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Daniel Bensaïd, a revolutionary for our times

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On Tuesday January 12, 2010 our friend Daniel Bensaïd, “Bensa” died. Those familiar with Daniel knew he was incurably ill, and had regretfully expected for some weeks news which, though we knew it to be inevitable, we always fought to believe would not come.

In Daniel we have lost one of the most prominent figures of the European anti-capitalist left. Daniel Bensaïd was one of the founders of the French JCR in 1966 and the Communist League in 1969 (later renamed the LCR in 1973 after being banned). A key figure in the events of May 1968 through the March 22 movement, he remained faithful to his revolutionary commitment until the end of his life, unlike many illustrious names of his generation who became “repentant rebels”.

A leader of the LCR until the early 1990s, he played a key role in the life and development of what would become one of the most emblematic formations of the European revolutionary left. A militant internationalist, he was a leader of the Fourth International for a long period and devoted much his political activity to internationalist work, playing a key role in the FI’s construction in several countries. In his memoirs published in 2004, *Une lente impatience* [A Slow Impatience], he noted, humbly: “leadership inspires in me a holy repulsion: I prefer to do than to have done. This could be due to egalitarian virtue. It may also, equally, be the sign of a disorganised inability to delegate and confer trust.”

Daniel Bensaïd’s influence marked several generations of revolutionary militants in France and around the world. For my generation, for those that joined the same current and project as Daniel in the 2000s, he was an irreplaceable reference. For us, the anti-capitalist left activists forged in the heat of the anti-globalization movement, the student movement, the revolutionary youth camps, the reference point of the French LCR, the debates of the European anti-capitalist left..., Daniel was our most beloved and respected international figure.

We felt an irrepressible attraction for somebody capable of writing about Walter Benjamin or elucidating on the political alliances of the LCR, publishing a work on Joan of Arc or talking about the dilemmas of the Brazilian left in front of Lula, or sympathizing with the thought of Derrida or August Blanqui. In Daniel Bensaïd a man of action, an international political leader and an intellectual of the first level converged. A combination of qualities that made him very unique in the panorama of the international left and one of those figures of lasting impact.

The Daniel Bensaïd that some knew was a man of precarious health and fragile appearance, “spectral” as he would say, but possessed of an iron strength and will. Daniel was a good sort, friendly and affectionate, modest, personable, always willing to listen and talk a while. Someone we always invited to the most special occasions. The last time was to participate with us in Madrid and Barcelona in our commemorations of the events of May 1968 organized under the title “May 1968-May 2008, we continue the fight”.

Since the 1990s, sick and in ill health, he devoted his efforts to theoretical and intellectual work, withdrawing from the tasks of political leadership, without therefore renouncing militant activity and his multiple commitments, talks and travels. At a time of disclaimers, capitulations and

bewilderment, his voice helped maintain an essential reference for moving forward. He undertook a huge task of renewal and revitalization of Marxist thought, leaving a vast written legacy and countless books, published with an unsurprising frequency. Taking advantage of militant meetings in Paris to drop by the La Brèche bookstore and get hold of the “latest” by Bensa became over the years one of my most enjoyable routines. Daniel also encouraged publishing projects, collections, and a tremendous work of intellectual discussion and search for convergence between different critical traditions through the magazine *ContreTemps*.

He devoted much of his time to the study of Marx’s thought in works such as *Marx l’intempestif* (1995 – published in English as *Marx For Our Times*), or its companion volume *La Discordance des temps* (1995), both resulting from teaching and study work during the 1980s, in his position as a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Paris VIII, at a time of retrogression and decline of leftist thinking. However, published on the eve of the November-December 1995 strikes against the Juppé plan that marked a return of mobilization and the social question, both works presented a stimulating reading of Marx, liberated from dogmas and fetishes. They are, possibly, his most significant works.

He would continue his study of Marx in multiple books. In 2001 a meticulous biography, *Passion Karl Marx* was published, with reproductions of the correspondence between Marx and Engels and images and illustrations of the era, where he sought to “put in context the critical spirit of a time, emphasizing the resonances between the globalization of then and now” and proposed we read *Capital* as “the dialectical elucidation of the mysteries of capital in the manner of Edgar Allen Poe’s Dupin or Sherlock Holmes: a crime has been committed; surplus value has been stolen; and the booty passes from hand to hand, is split between accessories, rascals, money launderers, so that we forget its origin....”

