

# The shape of socialist strategy - On Daniel Bensaïd “Politics as a Strategic Art”

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Daniel Bensaïd’s *La Politique comme art stratégique* (Politics as a Strategic Art), [1] published a year after the French socialist theorist’s premature death in 2010, raises important questions about the shape of a working-class project to achieve political power. Bensaïd was a prominent theorist of France’s New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), one of Europe’s most influential far-left organisations, and of the Fourth International. [2]

The heart of this densely written, still-untranslated 139-page book is a lengthy essay, “Strategy and Politics from Marx to the Third International,” which attempts a summary of socialist strategy from 1848 to our own time. Bensaïd paints a bleak picture of the present political landscape, which he terms “totalitarianism with a human face based on despotism of the market.” (p. 37) [3] In this collection of essays from the final decade of his life, he strives to relate historic principles of socialist struggle to a new reality.

Interestingly, Bensaïd has little to say about the strategic outlook of Marx and Engels, who traversed periods of revolutionary downturn with some similarities to our own. In their work “the strategic question is little developed,” Bensaïd writes. Indeed, “Engels went so far, on one occasion, as to refer to revolution as ‘a purely natural phenomenon governed by physical laws.’” (p. 53)

Elsewhere in this book, however, Bensaïd notes that Marx advised the working class to take the leadership of other exploited toilers, an eminently strategic concept. In 1852, Marx called for revolutionary forces of the petty bourgeoisie and peasantry to “ally with the revolutionary proletariat” to form what Bensaïd, alluding to a concept formulated later by Antonio Gramsci, calls a “hegemonic bloc.” Two decades later, discussing the Paris Commune, Marx said it represented “all the social classes that do not live from the labour of others.” (p. 93) Gramsci’s concept of social hegemony is a central pillar of Bensaïd’s discussion of Marxist strategy.

Surely the *Communist Manifesto* is a fundamentally strategic document. It declares, “The immediate aim of the Communists is ... formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat,” with the goal of “the abolition of bourgeois property.” [4] Marx and Engels also identified many steps along the path to this goal:

The international character of workers’ struggle.

- The need, as a first step, to “win the battle for democracy.”
- The articulation between reform and revolution.
- The role of trade unions in the movement for socialism.
- The importance of efforts by oppressed nations such as Ireland to achieve emancipation.

The initial forms assumed by working-class rule (the Paris Commune).

Why does Bensaïd not include such concepts in his survey of strategy? This omission is related to ambiguities in Marxist understanding of strategy, an elusive term whose meaning has changed over the last century.

## The meaning of strategy

Bensaïd does not define strategy in *Art stratégique*, but Antoine Artous, who introduces the collection, fills this gap by quoting an earlier text by Bensaïd:

*“For us, strategy is the basis on which we gather, organize, and educate our members; it is a project to overturn bourgeois political power.”* (p. 11)

Leon Trotsky, Artous notes, said that discussion of strategy emerged only after 1914, in what Trotsky termed the “epoch we call that of the actuality of proletarian revolution.” (p. 12) In that period, strategy denoted what the *Oxford English Dictionary* then called “the art of commanding ... major military movements,” and its use in socialist politics reflected a conviction that the time of decisive physical confrontation was at hand.

In the first years after the Russian revolution, the meaning of “tactics” and “strategy” in Marxist usage sometimes seems inverted from today’s idiom. Tactics were seen as broad in scope, strategy as something more specific. In 1922, for example, Trotsky said that, “At a time of the conquest of power, our political tactic is heightened to revolutionary strategy in the most concrete meaning of the term.” [5]

The proceedings of the 1922 Communist International conference that called for the united front was entitled, *The Tactic of the Communist International against the Capitalist Offensive* - where “tactic” embraces the entirety of Comintern policies.

Bensaïd’s denial that nineteenth-century Marxism embraced strategic thought seems to flow from the older conception of strategy that tied it directly to a struggle for power analogous to a military engagement.

