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Book Review - Daniel Bensaïd: An Unrepentant '68er's Life

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***An Impatient Life*. By Daniel Bensaïd. Translated by David Fernbach. Foreword by Tariq Ali. Verso Books, 2013 and 2015, 392 pages, \$19.95 paperback.**

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AN IMPATIENT LIFE is part of the burst of literary production by French Marxist writer and activist Daniel Bensaïd in the years preceding his death in 2010.

Bensaïd was an early leader of what would become the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), French section of the Fourth International. He became widely known in France as one of the leaders of the student revolt of May 1968 that preceded the June general strike in which over seven million workers participated.

The mainstream media in France saw Bensaïd as a public intellectual of the far left. He was often interviewed by the major French TV stations and *Le Monde* occasionally published his opinion pieces.

A professor of philosophy at the University Paris VII, Bensaïd was an academic more by vocation than avocation. He found the world of the French academy pretentious and hopelessly removed from the living, breathing world of struggle to which he looked for inspiration. His publications were not the fruit of an agenda driven by the intellectual fashions of the academia, but his own meanderings and sustained engagement with Marxism.

This book was first published in French in 2004 by Editions Stock under the title *Une lente Impatience*.

The political center of the book (and of his life) is Bensaïd's experiences as an activist and leader of the LCR and the Fourth International and his deep involvement with the Latin American Left, particularly the Argentinian, Brazilian and Mexican from the 1970s on.

David Fernbach did an admirable job with the unenviable task of translating a manuscript written in the language of a French Marxist philosopher deeply marked by non-Marxist thinkers and full of dozens of references to French political figures from the far left who migrated rightward and are all but unheard of outside of France. Numerous biographical footnotes, some taking up two-thirds of a

page, are included to help identify many, but not all of these figures.

An interesting set of photos includes a 1968 era shot of Bensaïd on a speaker's dais with early LCR leaders Alain Krivine and Henri Weber and photos of partners Sophie and Martine. The last photo shows Bensaïd peering into the camera, much changed but with alert eyes, as he sat in front of a computer on a small desk in what is probably the small apartment in St. Denis, the working-class suburb near Paris where he taught and lived.

There is a list of abbreviations of the numerous political organizations mentioned in the book, but unfortunately no index was included.

An Impatient Life is not quite an autobiography, nor a systematic history of the French LCR or the Fourth International, but a sustained reflection on his lifelong experiences as a revolutionary socialist, and how to be a revolutionary in non-revolutionary times.

The intended audience seems to be those in the LCR, its successor, the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), and others trying to make sense of the world today and of their own political lives and trajectories.

Broadly chronological in presentation, it is punctuated by a series of sometimes long, sometimes brief but always highly thoughtful and never pedantic meditations on subjects like journalism, the experience of the Brazilian Workers Party in power, the Argentinian left, May 1968, Marxist economics, political violence, his Jewish identity, and several sustained reflections on the 20th century revolutionary experience.

Activist, Leader, Unrepentant '68er

Bensaïd tells his story with constant references to his intellectual world. He possessed a tremendous erudition in the tradition of all the great Marxist thinkers beginning with Marx himself.

He became well grounded in classical Marxism from an early age. He read Lenin's complete works as he prepared to write his master's essay on Lenin's conception of revolution and later authored works on Marxist economics (discussed below). His intellectual curiosity was eclectic.

Chapters in *An Impatient Life* begin with quotes from such varied writers as the early Utopian socialist thinker Charles Fourier, the novelist Paul Valéry, post-modernist philosopher, Michel Foucault, Catholic writer Paul Claudel, turn-of-century poet and socialist essayist Charles Péguy, and others more or less obscure.

The final chapter opens and closes with quotes by French surrealist poet André Breton. *An Impatient Life* thus presents a particularly challenging translation task.

Bensaïd's message is expressed subtly but clearly through tone, critical of the excesses, short-sightedness and occasional ultraleft adventurism of the early days of the LCR. But he stays clear of the type of self-flagellating attitude in which many former LCR and other former far left militants have indulged. He steers a clear course between defensive justification and finger pointing and an equally unbalanced rejection and scorn for those years. His willingness to acknowledge mistakes, and recognize that some of the positions he advocated for turned out to be wrong, makes this book a model of political honesty.

