

# A brief introduction to Daniel Bensaïd

With a bibliography of his works

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**This text has been written as an introduction to the English translation of Daniel Bensaïd's "The Mole and the Locomotive".**

**"The Mole and the Locomotive" is Daniel Bensaïd's own introduction to his book: "Résistances. Essai de taupologie générale", Fayard, Paris 2001.**

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Born in Toulouse in 1946, Daniel Bensaïd teaches philosophy at the University of Paris VIII (Saint-Denis) and is editor of the review *Contretemps*. He is a leading figure in one of France's two main Trotskyist groups, the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire*, which he helped found in the immediate aftermath of May 1968. He has also long been active in Latin American politics, particularly in Brazil.

Bensaïd's primary concerns include the theory and practice of militant politics, popular revolutionary traditions, the subversive potential of messianic conceptions of history, the contemporary significance of Marx and Marxism, and the organisation of today's anti-capitalist movement. Determined to avoid the excesses of both voluntarism and passivity, he persists in a conception of politics that links necessity and contingency, event and historicity, analysis and commitment. His major work to date, *Marx for Our Times* (1995) is an unorthodox revival and application of the analytical resources offered by Marx's critique of political economy, a major theoretical assault on the ongoing "privatisation of the world," the relentless subordination of every aspect of social existence "to the impersonal law of the market." [1]

Rather more insistently than most Western Marxists, Bensaïd's most fundamental principle is a version of the famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: it is not enough "merely to interpret the world; the point is to change it." [2] Bensaïd's project is at all levels bound up with the search for practical alternatives to the perpetual reign of capital and commodity fetishism. The collapse of Stalinism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union have made this search both more hopeful (it is no longer necessary to fight a war on two fronts) and more desperate (in an age dominated by various versions of the end of history if not the end of politics *tout court*). His recent pamphlet *Les Irréductibles* offers a succinct overview of the principles that now inform this search. In a context marked by the achievements and limitations of the new social movements of the 1980s and 90s, by the recent mobilisation of groups of people defined as "without" (without residency papers, without housing, without employment...), by the more immediately international dimension of both capitalism and the opposition to capitalism, Bensaïd discerns five general theorems that might guide sustainable resistance to the status quo. (i) Class struggle is irreducible to communitarian conceptions of identity and belonging. (ii) Politics is irreducible to ethics and aesthetics. (iii) Imperialism has not simply dissolved in the supposedly painless progress of market globalisation. (iv) The fate of

communism is independent of Stalinism and the bureaucratic inertia of the former socialist states. (v) The future of rational critique is independent of the pseudo-resistant sterility of postmodernism and indifferent to the prevailing emphasis on anodyne diversity, ephemeral fragmentation and inconsequential disenchantment. [3]

Unsurprisingly, Bensaïd has resisted the neo-liberal turn in both French philosophy and politics ever since it began. His first publications were devoted to May 68, the French student movement and the Portuguese revolution of 1975; pursuing a long argument with those “repentant” former *soixante-huitards* become *nouveaux philosophes*, his *Mai si!* (1988, co-written with Alain Krivine) continues to call for the renewal of revolutionary struggle in the spirit of May. Bensaïd exposed the conceptual incoherence of “third way” politics decades before the label was invented, and in keeping with Trotsky’s critique of reformist social democracy, opposed from its inception that retreat to the “centre left” initiated by Mitterrand and Rocard and completed so spectacularly by Jospin. [4]

Although many philosophers over the past decade or so have retained a reference to Marx as a critic of capitalism (Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* [1993] is perhaps the most familiar example), Bensaïd is one of the very few who persist in a reading of Marx as the prophet of communism. *Marx for Our Times* (1995) marks the culmination of a long effort to free Marxism from its disastrous conflation with Stalinism on the one hand and positivism or scientism on the other. Retrospectively illuminated by the militant principles of Gramsci and Benjamin, Bensaïd’s Marx is first and foremost a revolutionary thinker, a philosopher of active political intervention. Like Benjamin, his overriding concern is to think the emancipatory potential that suddenly appears in moments of crisis and emergency. Bensaïd’s critical project, then, is directed against the most dangerous ways such potential might be minimised or disarmed. In particular, he seeks to preserve Marxism from either its reduction to a form of science (an empirical sociology or a mathematised economics) or its incorporation into a linear or teleological version of history, one driven by a crudely mechanical progression towards the inevitable triumph of socialism.