Over the years, the meaning of “strategy” has broadened in both French and English to embrace what the *Larousse* French dictionary calls “the art of coordinating actions and manoeuvring ably to achieve a goal.” Marxist use of the term, while still anchored in the struggle for workers’ power, has broadened as well. Already in 1928, Trotsky offered this definition:

*“Revolutionary strategy ... embraces a combined system of actions which by their association, consistency, and growth must lead the proletariat to the conquest of power.”*

When Communists formulated the united front concept in 1921–22, they called it a “tactic.” Still, they advocated it for the entire world working class, in a wide variety of contexts preparatory to a struggle for power. United front policy must surely be classified as an element in socialist strategy,

and Bensaïd himself does so in *Art stratégique*. In the same spirit, it seems logical to include the basic elements of socialist politics formulated by Marx and Engels in the arsenal socialist strategic concepts.

### **Lenin as strategist**

How can the working class break free of capitalist rule? Bensaïd says Marx relied on “a sociological wager: with development of industry, the proletariat will become more massive, and its growth and concentration will lead it to progress in organization and consciousness.” (p. 38) This outlook dominated Marxist thought into the first years of twentieth century, when Karl Kautsky, then Marxism’s most authoritative theorist, advocated what Bensaïd terms “an ‘attrition strategy’ based on universal suffrage,” that is, an excessive reliance on electoral gains. (p. 59)

According to Bensaïd, the first major challenge to this outlook was formulated in 1905 by Rosa Luxemburg. She advanced the concept of general strike “not as an ultimate act of defense but as an irruption that makes it possible to think of revolutionary strategy.” He also refers to the Dutch socialist Anton Pannekoek’s stress on the need not to take over the capitalist state apparatus but to do away with it – a point made earlier by Marx and Engels with in connection with the Paris Commune. (p. 61)

Lenin’s great contribution, according to Bensaïd, was to “systematize the concept of a revolutionary crisis,” which “makes it possible to break the vicious circle of submission and to conceive of the seizure of power by a class subjected to every form of domination (including ideological) by breaking the routine of social reproduction.” Bensaïd summarizes Lenin regarding the preconditions for such a crisis: “When those on the top can no longer govern as before; those at the bottom can no longer endure this rule; and those in the middle hesitate and shift toward the camp of revolution.” (p. 67)

The revolutionary crisis is associated in Lenin’s analysis with two other strategic elements, he says: the appearance of new and more democratic structures to meet the masses’ daily needs and of “a duality of power between two counterposed legitimacies.” An additional factor in such a crisis is “a conscious project and a force capable of initiative and decision – the party ... a strategic agency.” (p. 67)

Curiously, Bensaïd does not mention in this context the historic debate on strategy for the Russian revolution, in which Trotsky developed Marx’s earlier concept of permanent revolution. In this discussion, Lenin projected that even within capitalism, in the context of a democratic revolution, workers and peasants could achieve a “democratic dictatorship.” Permanent revolution later became a strategic pillar of Trotskyist movements. The concept of democratic dictatorship has fewer proponents today; Bensaïd does not mention it. Still, it seems relevant to the revolution in situations like that in Nepal where the preconditions for socialist revolution may not yet be present.

### **United front as strategy**

In 1919 the Communist International (Comintern) was founded with the goal of generalizing the strategic lessons of the Russian revolution, and this task dominated the debates on strategy in its early years. This infused urgency to the Comintern’s insistence on building mass parties before the outbreak of the revolutionary crisis that then seemed imminent.

*Art stratégique* says little on this aspect of Comintern policy, focusing instead on issues related to the united front. “The great controversies of the interwar period hinged on systematizing the

strategic notions of transitional demands, the united front, and hegemony,” Bensaïd writes. The concept of transitional demands was developed “to overcome the traditional gap between a minimum and a maximum program and the formal counterposition of reform and revolution.” (p. 72)

To give life to these demands, the early Comintern advocated a united front for working-class struggle and sought to express it on a governmental level. The Comintern’s “algebraic formula of a ‘workers’ government’ proved to be a lasting source of extremely varied and often sharply counterposed interpretations,” Bensaïd says. (p. 72)

Bensaïd does not mention the decision of the Comintern’s Fourth Congress on the conditions in which revolutionary Marxists might take part in such a workers’ government. Fortunately, Bensaïd has given us his own opinion on this question in “The Return of Strategy,” an article written in 2007 that is not found in *Art stratégique* but is available online in English. He cites three criteria that “can be variously combined for assessing participation in a governmental coalition with a transition perspective.” These are:

- “A situation of crisis or at least of a significant upsurge in social mobilisation.
- “The government in question is committed to initiating a dynamic of rupture with the established order. For example ... radical agrarian reform, ‘despotic incursions’ into the domain of private property, the abolition of tax privileges....
- “The balance of forces allows revolutionaries to ensure that even if they cannot guarantee that the non-revolutionaries in the government will keep to their commitments, they have to pay a high price for failure to do so.”

