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# Daniel Bensaïd’ “Impatient Life”

## : Contra the Blasé Wisdom of Sober Old Men

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**Daniel Bensaïd, *An Impatient Life: A Memoir*, published by Verso Books.**

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*“When great hopes have lead in their wings,”* writes the French revolutionary Daniel Bensaïd, *“little ones spring up like mushrooms on the ground, in everyday resistance and miniscule conspiracies”* (6). Bensaïd died in January 2010, at the age of 63, from cancer. The cancer was brought on by drugs he had been taking to combat Aids, which he had contracted 16 years prior.

With *An Impatient Life*, he left us not a novel, nor an autobiography, nor a memoir, but rather a “story of apprenticeship – an apprenticeship in patience and slowness – however incomplete... a simple testimony, designed to help in understanding what we did and what we desired” (11). It is a monumental work, containing in ecstatic unity all the elements of strategic acumen, aesthetic brilliance, and philosophical probing long associated with this most unorthodox creature of the Fourth International.

So much is woven into the political narrative of Bensaïd’s radical formation – national liberation struggles in Algeria and Vietnam, the international flames of the 1968 fire (Prague spring, Têt offensive, student uprisings in Mexico, Japan, and Pakistan, anti-racist and anti-war movements in the United States, wars of liberation in the Portuguese colonies, and labour revolts in Italy and Argentina), the coup d’état in Chile in 1973, the Portuguese Carnation Revolution of 1974, the monarchical transition in the Spanish state, the student, worker, and immigrant struggles in France, the tragic clandestine disasters of revolutionary ambition in the 1970s in Argentina, the methodical construction of the Workers Party in Brazil over the 1980s and 1990s (as well as its betrayals of the twenty-first century), and repeated trips to Mexico on political work, but also to visit the ghosts of Leon Trotsky, Frida Kahlo, and Diego Rivera.

## Fidelity to Subjugated Ancestors

Strategic debates on popular power, the revolutionary party, the general strike, workers' self-management, liberated areas, and armed struggle - none of it was outside Bensaïd's remit, nor, for that matter were more philosophical subjects, such as contending notions of time, history, progress, and memory. While engaged most intimately in the politics of southern Europe and Latin America, he was an inveterate internationalist whose intellectual curiosity and political commitments could not easily be contained, either by sectarian orthodoxies or national borders.

Fluent in the classics of Marxism - Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Gramsci, Lúkacs and, of course, Marx himself - Bensaïd, in consummate disregard of the sometimes stultifying cultural mores of the far-Left, also immersed himself in the worlds of literature, sport (soccer and bicycling), Third World liberation (especially Che), and French social theory - Lefebvre, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Badiou, among many others - not to mention his theoretical reflections on history and memory through rich encounters with Walter Benjamin and Joan of Arc.

One part sober reflection on the "art of waiting" impatiently in non-revolutionary times, another part messianic voluntarism, *An Impatient Life* is an extended meditation on political militancy as "a joyous experience despite its bad moments," and a rally against left-wing politics as "redemptive suffering" or sacrifice to "ventriloquous idols" (17-19). "It is not a question of devoting oneself to this or that fetish," Bensaïd explains, "taking up a sublime cause, but rather of being unreconciled to the world as it is. If the world is not acceptable, you must undertake to change it" (16).

This is also a story of keeping faith with dead comrades and honouring their commitments to liberation and emancipation, by respecting ourselves and continuing with dignity. "Compared with previous generations, the trials we experienced - at least in France - were minor," Bensaïd writes.

*"And yet we had embarked, particularly through our international ties, on a common adventure with our Basque, Bolivian, Chilean, Argentinian, Mexican and Brazilian comrades. Many of them have not survived. I can recall dozens of faces suddenly obliterated. We owe these departed faces the loyalty that Karol Modzelewski demanded toward those unknown to whom the debt is unpayable. To keep faith with them, out of respect to ourselves. Nothing is more disgusting than those photos, often taken at commemorative banquets or Socialist Party congresses, where a handful of satisfied veterans raise their fists and sing the 'Internationale' or 'La Jeune Garde' in a derisory way. As if to say: 'We were young. But we had a good time.' Or again: 'We were all wrong, but how well we've done'" (125-126).*

As against the pathetic gestures of delegates at Socialist Party congresses, Bensaïd offers elsewhere in the text, a portrait of his Argentinian comrade, Daniel Pereyra, who suffered the loss of so many dear to him:

*"Daniel once again escaped the dictatorship. He lives today in Madrid, where he published a book on the armed struggle in Latin America. He's in good shape, mentally and physically. As dynamic and active as ever, he lived through the disappointing years of post-Francoism without giving in, attentive to the least resurgence of hope, faithful to his commitments, his companions, and his dead friends" (137-138).*

It is through a similar concern for fidelity to those in the past who have been oppressed, who have resisted, and who have died that Bensaïd reflects on his complex relationship to Jewish identity in the later stages of the memoir. "My parents," he writes, "always accepted their Jewishness without shame or denial, but they never placed any hope in the state of Israel" (272). Bensaïd himself, as an atheist internationalist, has "never felt Jewish by race, religion or language. And yet," he writes,

