

Christopher Hitchens and his Critics: Terror, Iraq, and the Left

Simon Cottee and Thomas Cushman (eds.), afterword by Christopher Hitchens,
New York University Press, 2008, 365 pp.

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Also under review: *The Second Plane: September 11: Terror and Boredom*, by Martin Amis, Knopf, 2008, 204 pp., and *Left in Dark Times: A Stand Against the New Barbarism*, by Bernard-Henri Levy, translated by Benjamin Moser, Random House, 2008, 233 pp.

Paradigms have moved on. – Bernard-Henri Levy [1]

Still aghast in June 2002, Martin Amis witnesses that, ‘September 11 was a day of de-Enlightenment.’ In his book, *The Second Plane* – collecting essays and short-stories penned between September 18, 2001 and September 11, 2007 – he forcefully and yet elegantly registers the shock felt by a sensitive, courageous observer of events, thrust back by gusts of reactionary violence emanating from an unsuspected world of medieval fanaticism, in order to rediscover his own most basic moral and imaginative resources. Only the first of the fourteen pieces indulges for even a moment in that cognitive-affective blunder which Paul Berman perspicaciously identifies as ‘rationalist naïveté’ – the morally lazy, ethically purblind temptation to deduce some readily graspable ‘good reason’ that simply ‘must’ lie behind every apparently heinous act of brutality, so long as it is one directed against those perceived as powerful (the U.S., Europe, Israel) on behalf of the world’s designated victims (the wretched of the earth). As Berman was first to fully understand,

The suicide bombings [of September 11] produced a philosophical crisis among everyone around the world who wanted to believe that a rational logic governs the world – a crisis for everyone whose fundamental beliefs would not be able to acknowledge the existence of pathological mass political movements. [2]

According to this ‘logic,’ absent any pathology on the side of the killers, the more ‘desperate’ they are to kill us, the more guilty we are – obviously – for driving them to need to blow themselves up and take us out with them. If such reasoning were

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followed in a court-of-law, juries would routinely convict the friends and families of murdered people, and judges would sentence the miscreants with the admonition to be less provocatively explodable in the future. As Berman saw, 'Ultimately, the error was conceptual' (p. 153).

Beyond Rationalist Naïveté

'The Second Plane,' speculates a little mistakenly that Americans will have to 'absorb the fact that they are hated, and hated intelligibly,' but the rest of the volume suggests almost the opposite: What a challenge it is to deflect rationalist naïveté, reject the comforting resort to moral equivalence, and absorb the nearly unintelligible animus of the radical Islamist global death cult. [3] By the end of the book, in an austere titled essay, 'September 11,' all glib, politically correct cant is absent. 'Six years later,' Amis points out bravely – in maybe the single best, most honest sentence anyone has written on the dread topic – 'we are still learning how to think and feel about September 11' (p. 196).

This means in part learning to face the fact of some grave, unpalatable realities, which run counter to the 'commonsense' faith that all pathological mass-movements lie safely in the past:

With the twentieth century so fresh in our mind, you might think that human beings would be quick to identify an organized passion for carnage. But we aren't quick to do that – of course we aren't; we are impeded by a combination of naïveté, decency, and a kind of recurrent incredulity. The death cult always benefits, initially at least, from its capacity to stupefy.

Alluding to radical Islamism's well-documented debt to both Bolshevism and Nazism, [4] Amis gives some of the reasons why the most lucid analysts have begun the job of comparing today's Muslim totalitarianism (whether secular or religious, Sunni or Shia) to an earlier, European, brand of fascist insanity:

The exaltation of a godlike leader; the demand, not just for submission to the cause, but for utter transformation in its name; a self-pitying romanticism; a hatred of liberal society, individualism, and affluent inertia (or Komfortismus); an obsession with sacrifice and martyrdom; a morbid adolescent rebelliousness combined with a childish love of destruction; 'agonism,' or the acceptance of permanent and unappeasable contention; the

use and invocation of the very new and the very old; a mania for purification; and a ferocious anti-Semitism.

Combating, as a member of civilised society, this 'thanatoid' death-drive unleashed in the name of the latest *Führer Principe* [5] – whether one regards oneself as liberal, radical, or conservative – is the moral and political challenge of our age (p. 200). Recognising this is the precondition of any viable left or progressive politics.