To follow all the references, allusions and quotes, one would therefore need to be conversant in both

French political and intellectual life across several disciplines and an intricate knowledge of French politics since the 1960s. However, for those willing to work through the book, which for most by necessity will involve glossing over many of the numerous literary references and allusions, there are broad lessons here to be learned here — even if Bensaïd would recoil at the notion that he was giving them.

Bensaïd's critical yet balanced account of the radicalization of the 1960s stands in sharp contrast to books like *Génération* by Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman (an early leader of the League Communiste, a precursor of the LCR), which offers a romantic, mostly uncritical, nearly triumphalist account of the twenty somethings who led the student uprising in May 1968. Most of the prominent "'68ers" featured in *Génération* drifted away from revolutionary politics and some became well-known journalists, writers and Socialist Party (SP) politicians.

Taking aim at not only that book, but the whole vein of similar writing, Bensaïd finds it "exemplary of this generational hijacking" and the accounts of the participants featured in *Génération* "prodigious in fraudulent confessions and miserly in sincere self-criticism." (6)

Bensaïd on the other hand, along with Alain Krivine, are among the few major figures of 1968 in France who did not drift to the right or otherwise succumb to the opportunist lure of money and power.

Reflecting on the meaning and legacy of May '68 and the betrayal of many of its leading lights, he writes:

"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 private egoism. Social liberalism in power under Fabius, Rocard, Bérégovoy, Jospin (all had radical pasts before becoming Prime Ministers in SP governments in the 1980s and 1990s — KM), worked strictly in the opposite direction. We shouted "to hell with borders" and "We are all German Jews (a mass slogan in the spring of 1968 when a French minister referred derisively to student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit as a "German Jew" — KM), and the left in government hunted down undocumented immigrants. Their "liberal" Europe is dotted with 'holding centers' and detention camps." (77)

Such critiques have a particularly poignant ring in the era of the Middle Eastern refugee crisis, the brutal austerity imposed on the Greek people by neoliberal capitalism, and the role of the French SP under the presidency of François Hollande (2012-2017) in both. This is even more so as the publication of this review coincides with the 50th anniversary of the May-June 1968 events.

Anniversaries of May '68 are generally times for the type of meaningless celebrations that Bensaïd denounced. He devotes Chapter Six to sharply dissecting the hypocrisy surrounding the 20th and 30th anniversary celebrations.

From PCF to LC to LCR

Bensaïd was born to an Algerian Jewish father and a French woman living in Algeria who migrated to the southern French city Toulouse. During the German occupation of France, several of his uncles were deported and murdered in Nazi concentration camps.

His father was arrested and sent to a holding center outside Paris, but managed to be released when his wife, Bensaïd's mother, was able to obtain a certificate of "non-membership in the Jewish race" on his behalf.

He writes about his personal life, his close and loving relationship with partners Martine and after her passing with Sophie. Both were close comrades as well as romantic partners. He briefly mentions the illness that would eventually take his life, reflecting on how it affected his activity as well as his sense of time and importance.

Here as elsewhere, the autobiographical dimensions of the book consciously place his own life in historical and political context. As an adolescent, Bensaïd was attracted to both left-wing politics and the world of literature and ideas. He recalls spending a week during his summer vacation as a youth with his aunt.

His cousins, an electrician and a car-body repairer, both “Communists, it goes without saying. . . stuffed” his “head with CGT (the union confederation allied with the PCF) training courses on exploitation, but I profited as well from their little library of basic classics: Hugo, Dumas, Zola, Vallès, Aragon, and a few Simenon novels.” (23)

Bensaïd’s early political consciousness was deeply marked by the Algerian and Vietnam Wars, and events in France like the murder of pro-Algerian independence demonstrators killed by French police at the Charonne metro station in 1961. The Cuban revolution was a major influence.

These were the years when as he noted, “Third Worldism had the wind in its sails. François Maspero (a radical publisher — KM) published Franz Fanon, with Sartre’s famous preface. We enthusiastically read Che’s *Socialism and Man in Cuba*, celebrating a socialist humanism, lyrical and generous, and light years away from the petrified speeches of the Kremlin apparatchiks.” (35-36)

Under the impact of these events, he joined the PCF youth groups the Jeunesses Communistes (JC) and the Union of Communist Students (UEC) in 1961 at the age of 15.

Bensaïd’s parents owned a café in the southern French city Toulouse where the local French Communist Party (PCF) cell met and paid their membership dues. He described the difficult break with the social world of the PCF when along with fellow dissidents in the PCF student group the UEC, he broke with the party and founded the Revolutionary Communist Youth (JCR) in 1966.