*"I remain Jewish to a certain extent and up to a certain point, out of unconditional solidarity, not with a perishable state, but with those men and women who have been persecuted under that name. Jewish by history, essentially; at the opposite extreme from an immobility without history, such as is claimed today by those new mystics for whom everything has always been there since the beginning, for all eternity" (279).*

Bensaïd came out as an active anti-Zionist in 1967 in reaction to the Six-Day War. If the French 68ers who resigned themselves to the Socialist Party had severed their link with the cause of emancipation for the oppressed, and had sterilized the sentiments of the Internationale with the condescension of aged, the Israeli state has similarly fossilized and sanctified a very particular Jewish history:

*"A Jewish memory erected into state memory becomes sadly selective. Under the grip of the state, the culture of exile and wandering has been petrified into official history and raison d'état. The reconstruction of a mythic history for a people who escaped from history tends to justify a communitarian retrenchment and to strengthen a genealogical identity founded on an archaic right of blood.... We are fortunate to have had the likes of Spinoza, Heine, Marx, Freud, Rosa Luxemburg... and so many other heretics, who keep the thread of a different story possible" (278).*

## **Coming of Age**

Bensaïd's mother began an apprenticeship as a milliner at the age of fourteen, before leaving France for Oran in 1931, at the age of twenty-one. She was anticipating a world adventure, to be financed by plying her trade along the way. Oran, on the northwestern Mediterranean coast of Algeria, turned out to be the last stop on the world tour - she met Bensaïd's father, a North African Jew and a divorcée. Scandalously, she agreed to marry him. "People tried to persuade her," Bensaïd writes, "prophesying venereal disease and abnormal children. But she was not the kind of person to be intimidated. She became a philo-Semite, to the point of wearing a Star of David and inventing unlikely origins for herself in an imaginary Eastern Europe" (22).

His mother's tenacity also found expression in the way she faced-off with customary political idiocies, even within the family: "One day, when the television showed a programme on the English court, my brother-in-law committed the imprudence of casting doubt on the wisdom of regicide. She refused to speak to him for ten years. To rehabilitate the royalty, under her roof! There were things on which Mother was inflexible"(29).

Bensaïd's father was educated only until the age of seven: "the sports paper L'Équipe was his main daily reading. I almost never saw him with a book in his hand, with the exception of *The Mixed Waters* by Roger Ikor, and *The Last of the Just*" (273). In adolescence he worked as a waiter in a café before embarking on a career in pugilism, boxing being one medium through which a North African Jew of that period might hope to advance socially.

Exercising a characteristic ingenuity and fearlessness, Bensaïd's mother managed to obtain a certificate of "non-membership of the Jewish race" for his father shortly after the Gestapo captured him in France on 29 December 1943, a few years before Bensaïd was born. Bensaïd's father, unlike his father's brothers Jules and René, thus escaped the fate of the death camps. Under a false name, his father bought a bistro outside Toulouse, the social environs of which would prove fundamental to young Daniel's personal and political formation:

*"The bistro counter was my first school and my first sociological laboratory. A counter is a kind of secular confessional, the poor man's couch, where people come to confide their bruised lives.... On*

*the edge of the city, in a district that petered out at the foot of the hills, what was called semi-country, the Bar des Amis hosted a working-class clientele, with a mixture of Spanish refugees, Portuguese builders, Italian anti-fascists, workers from the chemical plant Onia (the future AZF) and the ordnance factory, postmen and railway men, car mechanics and small shopkeepers.... The bistro was solidly red" (25-26).*

The young people who populated his home-life were of a different breed than his school peers. His friends at home, "hung around the travelling fair, rode scooters without silencers, meticulously styled their hair, wore cowboy boots and faded jeans" (31). The boys at technical school, on the other hand, were mainly from wealthy families, and as such adhered to a much more proper decorum. On a theme that recurs repeatedly at different points in the memoir, Bensaïd celebrates this "advantageous social bastardy," the way his life stretched across two worlds, which allowed him to "dream of the stars while keeping [his] feet on the ground" (31).

His years in the bar, together with the influence of his unruly gang of friends, "served to vaccinate" Bensaïd "against certain mythologies that flourished around 1968"(46). In particular, he writes of how the people he grew up with grounded him to a concrete humanity, and thus intensified the alienation he experienced in encounters with the most theological of the Maoist circles which were exploding onto the scene around that time:

*"I did not recognize myself in the religious cult of the red proletarian, in the genuflections of the Maoist novitiates and their hymns to Mao Zedong Thought (no more, indeed, than in the edifying life of Saint Maurice Thorez or Saint Jacques Duclos. The people of my childhood were not imaginary but flesh in blood. They were capable of both the best and the worst, the most noble dignity as well as the most abject servility" (46).*

In 1961, he began to find his way into politics, through love and rage. That year he was solemnly provided with a copy of the *Communist Manifesto* from a young militant friend named Bernard, but it wasn't that pamphlet that would open up the new world - indeed, he found the prefaces taxing and the body of the text did not meet his expectations of revelation. Teenage Annette, however, introduced him to music and literature. Her parents were Communists, and together with her and a wider circle of youth Bensaïd joined the Jeunesses Communiste group at school. Soon they were forty members - but members of the impatient, rebellious variety from the outset.

