



Extract of International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine

<http://app.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3368>

Book Review

Go forward to meet the new: Daniel Bensaid's "An Impatient Life"

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Sunday 13 April 2014

Description:

There are several problems with the use of the term, 'the sixties generation'. To begin with, it tends to play into the dubious narrative of youthful rebellion followed by gradual conservatism in the face of career, family life and disappointed hopes. It's a narrative that sees the sixties as both defining - ah, the glories of youth! - and long left behind. By linking the generation with the decade (or even the year: a '68er' or soixante-huitard), the term suggests that those years were the apogee of the participants' lives. The most recent cinematic expression of this view is Olivier Assayas' nostalgic 2012 film, *Après Mai*.

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Daniel Bensaïd's rich and thoughtful memoir, *An Impatient Life* (a section of which can be read [here](#).) challenges this narrative in two important ways: Bensaïd remained faithful to his radical youth, and we get the sense he saw the events of May-June 1968 as one moment among many in an engaged life.

Bensaïd was born into the culture of the Left in 1946. His mother, a feisty and headstrong woman, came from a communist family. His father was a Sephardic Jew from Algeria, who at one time had a promising amateur boxing career. Bensaïd's father escaped from the clutches of the Nazis due to his mother's determination - but his uncles were not so lucky.

Bensaïd's family ran a bistro in Toulouse, which was 'solidly red':

The local Communist cell held its annual meetings for the distribution of membership cards in our bistro. The Union des Femmes Françaises organised teas in solidarity with all kinds of good causes. The tables were pushed together to make room for dancing the pasodoble, waltz or tango. The most agile would try out the Russian dances of the Red Army. In the early morning, we would peel the baskets of oysters that had arrived out of nowhere, bawling out at the top of our voice a deafening 'Internationale.'

Reading these lines, we are reminded just how deeply the institutions of the Left were embedded into French life. Possessing great authority after its role in the Resistance, and therefore its association with the Soviet Union, the Communist Party of France (PCF) was (like its sibling in Italy, the PCI) a mass party with real roots in the society. (By contrast, the US New Left of the sixties stemmed from a more profoundly individualist culture than that of Europe. Its roots lay as much in the tradition of left-liberalism associated with Thoreau's Civil Disobedience as that of the later 'Marxisms' it professed.)

Bensaïd joined the PCF young, but quickly broke from its stifling bureaucracy. Immediately, he helped found the French Trotskyist groups, the Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire (JCR) and later the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR). He moved to Paris to study philosophy, which, along with activism, would be his life-long vocation. From that moment, the Trotskyist movement became the centre of Bensaïd's political life, and he would be one of its most talented theoreticians and spokespeople.

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Trotskyism and Maoism - in the 1960s, these two currents seemed to be authentic and revolutionary alternatives to the airless Stalinism of the communist parties. Yet Maoism, for all the fantasies and delusions of its wild radicalism, tended to be theoretically paper-thin and often even more politically suffocating than its Communist opponents.

In these years, the Trotskyist movement acted as a kind of political conscience of the Left: it offered a critique of the horrors of Stalinism, argued for open and democratic socialism, opposed the betrayals of the establishment parties, remained independent of the alluring compromises of parliamentary power.

Yet Trotskyism was also to prove a Jungian shadow of the Stalinism it opposed - and like any shadow, it tended to reproduce the shapes of its more visible other. Although Trotskyism was theoretically closer to the 'classical Marxism' associated with the generation of Lenin and Luxemburg, it often reproduced the bureaucratic structures of its political rival. More importantly, there was a tendency for Trotskyist groups, deprived of any social weight to become intellectual thinktanks rather than real political organisations.

For its size, the Trotskyist movement produced a vast number of writers and thinkers, many of whom - as Bensaïd records - went on to become influential or famous in their fields. Indeed, it's startling just how many of the French intellectual or cultural elite came from the ranks of Trotskyism.