He also published studies on concrete aspects of Marx’s thought, like the complete critical edition of *On the Jewish question*, a study of Marx’s writings about the theft of firewood, taken as a starting point for analyzing the dynamics of contemporary globalization, or a developed analysis of Marx’s political thought, *Inventer l’Inconnu* (2008), a critical edition of the texts of Marx and Engels on the Commune. In it he portrayed Marx as a “brilliant analyst of conjunctures and a virtuoso of politics, not as a simple effect or reflection of economic and social determinations, but as the art of mediation”.

Recently, he published a presentation of some of Marx’s texts on economic crises where he reviews Marx’s interpretation of the nature of crisis, and begins a strategic discussion of the thinking of Keynes and Marx on this topic, looking for their points of confluence and divergence: “as a political project as a whole, and not as a sum of partial measures, Keynes’s programme openly proclaims, aims to save capital from his own demons. That of Marx aims to overthrow it.”

One of his last books was a pleasing introduction to Marx, *Marx mode d’emploi* (2009) published with illustrations by the artist Charb, well received by militants of the NPA and by youth keen to venture into the “critical adventure” of Marx’s thought. Conceived as “an invitation to discovery and controversy”, not intended to “restore the true thought of an authentic Marx” but “to propose one of his possible modes of use”, reviewing Marx’s ideas about the logic of capitalism, communism, political organization, internationalism, the relationship between humans and nature and so on.

Much of his work is marked by its concern for questions of strategy, rethinking revolutionary strategy for the 21st century. He dedicated much of his thought to analysis of the “spatial and temporal transformations of political activity” within the framework of capitalist globalisation. In *Le Pari mélancolique* (1997) he addressed the “metamorphosis and mismatches in the world” in the light of globalization, defending the need, before a “century ending on the ruins of its inaugural hopes”, a politics of commitment and “wager for revolution” based “in the act, not in the evidence of

the secured solution, but in the irreducible contingency of the hypothesis". A revolution "not as model, prefabricated schema, but as strategic hypothesis and ruling horizon".

In *Le Sourire du Spectre* (2000), he considered on the 150th anniversary of the Communist Manifesto the possibilities of a recurrence of the "spectre of communism", at a time where already the resistance to globalization that buried the "end of history" discourse of Fukuyama and neoliberal triumphalism was emerging. His *Irreductibles. Théorèmes de la résistance à l'air du temps* (2001) presented in the form of five elegantly written theorems attacked the "cynical rhetoric of resignation", and defended the "irreducible strength of indignation, which is exactly the opposite of the customary and of resignation.. Indignation is a start. A way to stand up and make progress. One is outraged, is disturbed, and then we'll see. One is outraged passionately, before even finding the reasons for this passion".

Resistances. Essai de Taupologie générale continues this search for a politics of resistance, through the figure of the mole, a "metaphor for someone who moves stubbornly, for underground resistance and sudden eruption". "Starting in the period of Victorian globalization and critically linking the thought of Althusser, Badiou, Derrida, and Negri, the book examines what the conditions of a revolutionary politics are and develops the "strategic notion of crisis" understood as "a moment of decision and truth, when history hesitates before the point of a fork ".

Strategic thinking also has a central place in *Éloge de la Politique profane* (2009) an important work which analyzes the transformation of the basic political categories of Modernity, the "eclipse of politics" and "strategic reason" before the neoliberal offensive, and discusses the various "contemporary utopias ", specific to the periods subsequent to great defeats "where the possible and the necessary are no longer points in contact"

Within the framework of this concern for strategy, he also entered with passion into writing about the "anti-globalization" movement and the controversies within it, arguing with authors as Negri or Holloway, in works such as *Changer le monde* (2003), or analyzing the historical significance of the movement in *Le nouvel internationalisme* (2003). He participated in significant debates in several World and European Social Forums and countless international meetings, seminars and initiatives linked to "anti-globalization".

In spite of this great intellectual effort he continued his involvement with the life of the LCR and the Fourth International and the vicissitudes of the international left. He also devoted much of his work to discussing issues of political orientation in France, criticizing Jospin's plural left in *Lionel, qu'as-tu fait de notre victoire* (1997), to delving into discussions on identity in the context of the crisis of the French Fifth Republic in *Fragments Mécréants* (2005), and polemicising with characters such as Bernard-Henri Lévy and the "new philosophers" against whom he wrote *Un nouveau théologicien B-H. Levy* (2007).