While their local group included both young women and men, the national authority structures of the French Communist Party were still bent on a "monastic segregation" of the sexes and attempted to impose this line on the local branch from on high. "At the first meeting," Bensaïd notes, "a wind of rebellion blew up. First (modest) victory against bureaucratic despotism: we obtained (by derogation!) the right to form a mixed group. It would have been too much for Annette and me to be separated on Thursdays in the name of a red catechism" (33)!

The insubordination didn't end there. His Young Communist crew found in their "smoky and alcoholic evenings a feeling of wide-open spaces, a taste of rebellion and poetry, far from the confined atmosphere of the local office where the Party bonzes were ensconced in their dullness" (35). The Communist students of his ilk were reading Che Guevara (from whose spirit Bensaïd drew boundless inspiration throughout his life), Frantz Fanon, and Sartre's preface to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. In the prose and ideas of Che's *Socialism and Man* in Cuba, Bensaïd discovered what for him was a "socialist humanism, lyrical and generous, and light years away from the petrified speeches of the Kremlin apparatchiks" (36). By 1965 his group of Young Communists had joined the Left Opposition, and came out against the Party's support of Mitterand's presidential candidacy, as well as the party's "lukewarm support for the struggle of the Vietnamese people" and its "tardy commitment to the Algerian FLN [National Liberation Front]" (38).

By 1965, Bensaïd was a member of the Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist Youth, JCR), the leading current of which was linked to the Fourth International. Prominent members included Alain Krivine, Henri Weber, and Gérard Verbizier. Bensaïd, however, found his closest link to “a vague tendency embodied by Jeanette Habel” which “could be described more or less as Guevarist” (52). Habel had brought Che’s *Socialism and Man in Cuba* back with her to Paris from a trip to Havana and was the first to translate it into French. For Habel and Bensaïd, Che’s speech to the Tricontinental conference in Algiers was both a “bold denunciation of Soviet bureaucratic egoism,” and “the internationalist manifesto of our generation. We felt with Che the ‘tragic isolation’ of the Vietnamese people, which dictated to us the categorical imperative of solidarity: ‘Create two, three, several Vietnams’ (54)!

## May 68

At the same time, Bensaïd was studying for his Masters degree under the supervision of Henri Lefebvre. He chose as his subject, “ ‘Lenin’s notion of revolutionary crisis’. Lefebvre calmly agreed to supervise this heterodox ‘research’” (55). Young Bensaïd’s chronological march through the bulk of Lenin’s *Collected Works* had begun, and the nascent intellectual origins of his later, penetrating writings on strategy are to be found in this early engagement with Lenin. It helped no doubt that he was reading Lenin at a moment when France was about to explode.

Indeed, Bensaïd had travelled with his new partner Martine to his mother’s cabin at Saint-Pierre-la-Mer to absorb and annotate the pages of Lenin while sitting on a beach. But news of tumult in Paris drove them to return in haste: “We immediately packed up Lenin, swimming costumes and sun creams” (58). May 68 had kicked off, and Bensaïd’s pen captures the scene upon his return:

*“... we had the feeling that the fire would go out with nightfall. But chainsaws appeared from no one knew where. Trees were chopped down. Overturned cars were transformed into ramparts, with loopholes and machicolations. The barricade-builders rivalled one another in imagination, as if competing for the most handsome subversive construction, decorating the paving stones with flowerpots, streamers, bits of bric-a-brac. The most grotesquely useless barricade was erected, by a kind of irony, whether deliberate or not, before the impasse of Royer-Collard! All the same, its defenders showed no less refractory determination to any idea of surrender” (60).*

“The planet seemed covered with flames,” he continues, “from which we saw only the light. History was breathing down our necks. The time of slow impatience had not yet arrived” (64).

Bensaïd reflects bitterly on the battles of historical memory over May 68, beginning with the twentieth anniversary of the events in France, taking place as it did during the purist period of Reagan and Thatcher’s ascendancy on an international tide of neoliberalism. The apostates of the French Left repented by making banal the content of 68, reduced to a mere “generational and cultural phenomenon, an uprising of youth against the archaisms of a centralizing Jacobin state, the hypocrisies of an outdated moral code, and the rigidity of established social hierarchies” (69). Its virtue, on this view, reduced to the way it pushed “the promotion of individual hedonism, sexual liberation, and an aspiration for decentralization. In other words, a neoliberal renewal of good old capitalism” (69).

Banished from polite discussion was the enormous workers’ revolt that underlay May 68, the extension of solidarity and equality, and the revolutionary rehearsal embedded in the eruption of anti-capitalism and the extension of revolutionary currents within French popular culture, however short-lived. What is more, when those repentant former activists of the French Left proved [n]ot content with banalizing the event, [their] discourses ascribe[d] it the responsibility for the

accumulated 'archaisms' and 'delays' of society.... May 68 supposedly reinforced 'social rigidities' (read: social rights that had been won) and obstructed a liberal reform that was naturally inscribed in the meaning of history" (71).

Bensaïd is particularly scathing when he engages the "smug self-satisfaction" of Henri Weber, a former comrade turned (neoliberal) Socialist Party politician, and an active voice against a left-wing recovery of the memory of 68. "The same kind of refrain," Bensaïd notes, "generally accompanies these reversals of allegiance: it's not us who've changed, it's life, it's the air, the spirit of the time. Life and the air easily take the blame" (77). Against the "blasé wisdom of sober old men" like Weber, Bensaïd offers the freedom dreams of the movement: "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 egotism" (77).