Bensaïd organises the otherwise eclectic material of his book into three parts, corresponding to the principal aspects of this fundamental critical gesture. In the first, the “Critique of Historical Reason,” he affirms a disruptive conception of time against the determinisms defended by orthodox and analytic versions of Marxism: “punctuated by events, history no longer possesses the meaningful unity of a universal History governed by an alliance between order and progress. From its fractures issues a vortex of cycles and spirals, revolutions and restorations [...], a world of explosions, cataclysms and crises, whose contradictions are resolved in the violence of decisiveness.” [5] Marx figures here as a philosopher of disjunctive and non-linear time, of a temporality in which any given era is never quite in step with itself, in which “ancient times, long-past times and recent times still work anachronistically upon the dimensions of the present.” [6] Part two, the “Critique of Sociological Reason,” is a defence of the political and subjective (or “anti-sociological”) primacy of class struggle against its reduction to “the inert domain of pure objectivity.” [7] The third and final part, the “Critique of scientific Positivism,” is as much an attack on one conception of science (positivist, detached, exact, lifeless...) as the celebration of another (philosophical, chaotic, heterogeneous, disconcerting...): “in a breathless quest for the living organism, where conceptual order constantly comes undone in carnal disorder, Marx’s science continually mingles synchrony and diachrony, the universality of structure and the singularity of history.” [8]

This disruptive conception of Marxism has its roots in Bensaïd’s rejection, as a student, of Althusser’s structuralist reading of Marx. Dissatisfied with Althusser’s practical and theoretical failure to cope with unpredictable events and interventions, he turned instead to Lucien Goldmann’s meditations on Pascal for inspiration.[9] Bensaïd’s watchful but unshakable historical optimism might be traced, in the end, to his own version of the logic which justifies Pascal’s famous wager on the existence of God - precisely because the outcome is irreducible to the logic of deduction and

proof, there is nothing to lose and everything to gain by putting your faith in the contingent future of communist revolution. [10] By the same token, such faith in the future is best sustained by a conception of the present which sees it as haunted by a revolutionary past. In his *Walter Benjamin, sentinelle messianique* (1990), Bensaïd recognises Benjamin (together with Charles Péguy) as the primary source for his acute awareness of the living resonance of bygone struggles. It's this awareness which informs Bensaïd's celebration of the legacy of Joan of Arc and his "alternative bicentenary commemoration" of the French Revolution, one that dwells on the sans-culottes' conception of a directly empowering practice of politics. [11] In each case, the effort to transform the world is motivated by a rational wager or "logical revolt," a secular wager free of any trace of transcendence.

Bensaïd's interest in Péguy and Benjamin, reinforced by his admiration for Benjamin's most significant recent French reader, Françoise Proust, has led him to reflect at length on the difference between utopian and messianic thought. Utopia is more subject to closure, more definite in its content, and thus more susceptible to disappointment than a messianism which trusts in the open indeterminacy of history and relies upon the fragile resilience of hope. In *Résistances* (2001), Bensaïd seeks to renew the revolutionary potential of messianism in a critical confrontation with the twin dangers of utopian escapism and cynical determinism. "The Mole and the Locomotive" is a translation of the introduction to this book, which is Bensaïd's most substantial study of contemporary philosophy to date. The remainder of *Résistances* is made up of critical reviews of what he identifies as four of the most important (and most ambiguous) recent interventions to offer some inspiration for the renewal of a secular messianism - the work of Althusser, Derrida, Badiou and Negri. In order to lend more substance to his introduction, it may be worth briefly anticipating Bensaïd's conclusions here.