“What saddened me” he wrote, “was the sense of breaking at one and the same stroke with a whole world and its mythology, with a part of my childhood, part of myself: the heroic tales of the Spanish (civil) war. . . the hospitality of . . . my proletarian cousins.” (42)

Bensaïd became part of a group of left-leaning activists and intellectuals who would come into contact with and fuse with the small Trotskyist Fourth International group, the League Communist (LC) led by Pierre Frank, that had survived Nazi and Stalinist repression including kidnappings and assassinations from the Spanish civil war in the mid-1930s through World War II.

Bensaïd describes the debates around affiliation to the Fourth International and his early ambivalence about the FI. By 1968, most of the JCR leadership considered themselves Trotskyist, but they initially had not tried to win him to that perspective. Although he would become one of the best-known leaders of the FI, he voted for admission only after considerable reflection.

Bensaïd did however, after initial hesitation, vote for admission to the Fourth International. His account of his political path on this question is worth quoting:

“At the end of the controversy, I finally made my decision, partly in negative reaction to the argument of the opponents of the Fourth International. The positive reasons were given me by (JCR leader) Sami Nair. Instead of insisting as Ernest Mandel did, on an unlikely inventory of existing forces, he held to a purely logical demonstration. Isn’t capitalism a world system of exploitation and

domination, ruled by a law of uneven and combined development? Yes. Isn't an International revolutionary organization needed to combat it? Yes. Well, there is one, certainly miniscule, but one that has survived without betraying or succumbing to the test of a terrible century. Still in agreement? Ergo, it is up to us to join it, transform it, and make it the instrument we need. What objection can be raised to such implacable logic?" (91-92)

Bensaïd's description of his relationship with the FI's central leader Ernest Mandel suggests that the much older Mandel was more a mentor than a comrade in arms. For Daniel and others of his generation, Mandel was a "tutor in theory and a passer between two generations. We learned a great deal from him, without his ever becoming the authoritarian guru in the manner of Michel Pablo, Juan Posadas, Pierre Lambert or Tony Cliff." (259)

Balanced Critiques

Bensaïd offers an extended account of, and critical self-analysis of the LCR's daily *Rouge* project and ultraleft actions like the physical attack on a far right meeting that led to one of the LCR's two judicial dissolutions and bannings. In 1975 the LCR decided to launch a daily newspaper, *Rouge*.

He describes soliciting funds with Alain Krivine for the project from cultural figures of the left like Yves Montand, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, actor Michel Piccoli and filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, all of whom made generous contributions.

Although Bensaïd defends the quality of the project, which "appears in hindsight as school of journalism that was at least as rigorous as the accredited institutions," it became clear that the organization had bitten off more than it could chew, partially as a result of an inaccurate analysis of the period. The launch of daily *Rouge* "had been a kind of wager on the conjuncture that a hypothetical victory of the left might have inaugurated." (175, 176)

The wager was lost and by 1978, *Rouge* had become a weekly. Bensaïd is also critical of the June 21, 1973 physical attack on a public meeting of the far right racist group *Ordre Nouveau* and its headquarters that led to the arrest of LC leaders Alain Krivine and Pierre Rousset and the legal dissolving of the LC by the Minister of the Interior. (The LC was refounded as the LCR in 1974.)

Bensaïd cites LCR practices for which he is proud, like its non-sectarian approach to social struggles, and the democratic ethos of the leadership. Like other political groups in France, the LCR had an organized service d'ordre or security detail. But unlike others, it was never an autonomous unit and consciously avoided machoism by including men and women who did not always possess exceptional physical size or strength.

"Recruited on political grounds, rather than physical or technical, our service d'ordre was conceived right from the start as one militant task among others, rather than a specialized permanent commando of supermen and superwomen. Its members were chosen every year by the rank-and-file cells. From 1971, far from the stereotype of a group of heavily muscled troopers, it was mixed, right up to its leadership team. This was unusual among left organizations. . . Finally, the stewarding services always remained under the direct charge of the political leadership, two or three members of which were personally responsible for it." (160)

He also looks back favorably on the League's rigorous internal education work and international participation from Argentina, to Chile, Portugal, and Euzkadi (Basque Country) as providing ". . . valuable material for reflection on the logic of violence," one of the many themes that the book explores. In the 1970s, he recalls, "Comparative study of the Chilean and Portuguese processes held

a key place in our training schools and courses.” (161).