## **The Subjective Moment**

Louis Althusser, and a wider school of Marxist structuralism that he inspired, experienced a meteoric rise in French intellectual and activist circles following the end of 68. Indeed, Althusser's *For Marx* had been building in influence since its release in 1965. Bensaïd and his comrades were suspicious almost from the start of this research program in "militant anti-historicism" and "of building a conceptual paradise purged of all historicity" (78). The chasm separating the rising star and the young rebels was as political as it was philosophical. Althusser's siding with the bureaucratic order of the Party against the "student problems" made him instantly unappealing to those who no longer held "any illusions as to the capacities of the PCF for regeneration" (79).

Bensaïd reacted fiercely to the reigning structuralist orthodoxy, and particularly to its characteristic melange of simultaneous theoretical effrontery and political torpor:

*"A glacial Marxism, without style or passion, reduced to a scientific objectivism without critical subversion, gradually shrunk to a skeleton to be fleshed out in the livery of new dogmatisms. The inertia of structures ended up legitimizing strange compromises between an intransigent radicalism of theory and a resigned realism in practice" (80).*

What was the way out? How were radicals to "escape the morbid eternity of structures? How to extract ourselves from the voluptuous folds of the *longue durée*? How to break through the vicious circle of infernal repetition? How to glimpse the open door through which a smiling spectre or an untimely messiah might one day arrive" (81)?

A pathway of sorts was opened up, for Bensaïd at least, in his subjectivist turn to the Lúkacs of *History and Class Consciousness*, and to the study of psychoanalysis, epistemology, and linguistics. Such heterodox investigations - encouraged by the anti-dogma of Henri Lefebvre, still supervising Bensaïd's Master's dissertation at the time - became intertwined with, rather than acting as an alternative to, the classic sources of Trotsky, Luxemburg, and, above all, Lenin.

An orthodox Lenin of the political field was inflected in the hands of Bensaïd with psychoanalytic metaphor:

*"Criticizing the 'disorganizing' confusion between party and class, Lenin was indeed one of the first to conceive the specificity of the political field as a play of forces transfigured into a specific language, full of shifts, condensations and revelatory lapses. Pursuing this analogy, one might see a party in the role of an analyst listening to the social, whose dreams and nightmares it interprets. Conceived not in the mode of reflection, but that of transposition, this relationship between the*

*political and the social determines the possibility of alliances and founds the very notion of hegemony” (86).*

Inspired by Lenin, too, was Bensaïd’s conceptualization of politics as algebra rather than arithmetic, whose “language cannot be reduced to immediate social determinants, as presupposed by the notions of reflection and superstructure.... For, contrary to what is imagined by the mechanical Marxists whom Lenin targeted, politics ‘does not docilely follow economics.’ And its strategic objectives cannot be directly deduced from economic struggles” (87). Bensaïd took from this the lesson of searching out the unexpected events and avenues through which politics was played out, through which the “hidden reality of social relations is unveiled” (87). His golden rule of politics in the period: “Stir up all spheres!” (88).

If, by his own admission, there was an ultra-Left element to the subjectivist turn of his post-1968 moment (a time of “hasty Leninism”), buried deep in a footnote later in the text is an evocative rendition of Sartre’s thoughts on the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity which Bensaïd would make his own. In that passage a new, dynamic, and interlaced equilibrium between the twin elements is achieved: “I thus borrowed from Sartre’s critique of dialectical reason the definition of the project, stretched between its necessary conditions and the open horizons of possibles, as ‘the moving unity of objectivity and subjectivity’” (335).

But if the subjectivism of the late 1960s had perhaps been inflated as a reaction to the popularity of Althusser within many circles of the French Left, “it at least had the merit of shaking the chains of structural fatality and interpellating each person’s responsibility” (83). Bensaïd continued later in life to pursue this balance of the objective and subjective, following Blanqui, Proust, and Benjamin in tying “the necessity of historical determinations to the contingency of the event, making it possible to grasp on the wing the opportunity of a conjuncture.... An art of the balance of forces, mediations and going against the grain” (291).

### **A Trotskyist of Sorts**

At the 1969 National Congress of the JCR the Ligue Communiste is formed, and 80 per cent of delegates, including Bensaïd, back its entrance into the Fourth International. French presidential elections are approaching, and the Ligue is bold from its outset, deciding that they will run twenty-eight year old Alain Krivine (practically ancient next to twenty-three-year old Daniel and the other young ones) as their presidential candidate. In the event, the campaign allowed for a bold propagandistic splash into national politics in what was the first televised presidential campaign in French history - in terms of votes, however, Krivine was annihilated by everyone. It is striking to note the loving character portrait of Krivine offered by Bensaïd in this section, when the reader has already encountered by now numerous eviscerations of the political curve in the life of Henri Weber:

*“Formed in the struggle against all forms of bureaucracy, Alain was a kind of reassuring elder brother, and an example of egalitarian rigour, always ready to play his part in hard graft, always available, even in the middle of the night, to rush to the aid of a comrade held in a police station, always read to enjoy the most frugal snack or be satisfied with the most uncomfortable hospitality from a fellow militant” (93).*