Bensaïd’s conditions are certainly in the spirit of the Fourth Congress decision, although somewhat more permissive.

During the Comintern discussion of the early 1920s, the contrasting views of Trotsky, August Thalheimer, Karl Radek, and Clara Zetkin agreed on one central point, Bensaïd notes. They all opposed any notion of inevitable collapse “such as that advanced at the end of the 1920s by emerging Stalinist orthodoxy.” Each of these figures “aimed to link the revolutionary event to the conditions that prepared its way, to link reforms to revolution, and to link the movement to its goal.” (p. 78)

“No sooner was the strategic debate on transitional demands, united front, and workers’ government engaged, then it was cut short,” Bensaïd writes, referring to the impact of the failed German revolution of 1923 and of factional struggles in the Russian Communist Party related to the rise of Stalinism. “It was continued, however, through the isolated reflections of Gramsci and the contributions of the Left Opposition.” (p. 71)

## **Two strategic hypotheses**

A large part of Bensaïd’s analysis of socialist strategy concerns two broad strategic hypotheses that, in his view, emerged during the experience of twentieth-century revolution. These are the “insurrectional general strike” of the type seen in Paris Commune and the Russian October 1917 revolution, and a “prolonged people’s war” on the model of the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions.

Noting that these two variants are found in various combinations, Bensaïd provides an insightful survey of revolutionary projects in Latin America from the Cuban to the Nicaraguan experiences.

(pp. 76-84)

The concept of an insurrectional general strike, he says, guided most revolutionary movements in developed countries during the 1960s and 1970s, the years of radical upsurge. Such a strike would permit workers' power to be established through a transitional process of dual power, in which "legitimacy would be transferred to forms of direct or participative democracy." (p. 84) Bensaïd is referring to soviet-type structures similar to what emerged in Russia in 1905 and 1917. The weakness of such formations, he says, is their possible "corporatist logic, [as] a pyramidal summation of particularist interests - of a locality, factory, or office." The mediation of a multi-party system is needed "to develop particular viewpoints into global proposals." (p. 85)

Bensaïd advises dropping the term "dictatorship" as a description for workers' rule: the word has become a "fetish" that only generates confusion, he says. However, he defends the underlying concept as developed by Marx and Lenin of the need for "a new legal framework, expressing new social relations, which cannot be born from the continuity of the old law." (p. 89) There will necessarily be a "break in continuity, including with regard to law, between two forms of rule and two legitimacies." (p. 91) The triumph of the new legal framework can only be achieved by the application of force by the working-class majority.

### **The legacy of a historic defeat**

Yet Bensaïd casts doubt on whether the revolutionary strategy he espoused in the 1960s and 1970s is still valid. "What are we coming from?" he asks in an *Art stratégique* essay written in 2007. "From a historic defeat. We do best to admit it and gauge its scope. The neoliberal offensive of the last quarter century is both the cause of this defeat, its consequence, and its culmination. Something was accomplished at the turn of the century, between the fall of the Berlin Wall and September 11. But what was it? The end of the 'short twentieth century' and its cycle of wars and revolutions? Or the end of modernity? The end of a cycle, a period of time, or an epoch?" (p. 117)

Elsewhere, he goes further: Perhaps this is the end of "the long epoch of political modernity that began with the English revolution of the seventeenth century. Under the impact of globalization, the classic categories of nation, people, sovereignty, citizenship, and international law have been called into question, without being replaced." (p. 28)

And again, "The words signifying emancipation were not left unscathed by the torments of the last century... If not dead, they are gravely wounded. Socialism, revolution, even anarchy, are in no better shape than communism." (p. 134)

Moreover, in the 1980s, "the concept of emancipation disappeared," leaving radical activists in a "utopian moment" in which an only vaguely conceived goal seemed best described by the French term *autre* - ("other"), as in *un autre monde est possible* - another world is possible. (p. 128)

One senses Bensaïd's anguished uncertainty and his impatience with the imposition of outworn formulas on a so vastly changed reality.