The Hitchens Factor

So, odd it is indeed, as Christopher Hitchens most notably avers, that a considerable segment of the contemporary so-called 'left' denies precisely this. Widening his net to encompass totalitarian threats from around the world, he argues that the end of the Cold War inaugurated a new conjuncture, and with it came a fresh challenge for political thought and action. Writing in the "Afterword" to Simon Cottee and Thomas Cushman's major new edited volume – *Christopher Hitchens and His Critics*, a collection of Hitchens' wartime writings, gathered helpfully with replies from noteworthy interlocutors, and framed beautifully by the editors' thoughtful introduction – Hitchens wryly sums up:

the years after the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1989 are marked by the recrudescence of danger from different forms of absolutism in Serbia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Darfur, and North Korea, and once again, a huge number of 'intellectuals' will not agree that the totalitarian principle, whether secular or religious, is the main enemy. There is, apparently, always some reason why this is either not true or is a distraction from some more pressing business or is perhaps a mere excuse for 'empire.' (p. 331)

The anti-imperialist intellectual is slow to appreciate Hitchens' point because it so profoundly strikes at the roots of their identity. The challenge of neo-totalitarianisms around the world, though serious and pressing, is one that upsets the presuppositions of the children and grandchildren of the 1960s because the United States is not primarily at fault in these situations, and might even do some good.

And it is precisely this simple fact that does not compute. For, as Jean Bethke Elshtain incisively notes,

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Somewhere along the line, the idea took hold that, to be an intellectual, you have to be against it, whatever it is. The intellectual is the negator. Affirmation is not in his or her vocabulary. It was not always so.... [but] For those of us who entered adulthood in the 1960s, to be an intellectual was to be in opposition. [6]

That is – so long as 'it' refers to American power or anything else regarded as 'white,' 'Western' or 'male.' When, on the other hand 'it' refers to something non-white, non-Western, non-male, affirmation is nearly all the intellectual can find in his (or her) vocabulary. In an age of so-called 'multiculturalism,' the reverse of Elstain's point is equally apposite. It forms the other half of the stupid discursive equation that prevents some – particularly on the 'left' – from seeing the threats that people like Amis, Hitchens and Bernard-Henri Levy see clearly. As Amis points out, in the post-left's eerily stereotyped discourse, everything 'other' is good (p. 156). The results are tragic if also comical, since 'in all conflicts between West and East,' those who lack the ability to consider supporting the American government in anything it does (for example in Afghanistan or Iraq) also suffer from 'the 100 percent and 360-degree inability to pass judgment on any ethnicity other than our own (except in the case of Israel)' (p. 197). Over time, such mechanical assessments 'harden into identity' says Elstain (p. 73).

Identity Anti-Politics

Hardened identities are not good for democratic politics, which depends upon the fluidity of citizens' commitments relative to accurate information and sound argument, holding open the possibility of the transformation of both opinions and identities in light of public discussion. Hardened identities, of the kind Elstain refers to, make persuasion difficult to say the least. They are even in a sense 'anti-political,' because they inhibit rather than encourage the collectivity's quest for a rational consensus freely arrived at. They prevent rather than facilitate decisions based on public scrutiny of reasons and evidence in view of debates about the meaning of shared values, such as liberty and equality.

My question therefore is whether such a rigid and automatic brand of 'thought' can be credited any longer as either 'left' or 'right?' Is it 'left' to praise the dictator Saddam Hussein for his 'courage,' as British MP George Galloway did? Is it 'right' to want to see the Taliban deposed? Is it 'left' to embrace Hassan Nasrallah, as Noam Chomsky did, congratulating the leader of Hezbollah in person for standing up

to the U.S. and Israel? Is Hamas really a 'part of the global left,' as a U.C. Berkeley professor, Judith Butler said at a teach-in? [7] Whose left is that? Is it 'left' to cite with credulity, as reasonable reasons for the attacks of 9/11, Osama Bin Laden's own stated explanation – including his attitude toward the Jewish State of Israel – as some academics, steeped in postmodern theories, have done? [8] Is filmmaker Oliver Stone saying something 'left' when he speaks of the 'rebellion of 9/11'? Who was rebelling and in the name of what? Was Jean Baudrillard offering us a theory from the 'left,' when he wrote of the attacks that, 'It is almost [as if it were] they who did it, but we who wanted it?' Was he writing from the left when he wrote the following?