Such mini-sketches proliferate throughout the memoir, revealing through sparse but exacting detail Bensaïd’s summary verdicts on a wide array of personalities. Here he is on Ernest Mandel, preeminent economist intellectual of the Fourth International in the twentieth century. This passage appears after earlier, more flattering depictions of Mandel’s encyclopaedic and multilingual abilities of the mind:

*“When I worked alongside him, he inspired in me more in the way of respect than affection. Like Proust’s Françoise, he often seemed more generous toward distant humanity than attentive to those closest at hand. Dialogue with him was not easy. Either he administered his interlocutor a lesson in monologue form, or subjected them to a tight questioning, seeking to glean information suited to confirming his own opinion. The relationship was rarely reciprocal and egalitarian. Except with [Charles-André] Udry, whom he rightly treated as an alter ego and designated heir” (260).*

Around the time when the Ligue was formed and Krivine’s presidential campaign was launched, the youth were simultaneously looking onto Latin America as,

*“a kind of twin continent in our political imagination... we recognized kindred spirits in the young militants of the Chilean Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), the Uruguayan MLN-Tupamaros, and a fortiori the Revolutionary Workers’ Party of Argentina (a section of the Fourth International). These organizations were born in a decade of the shockwave triggered by the Algerian, Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions” (95).*

Bensaïd became one of a few responsible in the Ligue for forging relationships with the nuclei of future Fourth International organizations inside the Spanish state. This involved repeated trips to Barcelona and Madrid, as well as to Bayonne and Bordeaux to meet with “the leaders of the ‘6<sup>th</sup> Assembly’ ETA. This group, a majority at their organization’s last congress, had developed from traditional Basque nationalism toward a Guevarist internationalism under the influence of the Cuban revolution” (104). Comrades in France were now studying revolutionary classics on how to build bases within the military and how to forge urban insurrection. The Fourth International had established a small-arms factory on the Moroccan border to supply the FLN in Algeria and they “envisaged repeating this operation for our Basque and Spanish comrades, in the perspective of a rapid fall of the Franquist regime” (20).

If the politics of the period was of a hasty Leninism, Bensaïd’s love life was likewise a tempest. At 23, he fell for Alexandra, a distant relative of Jane Fonda: “In 1968, during the Sorbonne occupation, she arrived at the JCR booth on a pair of roller skates, wearing leggings and a mini skirt.... I fell under the charm of her appreciative gaze, her overflowing vitality and her delicious Hollywood accent” (97). This young love for Alexandra was complicated by a simultaneous pull toward the tragic Martine, at whose funeral he weeps later in the memoir.

The revolution in this particular sphere of human relations will be slower going, Bensaïd concludes:

*“In these year of liberation of morals and attacks on the sanctuarising of private life, militants sought to free themselves from outdated prejudices about relationships and fidelity. Despite solemn shared proclamations of liberation, however, individuals were not all equal in the face of jealousy and heartache. The old Adam (or Eve) is not so easily shed. If one might hope to overthrow political power by assault, or revolutionize property relations by legislative decision, the Oedipus complex or the incest temptation cannot be abolished by decree. The transformation of mentalities and cultures is a matter of very longue durée” (98).*

Both relationships end badly and leave “a painful and bitter aftertaste” (99). Some years later, in 1972, Bensaïd falls for Sophie, who would be his partner for the remainder of his life.

## **Argentinian Wounds**

By some distance, the darkest sections of the memoir pivot around his extended visit to Argentina in 1973. “So many fallen, to whom we owe a debt,” he writes. “Although brief, the Argentinian episode



remains the most painful in my life as a militant. It certainly helped build the superego, laying down the imperative to continue, not give up at the first hurdle or give way to the first gloomy mood” (144).

Two disputing currents had emerged within the Argentine Trotskyist Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (Workers’ Revolutionary Party, PRT) in the wake of, on the one hand, Che’s death in Bolivia in 1967, and the recent defeats suffered by guerrilla movements in Peru, Colombia, and Guatemala, and, on the other, the 1969 Cordobazo, or urban uprising in Córdoba, Argentina in 1969. Hugo Bressano, aka Nahuel Moreno, led the PRT-La Verdad (The True PRT), and “argued on the basis of these urban explosions for a return to the classical forms of strike and urban uprising, against a fetishism of the rural guerrilla inspired by the Cuban revolution (or its legend)” (128). By contrast, Mario Roberto Santucho led the PRT-Combatiente (The Combative PRT), and argued for continuing with a strategy of clandestine armed struggle, deducing from the Cordobazo “the need to strengthen military preparation with the perspective of transforming these spontaneous struggles into organized insurrectionary movements” (128).

At the Ninth World Congress of the Fourth International, in April 1969, a majority came out in sympathetic favour of armed struggle. It was in preparation for the Tenth World Congress of 1974 that Bensaïd was sent with others in 1973 to Argentina to defend a majority line which had altered by this point. Many in the Fourth International majority had by this stage begun to pull back from the 1969-1972 line on armed struggle, while continuing to insist that any democratic openings in the Latin American context would likely be short-lived, and that consequently arming workers for defensive struggle would remain a key task. [1]

Bensaïd describes the effervescent sensation of a living Left in the streets of Buenos Aires upon his arrival, where there was “an extraordinary freedom of movement, expression and assembly. The kiosks were full of publications with red covers. Che’s portrait could be seen everywhere. And yet the press reported a daily violence – armed ambushes, tiroteros, kidnappings and ransom demands” (129). His hosts led him into student meetings, where “everyone was armed to the teeth” (131). Bensaïd describes the ritual of these events:

*“At La Plata, Buenos Aires or Córdoba, meetings began with a distribution of weapons and ammunition against the possibility of a hostile intrusion. While mate was prepared, a responsible comrade explained the evacuation plan. I would double-check that my safety-catch functioned properly, praying to the proletarian godmother that the appearance of a postman’s cap would not trigger a deadly civil war”* (131).

