

Daniel Bensaïd... by *Ballast* magazine

## A Bensaïd Primer

Daniel Bensaïd wondered whether we might repair the “damaged words” of the last century, delinking them from their ideological apparatuses and setting them in motion again. In this spirit, we share an A-Z of twenty-six key Bensaïd terms, which together offer a concise portrait of the man whom Tariq Ali has called « one of the most gifted Marxist intellectuals of his generation ». The list was compiled by *Ballast* magazine for their Bensaïd week, and translated by David Broder.

**Blanqui:** There is an underground current in the history of French socialism, a heretical, marginalised and repressed one. It is a sensibility masked by the tendencies that have been predominant on the Left since the end of the nineteenth century ... If we see the history of socialism in terms of the divide between a “first” and a “second” Left – the former being centralist, statist and anti-capitalist, and the latter more social, reformist and democratic – then this would be a much more radical “third Left”, which has always remained outside of the political game of parliaments and ministries. It is not an organised group or tendency, and still less a party: at most it is an intellectual and political constellation, whose most visible stars are Auguste Blanqui, Georges Sorel, Charles Péguy and Bernard Lazare. [“Auguste Blanqui, communiste hérétique”]

**Colonialism:** It particularly haunts the collective unconscious of a country like France,

suffering the threats to its “rank” in the world order and unable to finish its labour of mourning for colonialism. From the slave trade to colonial massacres, from Sétif to Tonkin, Algeria and Françafrique, it is still in need of therapy. [*Fragments mécréants*]

**Elections:** For us there’s a paradox, here: we are against this system, we are against the principle of a presidential election being held and even so we are forced to play the game, even as we also denounce it, because it is a constitutive element of power relations and thus we can draw some advantage from it. [Tout est encore possible]

**EU:** When the workers and the peoples resist, when neoliberal rule can no longer continue, the European Union provides the judicial power to push it onward by force, authorising the market to dictate its own law [“Pour une autre Europe”]

**Eyes:** The language of emancipation has not emerged untarnished from the torments of the last century. We could say that like the animals in the fable, such words were not all killed by this experience, but they were all seriously wounded. Socialism, revolution and even anarchy hardly came out of it any better than communism. Socialism is steeped in the blood of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, colonial wars and governmental collaboration, to the point of losing all its content as its scope expanded. A methodical ideological campaign has succeeded in getting many people to identify revolution with violence and terror. But of all the words that yesterday bore great promises and dreams of the future, it is communism that has suffered the most damage, on account of its being captured by bu-

reaucratic raison d’état and its enslavement to a totalitarian enterprise. But still, the question is whether any of these damaged words are worth repairing and setting back in motion again [“Puissances du communisme”]

**Expectations:** A dark time, a sad lukewarm feeling. This is less a crisis of the utopia itself than of the content of our expectations. There are multiple, more or less obvious reasons for this, after a dark century: the loss of illusions in progress, the debacle of a bureaucratically administered future, and the pressing concern for survival in a now-precarious present. So a lot of factors have contributed to the narrowing of the horizon of our expectations. But “how can we live without having the unknown ahead of us?” [“L’arc tendu de l’attente”]

**The feminist question:** In elaborating a critique of “gender relations” the feminist movement has already succeeded in avoiding the essentialist trap attached to the flatly biological representation of sex relations. In recognising the historical and social dimension of the antagonisms among the sexes, through the notion of gender, it leads us to think class consciousness and gender consciousness not as parallel and mutually exclusive resistances, but as resistances that converge in a single conflictual strategic alliance. Woman is the future of the [communist] spectre; and vice versa. [“La femme est l’avenir du Spectre”]

**Freedom:** Global capitalism allows individuals the – tightly controlled – freedom to consent to the implacable logic of market globalisation. What is the freedom of the unemployed worker sacrificed on the altar of a stock price? [*Un nouveau théologien*, B.-H. Lévy]

**God:** Not everything is permitted for an atheist – especially not for an atheist, in fact. Others are only responsible to God; the atheist, to himself. And there's no second chance or purgatory, nor any other great pardon. [“Les douleurs du présent”]

**Gulf War:** This war, waged by a coalition led by the Americans, is an imperialist war that stands in continuity with the colonial and neo-colonial efforts to re-divide the world. In no sense could it have been our cause, or our war. And given that we live in a belligerent power that joined the coalition, our engagement sought to stop the war, to challenge its supposed logic by whatever means we could, and to weaken our “war effort” as far as was possible. [“La guerre et après”]

**Loyalty [Fidélité]:** Soon I'll have been a loyal militant for some forty years. I've never defined myself as a “militant intellectual”, but rather as an intellectual militant, an activist who tries to reflect. For me the word militancy has never meant enrolment, joining the ranks of a religious or military brigade, but more simply a basic ethics of politics (just as teaching has to be the ethics of thinking or research). It is the principle of its reality and humility, the nourishing link between theory and practice, the daily invention of a singular collective. [“On est embarqué”]

**History:** History is not a long, calm stream. It has no guaranteed happy ending. If the crisis still isn't the event yet, it does show its concrete possibility. Its outcome is not determined in advance. [“Désir ou besoin de révolution?”]