Moral condemnation and the sacred union against terrorism are equal to the prodigious jubilation engendered by witnessing this global superpower being destroyed; better, by seeing it more or less self-destroying, even suiciding spectacularly. Though it is (this superpower) that has, through its unbearable power, engendered all that violence brewing around the world, and therefore this terrorist imagination which – unknowingly – inhabits us all. [9]

I think speculations like these (and many other examples that could be cited) [10] form part of a strange new configuration, a novel discursive regime, a weird constellation of viewpoints – or what Raymond Williams taught students of Marxist cultural critique to call an emergent 'structure of feeling,' one that I and others choose to call 'post-left.' [11]

And must we really endure, in 2009, the likes of Tariq Ali, who instantly says 'yes, but' to Mumbai, before the slain bodies of the innocent dead are cold? To be sure, he writes, 'none of this [the Indian government's actions and conditions in India] justifies terrorism, but....' But? But the post-left paradigm prevails, eliciting reliably another torrent of clichéd rationalizations for barbarism:

but [the massacre] should, at the very least, force India's rulers to direct their gaze on their own country and the conditions that prevail. Economic disparities are profound. The absurd notion that the trickle-down effects of global capitalism would solve most problems can now be seen for what it always was: a fig leaf to conceal new modes of exploitation.

Take this latest chance, India, to examine yourself, before you provoke more attacks on local Jewish centers! Examine closely the way global capitalism targeted

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Nairman House, taking the lives of Rivka and Rabbi Gavriel Holtzberg, two young parents in their 20s, and only spared their two-year old son, Moshe by a miracle. Notice the way economic disparities burn down magnificent old hotels, while trickle-down effects employ well-trained fanatics to shoot innocent bystanders at random. See the way India's policies themselves train young 'radicals' to embrace their own deaths with gusto. For after all,

Why should it be such a surprise if the perpetrators are themselves Indian Muslims? It's hardly a secret that there has been much anger within the poorest sections of the Muslim community. [12]

Yes, this we know. And it is hardly a secret that, according to the post-left, mass-casualty suicide-terrorism is caused by poverty and powerlessness, even when attacks are carefully arranged by well-funded, powerful organizations that recruit Muslim youth through massive propaganda campaigns. It would take more than a 'fig leaf' to conceal Ali's excitement at this latest incident.

In Defence of the 'Post-Left' Concept: A Reply to Critics

To forestall confusion among readers of goodwill and good sense, while perhaps also reassuring my more literal-minded and pedantic critics as well, 'the post-left,' as I see it, is obviously *both* post-left and *post-left*. The term refers with productive and intentional ambiguity (depending on context and emphasis) to those who appear in danger of either *going over or having gone over* from the precincts of the left (broadly if vaguely defined, but defined) to something else. They exist. They include those – well known to everyone likely to be reading this – whom Martin Amis calls 'liberal relativists.' In their cringing posture he detects, as do I, more than a hint of 'hemispherical abjection,' more than a touch of that moral scoliosis according to which,

given the choice between George Bush and Osama bin Laden, the liberal relativist, it seems is obliged to plump for the Saudi, thus becoming the appeaser of an armed doctrine with the following tenets: it is racist, misogynist, homophobic, totalitarian, inquisitorial, imperialist, genocidal. (p. 198)

That's pretty far right to be left, if you ask me. Whereas with the Trotskyist, Leninist and even Stalinist, one might have disputed the advisability of 'breaking a few eggs'

in order to ‘make an omelette,’ the question nowadays is ‘what omelette?’ It is one thing to debate means and ends, when one has a desirable, in principle, end in view. But when one can justify as progressive neither the means nor the ends, then what’s left (to coin a phrase)?

Norman Geras claims it is ‘feeble’ of me to make this point, but I don’t see why. Nothing in his criticism of me supports his dismissal of my claim that the post-left is different. [13] In spite of what Geras thinks, we have arrived, in other words, at what Bernard-Henri Levy calls mournfully a ‘progressivism without progress,’ and ‘a pointless radicalism.’ In *Left in Dark Times*, Levy contends nothing less than that (a portion of) the left is not what it used to be. In the world after September 11, as we gradually are compelled to see, though the fact that ‘the Left kept talking nonsense’ was itself nothing new, ‘it’s no longer the same nonsense.’ With the mechanical embrace of what Hitchens calls ‘fascism with an Islamic face’ (Cottee/Cushman, p. 46) and Levy calls ‘Fascislamism’ (p. 181) – given some sort of credence merely because it attacked capitalism, the United States, Israel and the Jews – came ‘errors of another order’ (p. 75). ‘I was coming to realize,’ Levy says, with sorrow and dismay, like a man who feels – as his quietly punning title suggests – abandoned and alone in a crisis,

that what we’d been witnessing [recently] was a chemical process of combustion, distillation, and recomposition more complex than metaphors of a cold fever or a mechanical lie – useless, habitual reflexes – might suggest.