Nourished by the rich soil of their national Left culture, the JCR and LCR were perhaps the more able to break from the intellectual uniformity that plagued Trotskyism in the Anglophone world. Who in France could avoid engaging with Louis Althusser, whose 'For Marx' landed in 1965 like a meteor from a distant planet? Who could avoid the influences of the Left's intellectual giants of the age: Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, Lucien Goldmann, Maurice Merleau-Ponty or Paul Nizan?

Bensaïd and his comrades devoured such work quickly and its influence on the LCR was significant. As Bensaïd notes in an interview elsewhere:

[W]e didn't have the pretension of founding a theoretical orthodoxy. From the beginning, at the end of the 1960s, there were among us followers of Althusser and Sartre, there were Mandelites, and obviously there is no question of a congress voting on the law of value or on the Freudian unconscious. We agree on tasks, on the interpretation of events and common political tasks.

Indeed, Bensaïd did not even consider himself a Trotskyist, but rather took what he needed from many theorists and traditions. He felt that 'we had to turn the page, go forward to meet the new that was in the process of being born ...'

Bensaïd was an iconoclastic Marxist and his range of referents were wide and heterodox, though we should not mistake openness for softness (an error all too often made on the radical Left). Indeed, openness - a refusal to draw too-strict lines of demarcation, an appreciation of subtlety and complexity - is precisely the mode of thought needed to avoid apostasy, when black suddenly becomes white, up becomes down, Left becomes Right.

If Bensaïd had a weakness, according to Tariq Ali, it was that 'even when he knew that mistakes ... were being committed by his organisation, he would never stand up and contest the will of the majority.'

Whatever the case, *An Impatient Life* is not only intellectually rich, it's also an incredibly warm book. There is grief here, but not cynicism or bitterness. Though it's difficult to judge a person's character from his or her own memoir, the testimony of others (such as Tariq Ali) suggests Bensaïd was as open personally as he was theoretically.

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Only two years after the formation of the JCR, the events of 1968 confronted Bensaïd and his comrades. They were months of liberation, an extraordinary explosion of popular energy, of rallies and mass meetings, of unrestrained creativity. Yet Bensaïd is at pains to emphasise the importance of May-June came not from the student revolt but the largest general strike in history.

For so many of Bensaïd's generation, '68 was the defining moment. But in his book Bensaïd moves on quickly to the seventies and the struggles of the LCR and the Fourth International, the largest international network of Trotskyist groups.

As with many of the groups that emerged in the sixties, the LCR was prone to bouts of ultraleftism. Like most sixties activists, Bensaïd and his comrades saw the upsurges of the time as preludes to an even greater worldwide radicalisations, and this fed their insurrectionist imaginary. As Bensaïd notes, four years after 1968, they used the slogan: 'Is the question of power raised? Let's raise it!'

Of one 1972 bulletin he says, 'Whatever its failings in political sense, it made up in terms of formal logic.'

Ultraleftism, obsession with the logic of a written program - these two elements, born from a lack of real social weight and the resulting lack of responsibility to any constituents, plagued Trotskyism everywhere.

Still, the LCR never drifted down the path of the militarist groups of Italy (the Red Brigades), Germany (Baader-Meinhof) or the US (The Weather Underground), preferring to employ actions and guerrilla theatre closer to the actions of the Yippies. These protests - the paint bombing of the visiting South Vietnamese President's car, the sacking of a bank, the occupation of Sacré-Coeur - were conceived of as symbolic, political protests, though in truth, one can rarely judge exactly how effective these sorts of actions are. Bensaïd affirms that 'we were attentive to the conjuncture, to the balance of forces, and to our actions being justified and understandable to working people.'

Such an approach kept the LCR one of the healthiest organisations of its type. As time passed, it developed into probably the most significant and mature of the First World Trotskyist groups.

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Bensaïd suggests that his generation needed to learn an 'active waiting, an urgent impatience, an endurance and a perseverance that are the opposite of passive waiting for a miracle.'

The two decades after the 'long sixties' (the period of about 1958 to 1974) witnessed the slow downturn of radicalism, the ascendancy of the New Right, the triumph of neoliberalism, the successive defeats of political movements: indeed, the eighties produced exactly the reverse of expectations of most sixties activists. May-June '68 proved not to be a rehearsal for later uprisings, but the apogee of the movements.

