

Daniel Bensaïd: a Marxism of bifurcation

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Daniel Bensaïd has the merit of having introduced a new concept into the Marxist lexicon: bifurcation. He has, so to speak, sketched the broad outlines of what one might call a Marxism of bifurcation.

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Ten years after his death, the thought of Daniel Bensaïd remains more alive than ever: We read and discuss it not only in France, but in Brazil, in Spain, in the United States and elsewhere in the world. Rarely has the revolutionary imagination found such a striking expression in our time.

A few personal remarks first. Daniel Bensaïd and I campaigned together in the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) we also participated in the founding of the New Anticapitalist Party. We were not always in the same tendency of the LCR, but we shared the desire to associate Leon Trotsky with Ernesto Che Guevara, as well as the passion for the revolutionary struggles in Latin America. On several occasions we intervened together in the debates between Brazilian Marxists. We also had some disagreements, since Daniel was an authentic Leninist - but capable of a subtle and innovative reading of Vladimir Ilyich - and I was a follower, or better still a lover, of Rosa Luxemburg.

The discovery of Walter Benjamin in the late 1980s brought us a lot closer. My book *Redemption et Utopie*, in 1988, which discussed Benjamin at length, interested him, despite his lack of appetite for religion. I asked him at that time to write an article together on the author of the theses *On the concept of history* and he replied: “why not write a book together?” [1]. But ultimately, he wrote it himself, and it was one of his most important works. Besides, we had some differences: Daniel was far from sharing my enthusiasm for anticapitalist romanticism, communist utopia and liberation theology. He watched from a distance, his regard tinged with irony, as I walked over these quicksands; but we had a common attraction for Charles Péguy - an author I discovered thanks to Daniel; simply I saw him as a romantic and a Christian socialist and Daniel saw him as classical and as a socialist in love with Joan of Arc...

In 2005 we wrote an article together on “Auguste Blanqui, heretical communist”, a definition which applies very well to Daniel himself. It appeared in a collective book edited by our friends Philippe Horcoff and Alain Maillard, *Les socialismes français à l'épreuve du pouvoir. Pour une critique mélancolique de la gauche*. [2] We greatly admired Blanqui, this implacable opponent of the bourgeoisie, of positivist ideology and of the doctrines of progress, and we agreed on the interpretation of his writings, during friendly discussions at the Café *Le Charbon*. Our main difference did not concern Blanqui, but Marx. Daniel criticized what he considered a “sociological approach” of the founding father: the belief that the concentration of workers in the factories necessarily leads to the development of consciousness and organization; I insisted on the point that,

for the philosophy of Marxian praxis, it is the experience of struggle which produces class consciousness. We found a compromise...

Like many people, I felt his disappearance as an irreparable loss for our cause. But he left us his work, whose critical and emancipatory potential is inexhaustible.

The turning point of 1989

Daniel had written some important books on revolutionary strategy before 1989, but from that year on, with the publication of *Moi la Révolution: Remembrances d'un bicentenaire indigne* (Gallimard, 1989) began a new period, characterized not only by an enormous productivity - dozens of works, including several devoted to Marx - but also by a new literary quality of writing, a fantastic bubbling of ideas, an astonishing inventiveness. The reasons for this turning point, at the same time personal, political and historical are complex, and infused with an element of mystery.

Despite their very great diversity, these writings are nonetheless woven from a few common threads: the memory of the struggles - and defeats - of the past, the interest in new forms of anti-capitalism, and the concern for the new problems with which revolutionary strategy is confronted. His theoretical thinking was inseparable from his militant commitment, whether he was writing on Joan of Arc - *Jeanne de guerre lasse* (Gallimard, 1991) - or on the foundation of the NPA (*Prendre Parti*, with Olivier Besancenot, 2009).

Consequently, his writings have a strong personal, emotional, ethical and political charge, which gives them an unusual human quality. The multiplicity of his references can be confusing: Marx, Lenin and Trotsky, of course, but also Auguste Blanqui, Charles Péguy, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, without forgetting Blaise Pascal, Chateaubriand, Kant, Nietzsche and many others. Despite this astonishing variety, apparently eclectic, his discourse is nevertheless remarkably coherent.