**Internationalism:** There is a clear need for internationalism. The commodity relation and

imperialist domination exist across the planet, which implies that we also need a worldwide response to them. Such an answer must bring together a much greater number of traditions of struggle than in Marx's time, when the International was only European. This makes things complicated. [“Un socialisme pour le XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle”]

**Joan of Arc:** Betrayed by her own side and abandoned by almost everyone, at the head of a miniscule troop of 400 mercenaries who no longer even represented an army, at Compiègne Joan of Arc was already a Saint-Just after the Battle of Fleurus or a Che in Bolivia. Her time had run out. ... A woman and a heretic, betrayed and tortured, Joan will forever belong to the parade of the fallen. Frozen by history, she awaits the great thaw of memory; every kiss by the present tries to wake her from this nightmare. [“Jeanne l'irreprésentable”]

**Karl Marx:** I'm often asked why anyone would still invoke Marx today... what a stupid question! It would make more sense to ask why anyone wouldn't invoke him today, at least in some measure and up to a certain point. [“Karl Marx, pourquoi le retour?”]

**Melancholy:** A melancholy of what is or may be is first of all defined by the possibilities and the uncertainty of its movement; that is, by a wager, a risk. A melancholy that does not ignore the painful divorce between the probable and the possible, but rather commits to overcoming it – in spite of everything, against everything and toward everything. Fully certain as to its uncertainty, it confronts the weight of doubt while never discarding it. Hope only makes sense if there is an acknow-

ledged dose of pessimism. [*Une radicalité joyeuse et mélancolique*]

**No:** There is their No and ours, and they are resolutely incompatible. Michel Rocard himself pitifully admitted that he had been “mistaken about the No vote in the referendum on the EU constitutional treaty: it was not a rejection of Europe, but a No to the deregulation of the labour market”. His lucidity came rather belatedly! In the meantime, the construction of a neoliberal Europe – conceived as a machine for breaking up social advances – succeeded in compromising the idea of Europe in the minds of millions of workers. [“Pour une autre Europe sociale”]

**Ostentatious:** The law against “ostentatious” religious symbols in schools (in fact, a law against girls wearing the Islamic headscarf) ought to be rejected on account of its discriminatory implications for populations of Arab origin. That is not to play down the religious oppression of women. This is a fight on two fronts, but which are fought on different terrains and with different temporalities: an immediate political struggle against a repressive law, on the one hand, and on the other hand a longer term social struggle to transform morals, for the secularisation of the world. [“Blessures et travaux de mémoire”]

**Politics:** An art of conflict, an organisation of the conflictual social relation in both time and space. An art of shifting the lines (of changing the balance of forces) and of breaking apart the march of time. [*Éloge de la résistance à l'air du temps*]

**Republic:** There is not a Republic, there are republics; there is not France, there are

Frances. And not only two, the one based in Vichy and the other in London, but lots of others: the Frances of Gurs and Le Vernet, of the Affiche Rouge and Vercors. Since June 1848 it's no longer good enough to speak of the Republic, without adjectives. No, we need to define it: the "social Republic" is the "Republic that hasn't been achieved", a pseudonym for the "permanent revolution" people started talking about in 1830. Without this loyalty to the foundational event, the Republic establishes itself, accommodates itself and then decays. [*Leur gauche et la nôtre*]

**Trotsky:** Trotsky is a clandestine guide. That's not a fawning reference, or a description exclusive to him. Quite the contrary: our task is to transmit a pluralist memory of the workers' movement and the strategic debates that have shaped it. But on this terrain, taking this perilous road, Trotsky offers indispensable help. ["Trotsky, un passeur du siècle"] Twenty-first century: No one can say what the revolutions of the twenty-first century will look

like. Capitalism has only been the ruling system for a few centuries: it is not eternal. It will end, for better or worse. We are entering into a long-term crisis of civilisation, where the reduction of the world to the market's measures is ever more irrational and miserable. The essential thing is to give the non-fatal side of history its proper opportunity ["Personne ne sait à quoi ressembleront les révolutions du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle"]

**Victims:** Internationalist solidarity is something different to Christian charity. It does not mean an ashamed subservience to victims: rather, it demands equality and mutual respect. And freedom of criticism is the condition for that. [*Fragments mécréants*]

**Walter Benjamin:** Walter Benjamin died like a dog, committing suicide in his forty-ninth year, at the end of a road that led nowhere, absolutely crushed, at a time when the people doing the crushing were far from a pretty sight. [*Walter Benjamin, sentinelle messianique*]

**Zapatismo:** This [new] generation is doing what it can, in political conditions that are far more difficult than what we once knew. The sources of its politicisation are different from our own. A "libertarian" tendency, as illustrated for example by the invocation of Zapatismo, is clearly making itself heard. We, well we gorged ourselves on Marx, Lenin and Trotsky; and that's certainly not where the new generation will find its inspiration. ["Complice de l'utopie"]

**Zionism:** Zionist terrorism is a state terrorism that can rely on a regular army, a police force and the secret services of a bourgeois state supported by imperialism. Faced with this oppression we unconditionally support the national rights of the Palestinians. ["La question juive aujourd'hui"]

By Miri Davidson  
28 May 2015

2 mai 2015 © 2015 Ballast