The caesura between hope and reality is one of the most interesting parts of *An Impatient Life*. For the LCR, this meant years of trying to break from their isolation through voluntarist means: launching a daily paper, sending its membership into industry (as much of the movement did at the time).

To substitute for the slow march of the 1980s in France, much of the later half of *An Impatient Life* is dedicated to the emerging movements of Latin America, which Bensaïd visited regularly as part of his role in the Fourth International.

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He recounts the disastrous militarism of Argentinean Trotskyism; the triumphant rise of the Brazilian Workers' Party, and its subsequent volte face in the face of the 'markets,; the vicissitudes of Mexican Trotskyism.

Back in Europe, the next decisive moment was the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, a seismic political event the repercussions of which are still being felt today.

At the time, many on the Left underplayed the effects of this 'end of history'. They treated it as a clearing of the decks that would allow new forces and new configurations to rapidly grow. The first half of the equation was correct, but the second was far more debatable. Certainly, the basis for a distinct Trotskyist current had been erased, yet the Left remained embattled.

The glimmerings of hope emerged with the Zapatista rebellion, the 'sans' movement in France against in 1995, and the anti-globalisation movement beginning in Seattle in 1999. But by this time, Bensaïd was already ill.

During the 1990s, much of his focus was on writing - he produced a vast array of books, including the important *Marx for Our Times*.

An Impatient Life was published in French in 2004.

Bensaïd doesn't discuss the second significant development of that period: the emergence of the first of the new 'broad left' parties, such as Partito della Rifondazione Comunista, launched in Italy in 1991, and the Scottish Socialist Party, founded in 1998. These parties seemed a way to reunite the Left in the new post-Stalinist context. Suddenly there seemed space for organisations that transcended the limits of both Stalinism and Social Democracy. These would, it seemed, be new workers parties: mass, democratic, and activist.

In the case of the PRC and the SSP, it was a false dawn. Rifondazione squandered its opportunity by becoming the left-wing of a neo-liberal government; like the Brazilian Workers Party, they traded their principles for power and privilege. The Scottish Socialist Party self-destructed in a squabble over its too-influential leader's personal actions. Coalescing a new powerful Left organisation has proved more difficult than many imagined.

Still, it is still too early to draw a balance sheet on these broad Left initiatives. Each organisation is different and politics begins, as Gramsci reminded us, with a national reconnaissance. We cannot be sure of the future fortunes of Die Linke in Germany or Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal, for example.

Bensaïd supported the broad left party process initiated by the LCR in France. Sensing the opportunity to break from their isolation, he and his comrades in the LCR launched the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) in 2009. The new organisation quickly leaped to 9000 members. Despite this promising beginning, things turned sour. The Front de Gauche quickly took up the space; the NPA suffered a series of splits and setbacks.

Bensaïd did not live to see the crisis of the NPA and we don't know what his opinions on its trajectory might be. Instead, his adult life was effectively coterminous with the life of the LCR. French Trotskyism now has to negotiate its ways through the shoals and reefs of politics without him. With his death in January 2010, the movement lost one of its finest figures.

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An Impatient Life will appeal most to those on the Left, for its staggering array of allusions and personalities requires some negotiating. It's a rich book, and an invaluable one. At times, it is also beautiful: replete with songs and poems that reflect a romantic's love of music and language. As far as I can tell with my broken French, Bensaïd's style - its forms and rhythms not quite reproducible in English - descends from both French literature and philosophy. Indeed, his memoir breaks periodically into ruminations mostly associated with history and theory rather than biography. These chapters - on the meaning of crisis, on violence, on Trotsky's time in Mexico, reflections on his Jewish heritage - give the book real intellectual weight.

Nowadays, Bensaïd's Marxism - a mélange of influences formed not into incoherence but into a fecund tapestry - is pressingly needed. When he once absorbed the riches of his own political forebears, now he has become one of ours. The time for hidebound traditions is over. He was right, all those years ago, to suggest that we have to turn the page and go forward to meet the new.

Republished from [Overland 60](#).

PS:

An Impatient Life is available for 18 Euros plus shipping from the [IIRE](#).