The Melancholy Gamble (1997)

All of Daniel's books enrich revolutionary culture, but my favourite is *Le Pari Melancolique* (Fayard, 1997). It is a personal choice and therefore arbitrary. But it seems to me that it is in this work that he goes the furthest in the renewal of Marxist thought. It was written at a critical moment of the 90s, weighed down by the negative charge of capitalist restoration, without real resistance in Russia and the other countries of Eastern Europe, but also lit up by the star of hope, thanks to the Zapatista uprising of 1994 and, above all, to the formidable movement of the workers' and popular revolt of 1995 in France.

In my copy of the book Daniel wrote a dedication, which refers to our common interests, but he did not fail to mark, in a small parenthesis, his difference: "To Michael, *Le Pari Melancolique*, on the (profane) relevance of messianic reason, in friendship, Daniel".

The first part of the book is a lucid diagnosis of the "world disequilibrium" that results from capitalist globalization. Unlike so many other Marxists, he does not limit himself to speaking of the economic crisis, but immediately places himself in an ecological perspective, by noting the explosive discrepancy between market time and biological time. He was one of the first, in the revolutionary Marxist movement, to realize the capital importance of the ecological crisis.

Daniel notes that market regulation is short-sighted: its logic depreciates the future and ignores the

effects of irreversibility that are specific to the biosphere. This logic presupposes a nature that can be exploited and degraded at will. As the great precursor of contemporary liberalism Jean Baptiste Say wrote, "natural wealth is inexhaustible because otherwise we would not get it for free". Whereas natural rhythms harmonize over centuries or millennia, capitalist economic reason seeks rapid gains and immediate profits.

The biosphere, underlines Daniel Bensaïd, drawing on the work of René Passat, has its own immanent rationality, irreducible to the mechanical reason of the market. Ecological values are not convertible into market values, and vice versa. As the eco-tax controversy illustrates, ecological effects and costs cannot be translated into the miserable language of market measurements. We need an anti-capitalist alternative: eco-communism.

Globalization is also traversed by another contradiction, no less dangerous: the formal rationality of capitalist globalization promotes everywhere the irrationality of identity panics, the abstract universality of merchant cosmopolitanism unleashes particularisms and hardens nationalisms. In this universe governed by the law of profit, subject to the faceless tyranny of capital, the walls are not abolished, they are moved: thus, we have the Europe of Schengen, surrounded by watchtowers. We could add in 2020: and by tens of thousands of migrants drowning in the waters of the Mediterranean.

Class internationalism remains the best response to tribal nationalism and imperialism. It is the heir of the universality of reason proclaimed by the philosophy of the Enlightenment and of the revolutionary concept of citizenship - open to foreigners - of the republican constitution of June 24, 1793, adopted by a Convention in which sat - but not for long ! - Anarchists Cloots and Thomas Paine. Finally, solidarity with the "other" is based on an old tradition that goes back to the Old Testament: you will not oppress the foreigner because you were foreigners - and undocumented - in the land of Egypt...

The last part of the book, "The revolution in its labyrinths", is in my eyes the most innovative and the most "inspired" part of the work. There are many Old Testament references. A non-Jewish Jew - in the sense given to this term by Isaac Detacher - an atheist and anti-Zionist, Daniel was no less interested in Jewish tradition, messianism, Marranism, the prophets. The biblical prophet, as Max Weber had already suggested in his work on ancient Judaism, does not perform magic rites, but invites action. Unlike the apocalyptic wait-and-see attitude and the oracles of an inexorable fate, prophecy is a conditional anticipation, which seeks to ward off the worst, to keep open the range of possibilities.

At the origin of prophecy, in the Babylonian exile, is an ethical requirement which is forged in the resistance to any reasons of state. This high requirement spans the centuries: Bernard Lazare, the Dreyfusard and libertarian socialist was, according to Péguy, an example of a modern prophet, animated by a "force of bitterness and disillusionment", a breath of indomitable resistance to authority.