In retrospect, Bensaïd’s assessment of the strategy of armed struggle in this context, and more broadly, became much more nuanced with time than it had been in the late 1960s:

*“Our comrades were young and intrepid, full of confidence in the socialist future of humanity. Three years later, half of the people I met at these meetings had been arrested, tortured and murdered. It was clear that we were on the wrong path. There was too great a gap between legal activity on the one hand and underground conspiracy on the other. The country’s situation might well be fragile, unstable and uncertain. It was possible, however, to take advantage of the democratic opening, however ephemeral this was, to build up forces, while prudently maintaining an apparatus that would make it possible to return to clandestinity if the need arose”* (132).

Régis Debray published *La Critique des armes* in 1974 after being freed from a Bolivian jail. In it he calls into question some of the foundations of his earlier defence of foquismo in *Revolution in the Revolution*. “This critical rethink,” Bensaïd notes, “echoed our own questioning. [Debray] emphasized the complexity of the countries of Latin America, which the texts of the Tricontinental

had classified as colonial along with those of Africa and Asia subject to direct forms of dependency. But their sovereignty, even if in part only formal, was not without its strategic consequences" (142). Bensaïd reflects on the ways in which "[a] military apparatus generates its own needs" (141), contains within it the bureaucratic logic of sustaining that apparatus. Having a cadre of increasingly professional, armed militants means that, "[i]nstead of melting into a social milieu like fish in water, their existence depends ever more on an expanding apparatus" (142), financed by robbing banks, for example, to obtain weapons. The memoir ultimately arrives at a critical evaluation of the Fourth International's position on armed struggle in 1969:

*"Even if we had for our part always kept our distance from his theory of the foco, we could not help recognizing ourselves, at least in part, in Debray's (self-) criticism of the illusions of a 'hasty Leninism.' We also had to examine our conscience. The armed struggle voted at the 9<sup>th</sup> World Congress was an ill-timed generalization, and the tragedy of Popular Unity in Chile a lesson for the European Left"* (143).

But if his experiences in Argentina left Bensaïd with an altered view on armed struggle, he was very far from being persuaded by any moralistic pacifism.

## **Reflections on Violence**

The memoir transitions from Argentinian terrain to much wider reflections on the extremes in violence of the twentieth century, from Auschwitz, Dresden, and Hiroshima, to Rwanda, the threat of nuclear weapons, and the War on Terror. Terrorism in the hands of George W. Bush is seen as the new "indeterminate and indefinable category" (147), of a permanent war without limits of territory or duration, a category useful in concocting a world of Manichean Good and Evil. What characterizes the new modalities of extreme conflict in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are the asymmetries in power between contending parties, such that "victims on the side of the powerful are counted in the single figures, but by tens and hundreds of thousands on the side of the dominated (when anyone still bothers to count them)" (152).

The narrative then wanders into the realm of violence in the revolutionary tradition, which for Bensaïd was problematically "accustomed to a certain insouciance, opposing the violence of the oppressed to the violence of the oppressors as if there was no common ground at all between them" (153). He identifies closely with the defence of legitimate, liberatory violence on the part of the colonized, as captured in the writings of Fanon and Sartre. Yet, he notes how that legitimate justification "sometimes drifted, particularly in the Maoist milieus, toward a disturbing fetishism of violence" (153-154).

On the balance of terror enacted in "the past century's theatre of cruelty," however, Bensaïd properly leaves no room for equivocation or denial:

*"... revolutionaries have been victims more often than executioners, and often doubly victim - persecuted both by military and fascist dictatorships and by Stalinist bureaucrats or agents of the Gestapo. The social democrats, on the other hand, have been party to all colonial wars that should not have been waged, and absent from those wars that should have been waged, in defence of the Spanish republic or Algerian independence. Not forgetting their share of responsibility in the murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, which marked the beginning of criminal practice within the workers' movement"* (154-155).

As far as the violence of the period of the Soviet Thermidor was concerned, for Bensaïd and his comrades, Solzhenitsyn's treatment of the gulags came as no revelation. Familiar with the texts of

Victor Serge, Ante Ciliga, Leon Trotsky, and David Rousset, they had long since sided against the different varieties of bureaucratic authoritarianism expressed through the array of twentieth-century Stalinist formations.

The remainder of the discussion in these sections of the memoir traces commitments to violence on sections of the far Left in Italy and Germany in the 1970s, compared to its relative absence in France over the same period, and the practical lessons on the question of violence, and the logics of guerrilla struggle in varied contexts, which the Ligue drew from developments in Argentina, Spain, Chile, Portugal, Guatemala, and elsewhere over the 1970s.

