

Alain Badiou remembers the life and work of Daniel Bensaïd

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On 12 January 2010, the philosopher Daniel Bensaïd, a leading figure of May '68, of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, died at the age of 63. Here, Alain Badiou pays tribute to his life and work, during a seminar devoted to Plato.

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I would like to begin this seminar by telling you of the death of Daniel Bensaïd. This has struck me deeply, and is a great personal loss. A loss that may seem paradoxical in a certain sense, since, for reasons that I will explain, Daniel Bensaïd was not what one might call a close comrade. It's true that close comrades, you know... One of Lin Biao's great claims to fame in China during the Cultural Revolution was to be 'Mao Zedong's closest comrade-in-arms' - which led to his death in a few short years. So it is wise to be wary of 'close comrades-in-arms' or such claims to fame. Daniel Bensaïd was not a close comrade-in-arms, but he was someone I experienced absolutely as a comrade. He was, for reasons I will explain, what I would call a distant comrade.



Don't renounce, continue!

He was a distant comrade for three basic reasons, which together produced something unusual. First, at the level of fundamental choices, I would even say of a fundamental choice, made by someone who, by the way, was clearly a great intellectual, a thinker, a philosopher. His choice was not to renounce, not to enter the logic of renegotiation in the name of apparent circumstances. This means maintaining an inflexible element in political subjectivity. It is, in fact, something much more general. When you refuse reversal, renegotiation, renunciation, when you refuse to drift over changing circumstances like a dead dog, this clearly means something more than just particular political determinations. It is this will, this imperative, that, in my Ethics, I said is the only true

ethical imperative in difficult circumstances, an imperative whose watchword is: 'continue'. Daniel Bensaïd was a man who calmly persisted in the conviction that while circumstances might change, while counter-revolutionary forces might become far more vigorous, all this was in no way a reason not to continue.

The second point was that the privileged place of exercise of this choice, for him as for me, was the border between philosophy and politics, the articulation of the two: philosophy as a discipline of thought, in which we had long been engaged, and politics as a practical, organized and militant figure. Harmony between these two things is not self-evident, as we well know; it is a question we were discussing in relation to Plato, and can be discussed in relation to the history of philosophy as a whole. What exactly is the relationship between philosophy and politics? It is a question internal to each of them, and therefore works on both sides. What we had in common was this choice to work effectively on both sides, which also meant finding the philosophical operators that legitimated and advanced the figure of continuation.

The third point was subjectivity. Subjectivity as we saw it, which for me is composed of three things. First, extreme firmness, which is naturally linked to the other two points. It was very clear for anyone who met Daniel Bensaïd, who spoke with him or read him, that it would not be easy to move him from his position. And then calm, that is to say, something diametrically opposed to a certain leftist mode of political hysteria, which is sometimes helpful but has its irritating aspects. He was extremely calm, precisely within this firmness. And the last thing is a great sense of humour. This firmness, this calm, this humour, was something I really appreciated, something I felt fraternally related to, and all that made up the comrade.

There were Maoists and Trotskyists, and still are

Why then 'distant'?

Anecdotally one could say: there were Maoists and Trotskyists, and there still are. This continues an old story, an old story from 1968. If we decipher this story a little bit, I would say that the dispute, the difference, the contradiction between us, which obviously existed, and which was written, named, bore on two things. The first, since we agreed not to renounce anything, agreed to continue, was the question of what exactly this meant. Basically, there was disagreement on that. There was also disagreement on analysis of the political past, which naturally raised the question of continuation and sorting this out. What should be kept? What could not be kept? What really supported continuation, but what nevertheless had to change? In other words, it was a question of the relationship between continuity and discontinuity within this continuation itself; we agreed about continuing, but a point immediately opened, precisely within this continuation, which actually underlies almost all debates in the space of revolutionary politics today. All right, we are not going to give in, we are not going to join the consensus, but the continuation itself is worked on by an immanent dialectic of continuation and non-continuation. I think that this was the first point of divergence: we didn't share the same dialectic of continuity and discontinuity within continuity. This is a first point, very complex by the way, which, if you look closely, is full of surprises and paradoxes.

The second point, which is philosophical, while the first one was historical and political, I will put quite simply: there were differences about what materialism consists in. What does it mean to be materialist in philosophy? Given that a revolutionary today necessarily has to be materialist, what does that mean in particular? And it seems that we did not have the same conception of materialism. Daniel Bensaïd accused me more than once of being a camouflaged cleric, meaning that in his eyes I was still not very materialist. For my part, I could have accused him of being an archaic determinist!

So, between the almost mechanistic determinist on the one hand, and the cleric on the other, there was an allegorical tension, quite significant, whose centre of gravity was basically: what is contemporary materialism?

According to an intuition of Althusser, this basically concerned the place of the aleatory, the function of chance (for me, under the name of 'event') within a recognition of the materialist character of the field of action or existence. In actual fact, Daniel recognized the need to make room for the aleatory, there are explicit texts of his on this, but he believed I was giving it too much space, I was not paying enough attention to a detailed, materialist analysis of the situation or the conjuncture. For all these reasons, Daniel Bensaïd was a distant comrade for me.