In 2004 he published his memoirs, *Une lente impatience*, tracing his personal, political and intellectual itinerary. Modestly, he defined his book as a "simple testimony to help understand what we have done and what we want". Looking back he stated: "We have sometimes, even often, been wrong, and on quite a few things. At least we have not made a mistake either in combat or in enemies." A combat he wrote about with his usual prose of high literary quality, covering the events of May 1968 and its aftermath, the Algerian war, the times "when history was biting us on the neck", the fight against the Franco dictatorship, the figures of the left in Latin America, the neoliberal restoration, the rise of the global justice movement or the state of contemporary Marxist thought.

Memory, transmission and inheritance occupied much of the writings and militant concerns of Daniel Bensaïd. He polemicised with François Furet and authors of the *Black Book on Communism*

and its historical falsifications, and devoted his work *Qui est le juge?* (1999) to questioning the “Court of history” and the “temptations of appeal to the old fetishes, History or Humanity” rather than the acceptance “of the fragile uncertainty of human judgment “and” deciphering the subtlety of the three handed game between legal justice, historical justice and political justice.”

Among his multiple and varied intellectual influences we can highlight Walter Benjamin, to whom he devoted the book *Walter Benjamin Sentinelle mésianique* (1990), part of a trilogy beginning with *Moi, la révolution* (1989) published on the occasion of the bicentenary of the French Revolution, and finishing with *Jeanne de Guerre lasse* (1991), devoted to Joan of Arc. If the trilogy could seem far from Marx, Daniel indicated in his biography that actually “it – the dates show it – follows a parallel path to better return to the issue of communism, the untamed road of the heretics, by the detour of messianic rationality along the steep path of a logic of the event.”

He became an unquestionable moral and intellectual authority, acting as a transmitter, a bridge between two different epochs providing an invaluable political-intellectual reference by which we incorporate ourselves in the completed militancy of the “short 20th century”. He never missed an appointment at the LCR summer universities or the revolutionary youth camps where his educational talks were always the stellar moment that everyone anticipated. *Les Trotskismes* (2002 – published in English as “Who Are the Trotskyists?”) revealed the trajectory of a minority current in the history of the labour movement, at the beginning of a new century, “that will not be an effortless theoretical and practical advance”, claiming “a certain Trotskyism whose” inheritance without practice is, without doubt, insufficient, but at less necessary to undo the amalgam between Stalinism and communism, to free the living from the dead and turn the page on disappointments. “He participated in the birth of the NPA, accompanying the passage of the LCR to the new project. Shortly before its creation he wrote in *Penser Agir!* (2008): “in proportion to the closeness of the time of passing from the Ligue to the new party, there are those who question ever more insistently the dozens of “veterans”, founders of the League in 1969 or those expelled from the Communist students, the JCR, if they do not feel nostalgia to see it disappear to grow into a new force. To answer them I would say that we rather have the feeling (and a bit of pride, let us face it) of work realised and a road travelled. It was much longer than we imagined in the youthful enthusiasm of the 1960s and not easy to stay so long being ‘revolutionaries without revolution’.

Daniel has died a year after the creation of the NPA, where he would have had a major role to play in training of its militants, in the consolidation of the strategic and programmatic framework of the party and the transmission of a heritage “without modes of use” to militant generations. He summarized better than anyone the objectives of the new project, to create: “a new party, as faithful to the dominated and the dispossessed as the right is to the owners and the rulers, that makes no apologies for being anti-capitalist and wanting to change the world.” On the eve of its foundation he published with Olivier Besancenot *Prenons Parti! Pour le socialisme du XXIème siècle* (2009) a good book for arming anti-capitalist activists with ideas, proposals and strategic perspectives.

The last time I saw Daniel was at the first summer university of the NPA in Port Leucate last August, where he gave several talks and presented the Société Louise Michel, a foundation set up in order to create a pluralist space for theoretical reflection and debate. We talked about the NPA, our recent campaign in the European elections, and the possibility of a Castilian edition of his book *Marx, mode d'emploi*, and his critical edition of Marx's texts on economic crises. Despite the persistent disease, and the fact that he looked weak and tired, nothing presaged the tragic outcome that came only a few months later.

It is hard to accept that Daniel is no longer with us. His death is a hard blow to all those who valued his presence, his books and his talks, one of the most stimulating elements of our militant adventure.

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P.S.

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