Bensaïd expanded on those discussions in books *La Revolution au Pouvoir* (Stock, 1976, and the edited volume he coauthored with Michael Löwy and Charles André Udry, *Portugal, la révolution en marche* (Paris UGE 1975).

He is also proud of the LCR’s factory implantation. He recalls that “. . . our effort at implanting ourselves in the factories, and the good sense of our veteran workers, provided a reality principle that fortunately balanced leftist temptations” (161).

Bensaïd also offers reflections on his own style of leadership, which reveal much of his own thought on leadership in general.

“I have the passion for action and social questions, a taste for controversy and discussing ideas. In contrast to Alain Krivine and François Sabado, I have little talent for calculating the balance of forces, for patient negotiations and the necessary work of alliances. Above all, I do not have the least appetite for power. The task of leadership inspires in me a holy repulsion. I prefer to do things myself rather than tell others what to do. That could be seen as an egalitarian virtue. But it can also be the sign of a disorganizing inability to delegate and trust others. It was in any case for a long time the most common defect among the leaders of the ligue. Brought up to combat Stalinism and bureaucracy, we acquired an egalitarian culture and a stubborn distrust of hierarchy and command.” (317)

Crying for Argentina

The European youth and worker radicalization that found its zenith in the May-June 1968 events in France, and the Italian “hot autumn” of strikes in Italy in 1969, seemed for many to have its counterpart in Latin America where revolution seemed to be on the horizon.

In 1969, the ninth world congress of the Fourth International had approved a document sympathetic to Latin American armed struggle. By the 10th Congress, held in 1974, two factions had crystalized.

The International Majority Tendency constituted by most of the European FI sections supported armed struggle, or “focoism” as theorized by Che Guevara and radical French intellectual Régis Debray. A minority tendency, the Leninist-Trotskyist Faction led by the U.S. Socialist Workers Party (SWP), opposed that perspective in favor of the classic tactics of strikes and urban insurrection.

Beginning in the 1970s, Bensaïd who had supported the majority began spending time in Argentina with the Argentinian section of the FI, the PRT-ERP that under the leadership of Mario Santucho was engaged in an armed struggle with the Argentinian state. Nahuel Moreno led a minority tendency in the organization whose positions aligned with those of the international minority.

When Bensaïd arrived in Argentina in 1973, the Cuban revolution was still kindling optimism among the revolutionary left, but more immediately the continent was reeling from the September 11 Chilean military coup. He was able to witness firsthand the ravages of the guerrilla war as hundreds of young militants and FI members were killed by the Argentinian military and repressive forces.

It became, he recalls, “clear that we were on the wrong path.” In fact, “(t)he armed struggle voted at the ninth world congress was an ill-timed generalization and the tragedy of popular unity government in Chile, a lesson for the European left.”

By the mid to late 1970s the FI majority had produced a document critical of its previous support for “focoism” and armed struggle. This led to a brief period of close collaboration between the FI and the U.S. SWP. “Although brief,” Daniel recalls, “the Argentinian experience remains the most painful in my life as a militant.” (143, 144)

Bensaïd also closely followed the Brazilian class struggle and the rise of the Workers Party (PT), visiting Brazil two or three times a year in the 1980s. He shared Ernest Mandel’s optimism about Brazil’s revolutionary potential. The “economic miracle” of the 1970s, he notes, “had generated a massive and concentrated proletariat.” (214)

Referring to the participation of FI comrades in the PT, he explains that “(o)ur comrades agreed that the construction of their own current was organically bound up with that of the Workers Party, conceived of not as a mere tactical opportunity but rather as a strategic orientation.” (220)

These reflections have a present-day resonance, as participation in larger political formations big and small remains part of the agenda of many FI groups. He describes the euphoria surrounding PT candidate Lula’s election as president in 2003; the upbeat atmosphere at the World Social Forums held in Porto Alegre; and then the neoliberal turn of the PT that was “. . . clearly proclaimed in the appointment to the central bank of a former director of the Bank of Boston, in the acceptance of the debt” and deep concessions to the International Monetary Fund. He also expressed alarm at the expulsions of left-wingers from the PT.

