

Daniel Bensaïd

“It is time to define the strategy”

The French philosopher Daniel Bensaïd, a revolutionary of ideas from the anti-capitalist left, has just published his In Praise of Profane Politics, a dense and complex work through which this thinker hopes to contribute to a counter attack by the transformative left which can take ordinary people out of a never ending crisis. In his eulogy, this eminently political thinker is disconcerting. In the present context of “neoliberal authoritarianism”, and without hiding his membership of France’s New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), Bensaïd tries to locate the fruitful poles of resistance. And among them, tries to separate the wheat from the chaff, inveighing sometimes with virulence against theorists who, purporting to describe “civil society”, “the movement for another globalisation” or the “new radicalism”, have defined theories that condemned it to sterility.

André Perez: *In Praise of Profane Politics is a title that sounds quite mysterious. What does it mean?*

Daniel Bensaïd: Ah. sounds mysterious?

A.P.: *It seems so to me.*

D.B.: Well then, we will go in parts. This work is first, a eulogy simply to politics, the true politics faced with the current situation. As Hannah Arendt said: market mechanisms administered by a managing political regime without genuine pluralism. It is also an eulogy to profane politics, faced with the advent of

religiosity in politics everywhere. This rebirth is evident in the good against evil crusade of the US. Also in Europe, where there is a strong temptation with Nicolas Sarkozy at the head to redefine the EU in Christian terms, leaving Turkey out. There is a third example. I do not know about Spain, but here religious vocabulary is increasingly penetrating legal discourse. The condemned not only must serve their sentence, they must also abjure, say that things have turned out for the best. This is something which relates not to the law, but to religion.

A.P.: *Also you refer to the religious invasion in the critical field.*

D.B.: Yes, the religious dimension is clear in thinkers like Toni Negri, and their allusions to Saint Francis. Badiou has something of the religious in his theory of the event, the emergence of a possible coming from nothing... The religious element spreads above all “within the people”, as you say, by means of the dissolution of the spirit of class. The neoliberal offensive has managed to destroy many class solidarities. That is a setback which still continues. So, there are religious, community solidarities that were disappearing. France places much emphasis on the Islamic element, when in reality this communitarian withdrawal is also seen in Jewish circles.

A.P.: *With the invaluable help of Benjamin, Arendt and Schmitt, you analyse the current domination, then examine the poles of resistance to return History towards emancipation. Pessimistic or optimistic?*

D.B.: I am only trying to perceive with clarity the political moment. Everything is still dominated by the defeat of the 1980s, when the idea of emancipation disappeared. But there

was a turning point in ideas at the end of the 1990s. It is unquestionable. The global justice movement brought together hundreds of thousands of people and launched the forums. But I believe that all these key facts have led us to a utopian moment. That is, ideas of emancipation not facing the practical application of what is possible. Hence the use and abuse of the term “alter”, “other”, “other”... “Another world is” “possible”, “another left” and “the other campaign”... This eliminates the need to define, it shows that there is no maturity. I am neither pessimistic nor optimistic. I think we should move on from this stage and define the strategy.

A.P.: *What will happen?*

D.B.: We must introduce a new idea, which was formulated by Marcuse in the 1960s: “is it possible to break the vicious circle of domination?” With a consumer society increasingly more obsessive and disturbing, with a society of the spectacle that has become a mock society... I am uneasy and I think that we have to begin to find formulas to get out. Resistance is insufficient in itself; we must relate it to one or more political forces.

A.P.: *Clearly why you support the NPA, Olivier Besancenot’s party.*

D.B.: I repeat: one or more political forces, because the novelty today is the emergence of reformulated radical lefts, able to take power, as we have seen in Latin America. When you think about the historic defeat suffered in the 20th century, the sclerotic and bureaucratized left as one of the causes which allowed the neoliberal authoritarian offensive is important. In France, the NPA and the Front de gauche. In Germany, Die Linke. In Portugal and Greece also the radical left is on the rise

while the social democrats are in full decline and the apparatus lefts endangered. Asia we know less, but the decline of militant Maoism frees forces for a new alternative.