Those who resisted powers and fatalities, all these "princes of the possible" who were prophets, heretics, dissidents and other rebels, were probably often mistaken. They nevertheless traced a barely readable path and saved the oppressed past from the gross pillage of the victors.

According to Daniel Bensaïd, there is prophecy in any great human, romantic, aesthetic or revolutionary adventure. The revolutionary prophecy is not a forecast, but a project, without any assurance of victory. The revolution, not as a pre-manufactured model, but as a strategic hypothesis, remains the ethical horizon without which the will renounces, the spirit of resistance capitulates, loyalty fails, tradition (of the oppressed) is forgotten. Without the conviction that the vicious circle of

fetishism and the infernal dance of the commodity can be broken, the end is lost in the means, the goal in the movement, principles in tactics.

The bifurcation and the gamble

Daniel has the merit of having introduced a new concept into the Marxist lexicon: bifurcation. He has, so to speak, sketched the broad outlines of what one might call a bifurcation Marxism. Blanqui certainly used this term, but in an astronomical context; Rosa Luxemburg does not use the word, but the idea is at the heart of the Junius Pamphlet of 1915: socialism or barbarism. Daniel hardly quotes Rosa Luxemburg: it seems to me that this is a limitation... But his approach goes further.

His rereading of Marx, in the light of Blanqui, Walter Benjamin and Charles Péguy, led him to conceive of history as a series of crossroads and bifurcations, a field of possibilities in which the class struggle occupies a decisive place, but whose outcome is unpredictable. The idea of revolution is opposed to the mechanical chain of an implacable temporality. Refractory to the causal unfolding of ordinary facts, it is, for Walter Benjamin as for Bensaïd, interruption.

It follows that revolutionary political engagement is not based on any progressive “scientific certainty” but on a reasoned gamble on the future. Daniel was inspired here by the remarkable work - too forgotten today - by Lucien Goldmann on Pascal: for the 17th century Jansenist thinker, the existence of God cannot be demonstrated by facts; for the believer, it can only be a gamble on which he commits his life. According to Goldmann, a similar - but profane - reasoning applies to the socialist future of humanity: it is a hope that one cannot demonstrate “scientifically” but on which it is necessary to gamble and thus commit one’s entire existence. The gamble is inevitable, in one way or the other: as Pascal wrote, it is necessary to gamble, we are on board the ship any action, any commitment is necessarily based on a gamble, it is therefore a “work for the uncertain”. In the religion of the hidden god (Pascal) as in revolutionary politics (Marx), concludes Daniel, the obligation to take a gamble defines the tragic condition of modern man.

As Enzo Traverso aptly observes, in his beautiful book *Melancolie de gauche* (2016), Daniel Bensaïd’s thought was at odds with the Stalinist historicism of the PCF, which reproduced some of the features of German social democracy criticized by Walter Benjamin: linear vision of history as the growth of the productive forces, confidence in “progress” and certainty of final victory. [3].

Nothing is more foreign to the revolutionary, insisted Daniel, than the paralysing faith in a necessary progress, in a guaranteed future. Pessimistic, he nevertheless refused to capitulate. His utopia is that of the principle of resistance to probable catastrophe. The gamble is not wishful thinking, a simple moral option: as Lucien Goldmann already pointed out, it translates into action - that is to say, for Daniel, strategic action, militant intervention at the heart of the contradictions of reality.

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P.S.

• International Viewpoint, 23 February 2020:
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6698>

Footnotes

[1] Walter Benjamin, marxists.org [“On the Concept of History”](#).

[2] *Les socialismes français à l'épreuve du pouvoir. Pour une critique mélancolique de la gauche* (French socialists in the test of power. For a melancholic critique of the left) Paris, Textual, 2006.

[3] Enzo Traverso, *Mélancolie de Gauche* Paris, La Découverte, 2016. Traverso dedicates a whole chapter of his book to Bensaïd, who was undoubtedly one of the inspirers of his research.