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Struggling for the right of existence; the memoirs of Daniel Bensaïd

Sunday 13 April 2014, by [SHALLICE Jane](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2014).

Jane Shallice reviews *An Impatient Life: A Memoir* (Verso, 2013) by Daniel Bensaïd and considers what the Left can learn from these beautiful memoirs

Why should you read this book? Written by a French Trotskyist, who died in 2010, and of whom few have heard and even fewer knew? A philosopher and a militant, who wanted to develop Marxist theory and apply it to our understanding of the world?

In *An Impatient Life* Daniel Bensaïd explains that his memoirs are the stories of an apprenticeship; an apprenticeship in patience and slowness, however incomplete, in an age of the deification of the commodity. When living in such bleak times, it is a most crucial work particularly when we have to find ways of sustaining our politics, with few indications of what will terminate this rule of commodity and accumulation. Bensaïd was a man committed, unfashionably now, to building an international revolutionary organisation in the teeth of the gales which have caused so many to race to the exit. And throughout he sustained his involvement with an open and critical reflection on the positions held.

Born into a working class family in 1948, Bensaïd's father, a secular Jew from Algeria, owned a bar in Toulouse. His mother, non Jewish, had married in the face of warnings that the marriage would bring trouble-venereal diseases at the very least. Daniel's early years were spent with Spanish refugees, Italian anti-fascists, Portuguese builders, postmen and local workers, building up a vast knowledge of the Great War, 1917, French workers struggles in the 30s and fascism in Germany and revolutionary movements around the world. In 1962, with the Cuban revolution and the struggles for Algerian independence firmly underway, the police killing of nine young militants in Charonne, Paris, propelled him to join the Jeunesse Communiste, the youth organisation close to the French communist party. Developing increasingly critical positions, he was expelled after five years and helped form the Jeune Communiste Revolutionnaire (JCR), a Trotskyist organization. He had a place at the prestigious Ecole Supérieure at St Cloud, where he chose to study philosophy - "precisely for its lack of discipline" - but his priorities and unbounded energies were directed into the JCR with Alain Krivine, Gerard de Vebizier and Henri Weber.

The organization, in which Bensaïd quickly became a key figure, became the French section of the Fourth International, whose major theoretician was Ernest Mandel: an internationalist, a fine Marxist economist, he was described by Daniel as having a "stubborn optimism of the will tempered by an intermittent pessimism of reason". Their international focus was around Vietnam, while Gaullism framed the domestic arena and their priority was developing a radical student movement linked to those in Germany and Italy. Out of this, the March 22nd movement was formed in early 1968, anti-imperialist, anti-bureaucratic having solidarity with the Prague Spring and oppositional currents in Poland and was avowedly anti-capitalist, supporting workers actions.

The '68 years

His writing on the ferment of the May events is fascinating. Written both as a participant but also one who remained true to all that could have been “the plurality of possibilities”. He rejected the depoliticisation and for him the dehistoricisation found in many current accounts of 1968 where the dual power potential of the general strike are ignored or diminished and instead the events celebrated as the foundations of individualism, hedonism, sexual liberation and the aspiration to decentralize. For him the banalisation of the events replaces the extraordinary impact of May and the strikes aimed at the heart of the French state; “We wanted a world in which the right to existence prevailed over the right to property”.

The JCR was banned by De Gaulle after the events of May 1968 and relaunched as the Ligue Communiste (Communist League) in 1969, developing an electoral strategy from which they gained little. Bensaïd became central to the production of the daily Rouge newspaper which lasted two years. This certainly developed him as a fine polemical writer as well as a theoretician of great style.

Accounts of his activism are interspersed with chapters following theoretical debates, within and around Marxism. The influences of Althusser and Maoism were key in France, and Bensaïd emphasizes instead “the formation of an open and cosmopolitan and militant Marxism”, rejecting both structuralism and “a glacial Marxism which leaves little room for disorder and crisis”. But he is also aware that for many young militants, and in retrospect he does not exclude himself, the post 1968 period opened the way for an ultra leftism.

A different way

The 1970s was a period when some sections of the Fourth International were engaged in the armed struggle and he became the link with comrades in Latin America. Reflecting back, he argues there was too great a gap between legal activity and underground conspiracy and analyses the use of violence and the strategy of taking up arms. In writing that “weapons have their own logic” and a military apparatus generates its own needs, he knows that many fine militants died.

In Europe with the defeats of the workers in the 1980s, and the immanent victory of neo liberalism, “the working class had become invisible”. However it was in this period that the Zapatistas in Mexico and the formation of the PT in Brazil, gave hope and sowed seeds for developing wider social movements, culminating in the World Social Forums.

By 1990 Bensaïd had become seriously ill. Being diagnosed with AIDS removed him from any role as an organizing militant, forcing him to concentrate on writing - “an ordeal rather than a vocation”. As an international atheist he had never felt Jewish by race, religion or language but through this period, forced on one hand by anti-semitism and on the other by rampant Zionist strategies of Israel, he publicly allied himself with other non Zionist Jews. In a chapter entitled The Marrano Enigma he writes of the confusions but also the elucidation and importance that Jewish thought provided him.

Learning

Bensaïd’s political life stretched from the explosive developments of the 1960s and 1970s in France, extended into his work in Latin American through the 1970s and 1980s, and to the victory of neoliberalism on a global scale, with the collapse of the Soviet Union alongside the political dominance of capital, individualism, celebrity and a media culture with political and financial interests enmeshed.

For those who have been politically active, and who are now feeling the domination of this grim

period, there is encouragement from his thinking and his luminous writing. An Impatient Life is no straightforward story, but a set of essays ranging from memories of his “activity” to explorations of ideas. As a dedicated activist and thinker Bensaïd writes against the grain, reflecting on those periods which were hard, on positions taken which he thinks wrong – but rightly so, meaning that he fully understood why these mistakes were made and yet continues to stand by those mistakes – and all the time conscious that we do not choose the circumstance of our lives.

And he finishes, “In order for the other world that is necessary to become possible, another left is equally necessary. Not a left “lite”, like fat free butter and alcohol-free wine or decaffeinated coffee but a left of struggle to match the right of struggle. We can no longer be satisfied with a left resigned to the subaltern role of opposition to the republican or liberal bourgeoisie. It is high time to break this vicious circle of subordination. This will be the task of new figures who are starting to rise.”

Jane Shallice

P.S.

An Impatient Life is available for 18 € plus shipping from the IIRE:

http://www.iire.org/index.php?option=com_jshopping&controller=product&task=view&category_id=2&product_id=59

P.S.

* From Redpepper:

<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/struggling-for-the-right-of-existence-the-memoirs-of-daniel-bensaïd/>

* Daniel Bensaïd, An Impatient Life : A Memoir, translated by David Fernbach, with an introduction by Tariq Ali, Verso Books, 2014. 336 pp.