A.P.: *Yes, but recently we see in the elections that the rise of the Front, the NPA or Die Linke does not compensate for the decline of the traditional left.*

D.B.: The dominant element of the era remains the historic defeat of the 1980s. We are not yet out of it. It is a race against time which is not won. It is clear that at the moment the renaissance of the radical left does not compensate for the decline of the traditional left. However, I see in the new activist generation of the NPA a current which sees things differently to us. We knew the ideal of the revolution. They have a more practical and direct vision of the confrontation in which they invest much energy. In France, Sarkozy continues his neoliberal counter-reforms. People know that if he achieves its objective, we will no longer live in the same country. There will be a leap from the principle of solidarity and equality. Something that is fundamental from 1789.

A.P.: *The polls say that the crisis is good for Sarkozy.*

D.B.: Yes, but do not forget that one crisis hides another, much more fundamental. From this crisis there will be no exit, because in the background is a crisis of values. Neoliberal authoritarianism is expanding the areas of the market to all human relationships. It reduces all interchange to accumulative value, and this in a world of networks and knowledge is absurd. This will to quantify the unquantifiable, measure the immeasurable, to appropriate value is ridiculous.

A.P.: *What motives are there today for struggle?*

D.B.: Before we had a religion of History telling us: there will be a final struggle and we will necessarily win. Now we must get rid of the fetishes, of this religion of History, accept uncertainty and adopt a profane politics as strategic art.

A.P.: *Don't you want to call Sarkozy a comrade after his speeches?*

D.B.: He maintains his authoritarian neoliberalism. For a basic reason - unemployment has been installed permanently. No one knows how modern societies will react, when there are no longer reserves of rural employment, or structures of family solidarity. If we go back to the crisis in the 1930s, in France 35 per cent of the population was still rural. There were shock absorbers. Now, 90 % of our societies are wage earners. How will societies react in terms of crime, or town planning?

A.P.: *Perhaps more of the same?*

D.B.: Neoliberal authoritarianism cannot last. The great invention of rescuing Keynes to talk of a Keynesian recovery cannot work. I just re-read Keynes carefully. He says that for the recovery to work there must be a homogeneous economic space, so that public capital enters quickly into circulation.

A.P.: *How does the moral propaganda of wild-cat capitalism function?*

D.B.: The traditional left has actively contributed to the putting in place of neoliberal authoritarianism. By for example, the dismantling of public services and the social state. This is a crisis of values and a crisis of solutions, because there are no alternatives. Therefore, if you agree that we will not come out

of this crisis just like that, you also accept the idea that the people, immediately, do not realize that you are robbing the social state. Consciousness will not come overnight. At the moment people are between fear and anger. Fear of what will happen to them tomorrow. Anger at injustice.

A.P.: *Can speeches replace reality?*

D.B.: There has been such a degradation of democratic life that we have arrived at the time of storytelling in politics. Alistair Campbell, Tony Blair's advisor, wrote it: the objective is to win elections and to win elections people must be told what they want to hear and someone must be found who says it well. And the programme? We will see later. The result is that there is no debate; there is no conviction, no proposals or arguments. We are no longer in democracy, we are in demagoguery. We live in a permanent plebiscite.

A.P.: *What are the forms of so-called biopower?*

D.B.: Foucault's "biopower" is the generalization of a society of diffuse control of the person. From video surveillance to metro tickets, from the fact that the people accept and internalise the obligation to spend hours in traffic jams to go to work, to accept that they commodify your mental leisure time bombarding you with advertisements that you pay for... All these are forms of biopower and it is a diffuse, perhaps more penetrating tyranny than the old discipline.

A.P.: *Does that mean that collectives set up to escape video surveillance are useless?*

D.B.: No, no. On the contrary. Total respect for all practices of resistance. They are the foundation of the fermentation of Utopia and the

project; they are the condition for everything. There is a problem with authors who theorize these experiments in the opposite direction to what is necessary. I don't say either the NPA or nothing.

The NPA is nothing but a stage. If the crisis is deep, as I believe, the entire political, trade union and social landscape will suffer a tremor. In ten years we will not be in the same landscape.

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