### **Strategy reasserted**

Marxists of Lenin's time defined the period following the Russian revolution of 1917 as a time of world revolution, where a struggle for power was on the agenda in many of the world's most powerful states. Bensaïd's Fourth International continued to uphold this concept, in modified form,

through the 1960s and 1970s. But his later writings reflect his view that this is no longer the case today.

Does what Bensaïd terms the “historic defeat of the 1980s” render obsolete the transitional revolutionary strategy developed by classic Marxism, of which he was an eloquent exponent? The essays in the *Art stratégique* collection do not provide a conclusive answer. However, in “The Return of Strategy,” written in 2007, Bensaïd upholds the continued relevance of Marxist strategic concepts. The notion of the “actuality of revolution,” he notes, can refer either to the epoch or the immediate situation. He continues:

*“No one will claim that revolution [in Europe today] has an actuality in the immediate sense. On the other hand, it would be a risky and not a minor matter to eliminate it from the horizon of our epoch.”*

This eloquent understatement is buttressed by Bensaïd’s analysis of time in *Art stratégique* – specifically, of how clock time differs from political time.

*“Strategic time is full of peaks and troughs, sudden accelerations and wearisome slowdowns, leaps forward and backward, collapses and setbacks. The needles on its dial do not always turn in the same direction. This time is discontinuous, punctuated by crises and opportunities waiting to be seized.”* (p. 116)

The implication is clear: the triumph of neoliberalism can be quickly disrupted by unforeseen consequences of capitalist policy and unexpected turns of events. Moreover, socialist strategy applies to periods of retreat and preparation, as well as during a struggle for power.

Bensaïd is right to suggest that it has become harder for Marxist activists to link up directly with the strategic concepts of the communism of Lenin’s era. That is all the more reason to examine the strategy developed by Marx, Engels, and the Russian Bolsheviks in the era before 1914, along with strategic experiences of the last half-century.

Bensaïd’s own movement provides an example of such thinking: the dissolution in 2009 of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire into the NPA reflected a shift to a concept of a working-class party closer to that of the formations in which Marx and Engels participated.

### **Toward a vindication of Marxist strategy**

Bensaïd is right to insist that the conditions for socialist revolution outlined by Lenin are not present in the imperialist states today. Moreover, there is much in today’s situation that is historically new and that must be absorbed and digested – not simply rejected in the name of outworn formulas.

We should also note, however, that the fraying of neoliberal hegemony has led to a reassertion of Bensaïd’s categories of “modernity.” Neoliberalism heightened the developed countries’ domination of the Global South, resulting in renewed movements for national sovereignty. Social upheavals in Venezuela, Bolivia, and elsewhere in Latin America, novel in many ways, have also confirmed the relevance of Marxist categories of state, government, class, and party. Structures of neoliberal globalization have weakened, most notoriously in present-day Europe.

Events of Bensaïd’s creative final years thus tended toward vindicating the transitional socialist strategy that he so forcefully advocated.

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For collections of online articles by Daniel Bensaïd, see *International Viewpoint* and Europe solidaire sans frontières (ESSF).

On ESSF, all available articles from Bensaïd are listed under the author's entry 101: [BENSAÏD Daniel](#)

All article on Bensaïd are listed under the keyword 1154: [BENSAID Daniel](#)

All article by **and** on Bensaïd available in ENGLISH are listed under the keyword 6264: [BENSAID Daniel \(Eng\)](#)

Current strategic discussion in the NPA is available in the Phénix section of Europe solidaire sans frontières (section 1063): [Stratégie du Phénix](#) (directly accessible from the home page)

Several books written or co-authored by Bensaïd are available in English, including *Strategies of Resistance & Who Are the Trotskyists*.

Related articles on this website from John Riddell can be found in the section 1127: [International \(Third\) \(Movements, World\)](#)

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## Footnotes

[1] Daniel Bensaïd, *La Politique comme art stratégique*, Paris : Éditions Syllepse, 2011.

[2] For a sensitive and perceptive appraisal of Daniel Bensaïd's work, see Sebastian Budgen, "The Red Hussar: Daniel Bensaïd, 1946-2010," *International Socialism*, no. 127. Available on ESSF (article 17913): [The Red Hussar: Daniel Bensaïd, 1946-2010](#).

[3] All page references in the text are from *La Politique comme art stratégique*.

[4] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1984, vol. 6, p. 498.

[5] John Riddell, ed., *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist Internationa*, 1922, Leiden: Brill, 2012, p. 268.