is necessary to observe "the real movement of abolition of the existing order", the new forms emerging from the struggle of the oppressed, etc. No one had imagined the Commune before the Commune, the soviets before the soviets, the workers' councils of Turin or the militia of Catalonia before their appearance. That is precisely the force of innovation of the event, to which revolutionaries must remain attentive and ready to react. There is, moreover, but this is not the place to approach it too superficially, an important and specific debate on revolutionary violence and social violence in the light of the trials of the past century.

3. I have already mentioned the question of bureaucratization, of the "professional dangers of power". Today we have the advantage of knowing that they exist and of knowing more about their mechanisms, to better attempt to ward them off. For us, relations between independent social movements, parties, states and political organizations are clearer. So are the questions of trade union democracy and democracy within parties. We now consider that political pluralism is a principle (a conclusion at which Trotsky himself only arrived in *The Revolution Betrayed*). More generally, democratic culture has progressed and has taken hold of new means of communication that enable it in particular to break the monopoly of centralized apparatuses (political or trade-union) over information. The diversity of the social movements, the impact of feminism on the whole of society and of culture, all that works in our favour. It nonetheless remains that tension is still inevitable between the logics of power and the demands of self-emancipation, between the collective and the individual, between the right of the majority to decide and the rights of minorities, between socialism from below and a necessary degree of centralization and synthesis. In other words, the hypothesis of a "libertarian Leninism" remains a challenge for our times.

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[1] The Latin American Council of Social Sciences.

[2] Daniel Bensaïd, *Marx for Our Times*, London, Verso, 2002. Originally published French in 1995 as *Marx l'Intempestif*.