Bensaïd concludes that any “extinction of social and physical violence in human society is unfortunately no something we shall see tomorrow.” For the oppressed, so long as social relations in actually existing capitalist society remain relations of force, “a dialectical turn, by way of which gentleness would ‘enter the heart of the most violent by their seeing the vanity of everything’, sadly remains, as far ahead as we can see, too hazardous to form the basis of politics. It is also why one can be resolutely peaceful without falling into the illusion of an angelic pacifism” (166). Ultimately, on this view, if we are “unable to eradicate violence in a foreseeable future, we must at least work to discipline and restrain it, which presupposes the development of a new legal culture, and a culture of violence itself” (166).

### **A Triadic Crisis of Marxism**

While July 1979 witnessed the Sandinista revolutionaries’ capture of Managua, the hopeful glow from Nicaragua’s embers could not quite light up the North American or European Left in the 1980s. Thatcher reigned in London, and Reagan in Washington. Marxism’s crisis was threefold: “a theoretical crisis of Marxism, a strategic crisis of the revolutionary project, and a social crisis of the subject of universal emancipation” (198). The intellectuals and the left-wing politicians were saying their farewells: “farewells to arms, to Marxism, to revolution, to the proletariat” (198).

Postmodernism helped fill the void, with its “rejection of ‘grand narratives’, a resignation to the fragmentation of meaning, a loss of historical perspective, the shrinking of temporality to an immediate present, the pleasure of the ephemeral and zapping, the aestheticizing of rebellion” (201). Meanwhile, neoliberal economic restructuring proceeded apace, albeit unevenly, across much of the world. “In the 1980s,” Bensaïd suggests, “confronted with this counter-reform, revolutionary hope withdrew to a line of stoic resistance” (204). Still, in Latin America, possibilities seemed to persist. The Nicaraguan revolution found its echo in the mass guerrilla insurgencies in Guatemala and El Salvador, and these were not resolutely defeated until the early 1990s.

The most crucial anomaly in the world tide of neoliberal counter-offensive for many in the Fourth International, however, was Brazil, with its wave of workers’ strikes, agrarian revolts, and the incipient bases of an emerging Workers Party (PT), originally established in 1978. As part of the leadership of the international, Bensaïd was delegated the task of following developments in the giant of South America. Dynamic industrial growth over the 1970s had created the ABC industrial triangle within the metropolitan area of São Paulo. “Formed in underground resistance to the dictatorship,” Bensaïd writes, “a new radical left emerged from the catacombs, politically fragmented and geographically scattered. It constituted a mosaic of small organizations, for the most part tending to Maoism or Trotskyism” (214).

Bensaïd recounts with loving detail his cultural, as well as political, immersion in the scene of the working-class Brazilian Left over multiple extended visits each year for most of the 1980s. Yet, he also recalls how his initial encounters with the comrades of São Paulo were marked for him by their

alien style of communication. It would take some time to become acculturated:

*“Parachuted into the São Paulo metropolis, this little team of discrete and stubborn mineros were poles away from the carnivalesque exuberance that popular imagery has of Brazil. Accustomed as I was to meetings in which the turn to speak is bitterly disputed, I long found their meditative councils disconcerting. They could remain silent for minutes at a time, while they cautiously smoothed their post-colonial goatees and seemed to seek inspiration in the hieroglyphic cracks in the ceiling” (216).*

Rather than a mere repetition of Ernest Mandel’s famous optimism – occasionally fantastical – the hope of establishing a mass workers’ party in Brazil was grounded in a material and social reality. One average scene from a worker’s assembly in the ABC industrial zone captures this nicely:

*“One Sunday morning, my old accomplice Celso Castro, who had also worked full-time for the Ligue during his exile, took me to an assembly of 80,000 workers, gathered in the São Bernardo do Campo stadium. Lula’s talent as a popular agitator amazed me. The archbishop of São Paulo, Dom Evaristo Arns, came to support the strikers, opening the churches for them to organize solidarity and food distribution. He asked the crowd to pray for the success of the struggle” (218).*

The workers of the industrial belt allowed the PT to grow rapidly, while it simultaneously spread its tentacles into the countryside via the Christian base communities of liberation theology. “The formation of the PT,” Bensaïd recognized, “bucked the trend in the landscape of the international left. Not only was it contemporary with the neoliberal counter-offensive in Europe and North America, but it was followed very soon by the first signs of deindustrialization in certain Latin American countries” (221).

His investment in the formation of the PT – visiting Brazil two or three times a year between 1980 and 1990 – did not blind Bensaïd to what it had become by the time Lula assumed office for the first time in 2002. At best, the party by then seemed to have two souls, one a residual legacy from the bottom up struggles of workers and landless peasants, the other a reflection of the new political elite, poised to capitulate to the edificial core of a neoliberalism long-since implanted in Brazilian society. “Six months [of Lula in office] had been enough,” he notes,

*“to make clear the dominant logic of the government: stability first – defeat inflation and reassure the markets! Only then, according to an incautious presidential formula, could ‘the spectacle of growth’ begin.... The general neoliberal orientation was clearly proclaimed in the appointment to the head of the central bank of a former director of the Bank of Boston, in the acceptance of the debt agreements with the IMF, compromise over the Free Trade Area of the Americas, pension reform, astronomic interest rates over 20 per cent on average, and the obsessive quest for a trade surplus of 4.5 per cent” (228).*

## **The Land of the Old Man’s Exile**

Among the few areas in which the memoir loses its thread, the following come to mind. First, and something not of the author’s doing, the extensive notes at the bottom of so many pages, documenting the minutiae of each and every political figure – however obscure – to be mentioned in the text, started to wear on this reader, like so many Wikipedia entries. Such marginalia, however, is a matter of taste; and some readers will no doubt enjoy the fine details. A second blemish can be found in the repetitive, and sometimes empty haranguing of often unspecified Maoist groups at different points, which strikes a discordant note against the non-sectarian register of much of the rest of the book.