Bensaïd's acknowledges that it is too easy to portray Althusser as a structuralist who leaves no space for individual agency in historical developments. Bensaïd condemns Althusser's reluctance to distance himself unequivocally from Stalin and is critical of his inflated emphasis on the autonomy of science, of his dismissal of matters of experience and struggle, and of his increasingly desperate effort to locate a decisive epistemological break, in Marx's work, between a scientific orientation and a merely ideological concern for alienation. Nevertheless, he applauds Althusser's later efforts to reconcile a notion of history as a "process without a subject" together with the contingency of encounters and situations, such that individual engagement in specific political situations begins to appear productive of historical change (rather than the other way around). The result is a failed but provocative attempt to rethink the relation of chance and necessity within a Marxist conception of history.

Bensaïd likewise finds much to praise in the unsettling and elusive optimism that inspires Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1993). Again broadly in keeping with Benjamin's conception of things, Derrida differentiates messianic experience from (abstract, resigned, deferential) utopianism, and associates the former with a concrete, optimistic and immediate effort to disrupt the status quo in the name of justice. Though not themselves revolutionary in Bensaïd's sense of the word, Derrida's "spectres" haunt the prevailing order of things and may allow the spirit of communism to inspire steps towards future revolution. Derrida's aversion to presence and the present, however, his reluctance to embrace what he describes as Marx's version of "onto-theology," coupled with his own aversion to organised communism and his belief that class conflict is essentially a thing of the past, seem to combine to consign the revolutionary project to a sort of permanent uncertainty and indecision.

The opposite problem, in a sense, undermines Badiou's post-Maoist revival of the category of the subject. Bensaïd is understandably sympathetic to Badiou's engaged and militant conception of politics, but believes that it fails to pay sufficient attention to matters of historical continuity and political organisation. Badiou is overly dependent on an abrupt if not "miraculous" conception of

transformative events as the primary source of political and philosophical inspiration, and his conception of the subject involves little more than the *repetition* of Pascal's wager. His conception of politics undertaken at a principled distance from history and the state, his affirmation of a "politics without party," threatens to deprive organised politics of its material force.

If Badiou is overly reliant upon the exceptional discontinuity of events, Bensaïd reads Negri as overly reconciled to historical inevitability, to the supposedly ineluctable movement of history towards the triumph of communism. Bensaïd has much in common with Negri, not least with the latter's careful attempt, in his works from the seventies and more recently in *Insurgencies*, to devise a theory of political subjectivity that links a neo-Leninist emphasis on organisation and decision with an analysis of the changing material configurations of exploitation, class composition and surplus extraction based on Marx's *Grundrisse*. [12] Roughly speaking, what Negri calls "constitutive power" - creative potency (*puissance* or *potentia*), the power to create new situations, as distinct from power (*pouvoir* or *potestas*) as actually exercised within an already constituted situation - takes modern political shape as the growing collective capacity to make history rather than simply endure it. In *Empire* (2000), Negri and his collaborator Michael Hardt examine the ways in which the contemporary form of constituted or "sovereign" power has progressively escaped the limitations of the nation-state and become a truly global, truly deterritorialised force, itself ultimately a (repressive) reaction to an equally mobile, equally transnational version of popular constituent power - the power of the "multitude." [13] In the form of empire, capitalism tends progressively to purge itself of all anachronistic forms of mediation and transcendence and so prepare the way for a frontal struggle with communism. Bensaïd is uneasy, however, about the effectively absolute quality of certain aspects of constituent power, and about what he sees as Negri's relative disinterest in the strategic, institutional and organisational factors that might enable the newly global potential for insurgency to become an actual reality. Since constituent power is itself the dynamic principle behind historical change, since it is resistant to oppression as a matter of course, and since it realises itself as uninterrupted "permanent revolution," [14] Negri sometimes seems to anticipate communist victory as virtually automatic or as latent in the very nature of things. Bensaïd concludes that, in the end, Negri's quasi-"Franciscan" orientation is inadequate to the task of inspiring a viable version of genuine democracy and democratic empowerment.

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