The friendly support of a distant comrade

However, I want to say that when the friendly support of a distant comrade is shown, it is a very strong, very moving thing. Basically, the support of a close comrade is taken almost for granted, there may be some questions about it, but these lie in the very nature of the closeness. The friendly support, without ulterior motive, of a distant comrade is after all something quite rare. And I will always remember how, when the campaign against me alleging I was anti-Semitic began, a campaign that was subjectively very unpleasant, he was really one of the very first to enter the fray publicly and defend me, in an extremely well-argued way, with his particular talent, both documented and absolutely firm, calm and full of vengeful humour. And that was truly the distant comrade showing himself in the most immediate and friendly way. Of course, the other side of the emotion you feel when the distant comrade intervenes near you is the terrible shock of his disappearance. I am not going to say, it would be absurd, that the disappearance of a distant comrade is harder to bear than that of the a close one, but there is something that particularly strikes you because, as a distant comrade, you did not witness the long sequence of his disappearance in a subjective, close and daily way. It happens just like that. And this disappearance of the distant comrade, which I am experiencing tonight, even in front of you, is a test.

I believe that one of the reasons is that, in the end, distance is a measure of our own place, a particular measure. In a certain sense the nearby is the place itself. The close comrade is the one who accompanies you and occupies the same place where you think and act. But the distant comrade is not in the place itself, and since he is a comrade outside the place, he is also a measure of the place. In a certain sense, every place needs its own distance to consolidate itself, to exist. This is, in politics, the very complicated and important question of alliances with people who are distant. And the unmistakable alliance that existed on all sorts of points with Daniel makes his disappearance also something that affects the place in its own measure, that which is given to it by its distance.

We talked last time about place, and I would like to take this opportunity to say a few more words about it. As you know, the localized materiality of a political procedure can be called 'place'. And the consistency of this materiality is such that it objects to the quite widespread idea that the meeting of bodies can be replaced by an immaterial connection, for example via the Internet. I am certainly not saying that this new operation is useless, but it is not a substitute for the collective construction of place as a combined presence of bodies. Rest assured, nothing will replace this collective effect of the coexistence of bodies, especially in the political process. As soon as bodies are absent, as soon as immateriality sets in, communication or connection may be quick and unmistakable, but decision is precarious.

Meeting is the active core of politics

I'll give an example that some of you here are familiar with. During the last vacation, international delegations had decided to meet up in Gaza, symbolically, to show international support for the people of Gaza, victims of a kind of encirclement, a policy that is, and is ultimately designed to be, whatever is said, a policy of annihilation. Now, a fundamental difference between the foreign delegations and the French delegation is that the French delegation had previously held a physical meeting, whereas the Americans, for example, had got together on the Internet and agreed to meet in Egypt. So, they arrived in Cairo separately. And, in Cairo, they learned that there was no question of them going on to Gaza. So, they found themselves completely nuked. The French delegation, on the other hand, had met up beforehand and taken a decision that, in a certain sense, only a real meeting could allow, namely that, whatever happened in Cairo, they would stay together anyway until the end of the period planned for this expedition. The consequence of this is that they constructed a place. They arrived together in Cairo and they occupied a major boulevard in the city. Of course, the Egyptian police began to show their teeth, there were negotiations - I will spare you the complexities - but in the end they occupied a Cairo pavement for five days, with banners, and met with great support from the population.

This shows how it remains absolutely true that meeting is the active core of politics, being the instance of its place. This really is something that touches on what we could call real democracy. We could call 'real democracy' the set of procedures by which the construction of a new political place is made possible. I even think that this is the most precise definition that could be given at present. And here you can see very clearly how, contrary to what is said, the meeting of bodies remains a sine qua non of political decision-making, and that, from this point of view, it is not true that the Internet as such can produce real democracy. It can be an operator, but it is not constitutive.

A great loss for everyone

I now return to Daniel. Until yesterday, the day before yesterday, we had the presence of Daniel Bensaïd, the presence of his long-time emaciated body, the thin body from which came this southern voice, the Toulouse accent - which for me was a further fraternity with him, as we come from the same city. In this sense, I will conclude on this, this body of Daniel, with his Toulouse accent, was already enough to make a place for itself. A small place, where philosophy and politics were connected in one body and one voice. And there, really, when I saw him, with this singular body and the acuteness of his humour and his voice, proximity and distance were mingled in him. And that's why I wanted to tell you all that with the disappearance of Daniel Bensaïd, who was 63 years old, we all experience a great loss. And in today's conditions, his death is untimely! We are going to miss Daniel Bensaïd for at least twenty years, that's how it is. But, in any case, that is certainly an additional reason to support the cause for which he was a comrade. It is after all the only thing he could ask of us, and that he did ask of us.

Alain Badiou

P.S.

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<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4553-alain-badiou-remembers-the-life-and-work-of-daniel-bensaid>

- Translated by David Fernbach

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