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Review: “Strategies of Resistance” & “Who are the Trotskyists?”

Thursday 21 January 2010, by [SERGE Daniel](#) (Date first published: 12 January 2010).

New Socialist - NS received this review on the same day that we received the sad news of Daniel Bensaïd’s death. An obituary in English of this important French socialist thinker and leader is online here: François Sabado, [Daniel Bensaïd: militant, intellectual, friend](#)

Strategies of Resistance (2009) collects a series of essays on the Trotskyist movement, covering its history and the challenges facing today’s revolutionaries. Its author, Daniel Bensaïd (1946-2010) was one of the chief theoreticians of the Fourth International, the grouping of revolutionary socialist organizations first established by Trotsky in 1938.

From the above, it should be clear that *Strategies* is not an introductory booklet. It’s aimed as a primer for activists who want to understand the history of their movement. However, if you are a beginner, you will be lost among its constant references to Stalinism and anti-Stalinist revolutions, the dialectical movement of history and the trajectory of the USSR. But for someone who knows socialism, and who doesn’t mind embarking on unfamiliar terrain, *Strategies* is immensely rewarding.

The bulk of the collection is taken up by “Who Are The Trotskyists?,” a tour through the murky waters of the left of the international communist movement. Bensaïd guides readers decade by decade from the post-Russian revolution debates on “socialism in one country,” to the formation of the Fourth International and its bunkered history through the post-WW2 era, to the flowering of Marxist activity in the 1960s and 70s, ending with a sober assessment of the post-USSR era. It’s the story of a small group of revolutionaries who fought their way through inhuman conditions: firstly against the Stalinist bureaucracy of the USSR, secondly against capitalist imperialism and fascism, and finally against their own internal divisions. They established groups, sometimes thousands-strong, that intervened politically on the issues of the day. Trotskyists played a central role in supporting struggles against colonial powers, in Latin American revolutionary movements and in workers’ struggles in Europe.

The emphasis is on “sober.” While Bensaïd represents the Fourth International and not the political currents that left it, he is not drawing a red thread from his party back to Old Man Trotsky. He is critical of the post-war expectations of a new global war and the guerrilla adventures of the 1970s. However, his task is to situate all these developments historically, and not to fall into what he calls ‘the condescension of posterity’, judging the hopes and fears of a past epoch by our own. In the 1950s, given the nuclear build-up and the Korean War, it was quite reasonable to expect capitalism to enter another holocaust in the near future. With the upsurge of anti-colonial struggles in the 1960s, it made sense to consider forming armed struggle groups in poor countries. That history

judged differently does not make the Trotskyists' decisions the inevitable result of weaknesses in their doctrine, or of Marxism itself – although Bensaid condemns those who would take Trotsky's words as sacred relics, rather than strategic pieces of the moment. Rather, their story is told through the eyes of participants. It's up to the reader to find inspiration in people from earlier times trying to change the world.

The first essay ends abruptly at the turn of the millennium, and the debates it refers to are so complex that Bensaid can only summarize their decisions, not how they worked at the time. To show this process, *Strategies* provides a helpful selection of political essays by Bensaid addressing a range of broad and complex questions. Again, casual reader be warned: coming to terms with the end of Stalinism, the rise of postmodernism and the idea of hegemony is not a task for the faint-hearted.

For example, he tries to rescue the concept of hegemony from two extremes. Firstly, he refutes the caricature of Leninism, in which the party substitutes for the class, showing that both Lenin and Gramsci thought the working class had to have several political representatives, to prove ideas in practice. On the other side, Bensaid takes hegemony back from post-structuralist fracturing, in which fundamental social antagonisms are reduced to identities, and the focus for social change shifts from class struggle to democratic citizenship. Even if you don't understand those terms, you can appreciate the awe-inspiring breadth of Bensaid's vision.

Bensaid outlines the central strength of Marxism: the ability to understand the world as a concrete whole. He describes this process in "The Mole and the Locomotive." Marxism isn't just a "good theory," it's a response to the very real fragmentation that capitalism creates: "the weight of defeats and disasters reduces every news item to a dusty powder of minor news items, of sound bytes which are skipped over as soon as they are received, of ephemeral fashions and faddish anecdotes."

Yet "we must seek both to understand the logic of history and be ready for the surprise of the event." History is not written in advance, because capitalism is not one-way. It depends on people, and people always resist. Understanding, participating and shaping that resistance is a task for generations of Marxists, and Bensaid has nothing but scorn for those who abandon that task at the first hint of setback. Up till his recent death he remained a radical, not from some religious, messianic vision that only he held, but from an understanding of history itself that always contains the germs of multiple possibilities.

Strategies of Resistance goes far deeper than this brief summary. The title essay, in particular, compresses huge debates on postmodernism and revolutionary strategy into opaque, paragraph-long theses. But read in the context of the opening history of Trotskyism, the reader sees what is at stake in this theorizing: understanding the world in order to change it. No transcendent event, no decisive moment in the far-distant future, should give socialists hope: only the fact that we possess a method, rich in history and depth, that allows us to understand and act upon the world. To that extent, Bensaid's essays provide a task – and thus an intense hope – for the present. This is the real value of this excellent collection: to see where Trotskyists have come from, where radicals in the Marxist tradition might go, and most importantly how to get there.

By Daniel Serge

The book is available in Canada for \$13.50 (including shipping) by writing to: petirrojo@bell.net

Copies can also be purchased from the International Institute for Research and Education:

http://www.iire.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=186%3Astrategies-of-resistance-a-who-are-the-trotskyists&catid=18%3Anotebooks-for-study-and-research&lang=en

P.S.

* From New Socialist:

<http://www.newsocialist.org/index.php?id=1979>