Although he noted that “(a)t the time these lines being written, it is impossible to predict how the experience of the Lula government will turn out,” he presciently wrote, “If the most powerful country on the continent is not capable, under a government of the left, to stand its ground against . . . the ‘gigolos’ of the IMF, to undertake a radical agrarian reform, what can one expect of the Bolivians, the Ecuadorians, or the Uruguayans?” (228)

Midnight in the Century

At various points, *An Impatient Life* takes us back to historical events prior to Bensaïd’s birth. These are always around themes of struggle under extremely unfavorable conditions. He takes us back to the world of Trotsky, but not as co-leader with Lenin of the world’s first proletarian revolution or as head of the Red army leading the defense of the revolution against white reaction and imperialist invasion, or negotiating on behalf of the world’s first workers state with the Imperial powers at Brest Litovsk.

Rather, he recalls Trotsky as the isolated, tragic figure struggling mightily against Stalinist reaction and European fascism, when it was “midnight in the century.” He takes the reader on a haunted tour of the house in Coyoacan, Mexico where Trotsky lived and worked in exile from 1938 until his assassination in 1940 by a Stalinist agent.

There is an extended discussion of the Dewey commission, established to investigate Stalin’s charges in the Moscow Trials of the mid-1930s against not only the Left Opposition, but virtually all of Lenin’s closest comrades. Such historical meanderings suggest that Bensaïd saw a parallel between the struggle for truth and political integrity against the lies of the Stalinist show trials in the 1930s and our times.

Interspersed with these reflections are sharply lucid analyses of the world as the period of May ’68 and the colonial revolutions receded. Bensaïd takes aim at the destructive neoliberal trend of contemporary capitalism and the Social Democrats who have embraced and implemented it. “It is

not the least of paradoxes, in fact to see conservative neo-liberals now claiming the banner of dynamism and movement.” (204)

In response to sociologists like Alain Touraine and Serge Mallet who saw a disappearing proletariat, with the implication that its emancipatory project too has disappeared, Bensaïd counters, “(t)he ‘farewells to the proletariat’ are not just the expression of a risky sociological diagnosis. They also contribute to a political and moral debacle. On the ruins of class society, what flourishes are identitarian panics, the herd instinct, myths of origins, sects, and tribes.” (207)

By the mid-1980s it was becoming clear that the upsurges in all three sectors of the world revolution — class struggle in the advanced capitalist countries, the struggle against Stalinism in the USSR, China and the pro-Soviet Eastern European Stalinist regimes, and the revolutionary upsurge in the countries dominated by Imperialism — were receding.

After the 1980s, he writes, “We were entering a suffocating period of intellectual stagflation. The time had come to arm oneself with slow impatience, to shore up the foundations, and (re) read Marx” free “from the tyranny of Orthodoxy.” Marxist studies, “now on the defensive, felt the growing influence of methodological individualism, game theory, and the formalist jargon of equity.” (293, 298)

As he pulled back from daily militant activity, he organized a night course on Marxist economics for an international group of working students.

“During the 1980s” he recalls, “against winds and tides, I devoted the greater part of my lectures to readings of Marx, ploughing through *Capital*, *The Grundrisse*, and *Theories of Surplus Value* with the help of group of valiant students.” (294). The notes he took served as the basis for a sustained engagement with Marxist economics and philosophy and led to the publication of *Marx L’impestif*, and *le discordance des temps*.

He also pursued other writing projects. “Carried away by a writing mania,” he published works on the French Revolution, Walter Benjamin and Joan of Arc. (270) He was heartened in the 1990s by the Zapatista uprising in 1994, the French strikes in the winter of 1995, and the Seattle demonstrations of 1999.

“The 1980s were sordid. The 1990s began a renewal.” But “one can never be sure to have left the worse behind,” recalling how veteran French Trotskyist leader Pierre Frank had recollected how after the horrendous 1930s, the beginning of World War II was met with almost relief!

Bensaïd died just as the LCR dissolved itself into the New Anti-Capitalist Party. He would have enthusiastically supported the NPA project and would have likewise found its disappointing evolution painful. While much of *An Impatient Life* chronicles failures and defeats, Bensaïd never raises a doubt about the importance of pursuing the revolutionary project to which he devoted his life and considerable talents.

In his Foreword, Tariq Ali recalls his last meeting with Bensaïd. After a sober discussion of the current prospects for social change Bensaïd “. . . shrugged his shoulders: Perhaps not in our life time, but we carry on fighting. What else is there to do?”

Reflecting on his life as a militant, he expressed a similar sentiment towards the end of *An Impatient Life*:

“Perhaps the construction of a revolutionary organization is both necessary and impossible, like absolute love in the writings of Marquerite Duras. But that never stopped anyone from falling in

love." (318)

Keith Mann

P.S.

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