What had been catalysed into being was ‘an oxymoronic Left, a Left that makes your head spin – a left that, if words have any meaning at all, is sometimes more right-wing than the right wing itself.’ He has no choice but to conclude, from the weight of accumulated evidence, that the ‘most singular characteristic’ of this ‘right-wing Left’ is that it ‘no longer takes its inspiration from the Left but from the Right’ (p. 82). As Levy goes on to argue at length, in detail, and with marvelous eloquence, the post-left that flirts with groups like the Muslim Brotherhood is left-no-more; it is post-left; it is right; it is neo-fascist. He writes,

we were Marxists, Leninists, Marxist-Leninists – we weren’t Islamoproggressives. We might not have been able to spot a Red fascist – but we were never wrong about Brown fascists. (p. 171)

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When Words Lose their Meaning: the Right-wing 'Left?'

And so we confront 'the situation that people who understand that words do indeed have and keep their meaning' must (Levy, p. 82). Those I prefer to call *for this reason alone* (respect for language) the post-left (those whose 'radicalism' only serves to make them supine before the brutal tactics of reactionaries at war with democracy), are prime examples of Berman's rationalist naïveté. Academics mostly, but with their semi-educated analogues and fellow travellers in 'the street,' the post-left have finally – thanks to the cumulative effect of decades of postmodern relativism, post-1989 posthistoire-induced malaise about the disappearance of all Utopian projects, postcolonial theory's overemphasis on imperialism as the root-of-all-evil, and a post-Marxist identity politics, calling itself Cultural Studies, which invests all its professional energy in the monotonous ritual denunciation of the 'Western racist capitalist patriarchy' – departed from all commonsense notions of what it means to be 'left.' Quantity has become quality, in good dialectical fashion. It all adds up, to quote Saul Bellow, until one day it tips the scales.

I speak of Wittgensteinian 'family resemblances,' of course, and not essences: One need not subscribe to all, or any particular one, of the myriad and contradictory tenets of all the 'post' discourses to be post-left. Instead, by embracing some hodgepodge of 'reasons' for anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism and, yes, sometimes anti-Semitism too, one joins forces with those whom Hitchens so pungently identifies as,

a bunch of clapped-out pseudo-Marxists, who, deep in their hearts, have a nostalgia for the days of the one-party State and who secretly regard Saddam as an anti-Imperialist...[,] assisted by an impressive number of fundamentalist Muslims, who mouth the gibberish slogans of holy war but who don't give a damn for the suffering inflicted by Saddam on their co-religionists. (Cottee/Cushman, p. 110)

If such an unsightly sight could lead Michael Walzer to ask, in the title of an important essay, 'Can There Be a Decent Left?' then surely one is permitted to ponder whether or not there can be such an indecent one – or whether we had better start calling it something else. I believe *City Journal's* reviewer, Fred Siegel, is mistaken on this count to ask of Bernard-Henri Levy, 'when is it time to leave a dysfunctional family?' since it is the post-left who have 'left' BHL and the rest of us, without succor and 'in dark times.' Levy's title recalls Hannah Arendt's *Men in Dark Times*, and he echoes her clarion call to resist the eclipse of freedom, uncertainty

and the individual, in favor of domination, self-righteous certitude, and the general will.

But by the same token Siegel is surely on-target in asking, ‘is it not time to free ourselves, as much as possible, from a hopelessly outdated and unavoidably misleading set of political categories?’ [14] Amis, Hitchens, Levy, and Paul Berman – to whose path-breaking investigation, *Terror and Liberalism*, all three works under review here owe a substantial debt (and in Hitchens’ and Levy’s case, an unacknowledged one) – have been showing us how to do just this. Which means that: Jonathan Freedland, writing in *The New York Review of Books*, is wrong to dismiss Hitchens’ battle with the ‘hard left’ and clashes with ‘ultra-leftists’ – material comprising the bulk of the historic Cottee and Cushman volume, as well as the bulk of its interest – as a ‘predictable’ waste of ink. [15] Nor, interestingly, did Hitchens’ position on the war in Iraq lead him to endorse John McCain, as Freedland thought it would have to. [16] Finally, the *NYRB* reviewer unaccountably joins the Lilliputian chorus in panning Martin Amis one more time for, of all things, writing well and memorably about the most important issues of our day – taxing him with a display of ‘pyrotechnical talents’ purportedly out of place. In fact, precisely the opposite is true! For it is significant that what Freedland casually dismisses as the merely ‘virtuosic quality of [their] writing’ is actually an important part of what binds these authors together. The post-left can’t write for shit. The fighting liberals can. And the quality of their prose is an indication of the quality of their thought, in each case.