A more serious flaw, though, in tone, prose, and content occurs in Bensaïd's treatment of Mexico. At its worst, there are passages which descend into an uncharacteristic exoticism. None of the depth of the investigations into the rhythms and dynamics of Argentine and Brazilian politics is echoed in the analysis of Mexico. "In Mexico," he writes, "reality often goes beyond fiction" (238), it's a "haunted country, a land of spectres" (240), where "nothing should surprise" (240); he speaks of the "vices and virtues of their dark Mexico"; Frida Kahlo is described as "an Aztec goddess, decorated with jewels of stone and metal" (241), while Diego Rivera is an "ogre and lover, greedily physical, as if inspired by the memory of those cannibal Indians who cooked their potzole with the flesh of human sacrifice" (241), and so on.

All the same, there are insightful and engaging accounts here on how the aging American liberal philosopher John Dewey (almost 80 at the time) travelled down to Mexico to hold impartial hearings with Trotsky (the Dewey Commission) regarding the Moscow Trials and the relevant charges facing members of the Left Opposition, and Trotsky himself. There is also a litany of literary and psychological gems buried and hidden amidst clichés on the ostensible features of the Mexican character.

One such evocative and penetrating passage relates the dynamics of the affair between Trotsky and Khalo: "In the course of this crisis, [Leon] resolved to break with Frida. People often have the illusion that they can leave their past behind. It always ends up catching you treacherously on the turn. It is always a length or two in advance, the past. It appears before you like a grinning ape" (250). A few pages later, the same affair is used as an entry into Trotsky's dispute with André Breton over the censorship of art - Breton was in favour of freedom in art, except when it ran against the grain of revolution. Trotsky was more libertarian:

*"... this last year, in the blue house, he had experienced the test, always begun anew, of amorous disorder, or human weakness, of the painful work of grieving. He had been able to verify once again that sentiments decidedly do not march at the same rhythm as decrees and orders: that manners, mentalities and emotions follow a different temporality from economics and politics. Economics needs a plan, he concluded, but for intellectual creation 'the revolution must establish from the beginning an anarchist regime of liberty. Yes, anarchist! No authority, no constraint, not the slightest trace of command!'" (254).*

## **Preventing Peaceful Sleep**

Bensaïd, finally, lays some seeds for organizing our impatience in the potentially fertile soil of the age of austerity. He rediscovers the messianic rationality of Walter Benjamin and the role of secular prophecy in a period of ecological catastrophe and the social devastations of the latest phase of capitalism. Secular prophecy, unlike utopia, "harasses the present in the name of threatened tradition. It does not promise a guaranteed future in the form of destiny. It warns in the conditional mood of the probability of catastrophe that there is still time to forestall" (291). For Bensaïd, the secular prophet "is first of all someone who prevents peaceful sleep. His messianic impatience is an ambush, a watch, a guard, the fully present experience of a proclaimed future that tarries and fails to arrive; they very opposite, therefore, of weariness at the sad repetition of works and days" (291).

Like the British social historian E.P. Thompson when he reclaimed the insurrectionary legacy of the English Luddites, or the early twentieth-century Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui when he found in the communal traditions of the indigenous ayllus a well-spring of anti-capitalist values and culture, or the Brazilian-French theorist Michael Löwy who has done so much to marry revolutionary Romanticism and modern Marxism, Bensaïd engages in, and appeals to, a careful dialectic of the

Romantic past and the socialist future. And he does so, mirroring the practice of so many movements of the oppressed, out of fidelity to the defeated dead:

*"The defeated have a long memory. Often, this is all that they do have. It is the only chance left for them to escape being the prey of the winners, and to defy the hellish repetition of defeats. Only their fidelity to subjugated ancestors can still reverse the direction of signs, rescue a tradition threatened by conformism, and the latest fashion of embourgeoisement (which is, quite precisely, a style marked by conformism)" (288).*

When the left-indigenous insurrectionary cycle of revolt shook the foundations of Bolivian society in the early years of this century, many rebels in the streets of El Alto saw themselves as the incarnation of Tupaj Katari's return. Katari, before he was drawn and quartered by the Spanish for his leadership of the massive anti-colonial uprising of 1780-81, is purported to have said: "I am one man, but I will return as millions."

Since the onset of austerity following the early years of the latest crisis in global capitalism, successful defensive - much less offensive - actions of the Left have been few and far between. The time has come, clearly, to reinvent ourselves, while remaining loyal to our subjugated ancestors. "Start all over? Certainly. But not from zero. Not from nothing, from a blank page or a clean slate.... One always begins in the middle..." (200).

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**P.S.**

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<http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/955.php#continue>

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**Footnotes**

[1] Thanks for Charlie Post for sharing his knowledge with me on this period. Any errors in interpretation of the period are mine.