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Notes

- [1] Levy 2008, p. 75.
- [2] Berman 2003, p. 143. Subsequent references to this edition are cited in the text.
- [3] Berman discusses the phenomenon of 'rationalist naivete' in his *Democratiya* interview. See Johnson 2007.
- [4] Küntzel 2007.
- [5] Heller 2002.
- [6] Elshtain 2003. Subsequent references to this edition appear cited in the text.
- [7] Kramer 2006 takes note of Judith Butler's notorious comments to this effect on a panel before an audience at UCB, in his 'Islamism and Fascism: Dare to Compare.'
- [8] See Saba Mahmood 2008, p. 149. A professor of Anthropology at Berkeley, Mahmood writes approvingly, 'Even Osama Bin Laden was clear in his message at the time of the World

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Trade Center Attacks: he wanted American troops out of Saudi Arabia, a just solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and an end to Euro-American domination of Muslim resources and lands.' One is left to infer that Mahmood herself sees justice in this message. For although she fails to specify what Bin Laden's idea of a 'just' solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict might be, she continues: 'His ends, if not his means, speak to a wide range of Arabs and Muslims who are currently witnessing one of the most unabashedly imperial projects undertaken in modern history, a project that, as a number of observers have pointed out, has done more to fuel the militant cause rather [sic] than eliminate it' Both the sympathy for Osama and the assumption that the West 'causes' terrorists to attack it are staples of post-left reasoning.

[9] Baudrillard 2001.

[10] See for example London Review of Books, October 4, 2001, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n19/mult01_.html, where a number of intellectuals had their say about the 'root causes' of September 11. Mary Beard confessed to having 'the feeling that however tactfully you dress it up, the United States had it coming. That is, of course, what many people openly or privately think. World bullies, even if their heart is in the right place, will in the end pay the price.' Eric Foner wondered who was worse, Bin Laden or Bush's speechwriters. 'I'm not sure which is more frightening: the horror that engulfed New York City or the apocalyptic rhetoric emanating daily from the White House.' Charles Glass explained the attacks by the 'fact,' as he saw it, that 'America has come to stand in the same relation to the Third World, especially its Muslim corners, as Israel stands to its Palestinian subjects.' Fredric Jameson found the 'seeds of the event...in the wholesale massacres of the Left systematically encouraged and directed by the Americans,' the elimination of the 'Iraqi and Indonesian [sic] Communist Parties' precipitating September's 'dialectical reversal.'

[11] The term 'post-left' was first introduced by Markovits and Brahm 2008. Alan Johnson, who had previously used the term 'reactionary left,' picked it up and ran with it successfully in Johnson 2008. I presented my first extended treatment of the subject in Brahm 2008. On the concept of 'structure of feeling,' see Williams 1978.

[12] Ali 2008.

[13] Norman Geras reads Alan Johnson hastily and me narrowly and selectively, in his criticisms of us for utilizing the neologism 'post-left.' Though the scrutiny of our work on an important topic is welcome, the accusations are misplaced and exaggerated. Geras says, for example, that I offer an argument that is not simply a bit wrong or inadequate in some way, but absurd: 'It is hard to overstate the feebleness of [my] explanation,' according to him. But he does, indeed, overstate. For I am not, as he claims, 'trying to cleanse...history by use of a definitional stratagem,' or any other stratagem for that matter, as fair-minded readers will readily observe. I am simply attempting to grasp the present with an eye to the future. Nor, it seems to me, is Johnson merely 'crying apostasy,' much less seeking to 'excommunicate' anybody from the Holy Church of the Left (into which I for one was never baptized, and to which surely not even the editor of Democratiya can be thought to hold the keys). Neither of us is interested in any vain exercise in ritual 'purification,' as Geras hyperbolically asserts. Instead, as should be plain to the careful reader, our effort at terminological innovation is a response to the changing world around us – one mapped nicely by the authors under review here as well. The post-left is real, not imaginary; we couldn't get rid of it if we tried; I simply put a name to it. Geras takes Johnson to task in 2008a and myself in 2008b.

[14] Siegel 2008.

[15] Freedland 2008.

[16] Hitchens 2008.