

Left in Dark Times: A Stand Against the New Barbarism

by Bernard-Henri Lévy, Random House, 2008, 256 pp.

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One of the few certainties of the 20th century was that the apostles of Marxist materialism and the adherents of Muslim theocracy were mortal enemies. In Afghanistan, they went to war. But that was the 20th century.

The terms Left and Right were coined in 1789 to describe seating arrangements for the National Assembly during the early stages of the French Revolution. Those seated to the podium's right wanted to preserve parts of the past; those on the left hoped, in the name of progress, to invent a new future. But the manoeuvrings of politics soon muddied the initial transparency of these terms into an enduring illegibility. The ideas of the bloody minded right-wing reactionary Joseph de Maistre, the intellectual arch-enemy of the Revolution, for instance, became an inspiration for the early socialists – and so it has gone ever since.

The flamboyant French litterateur Bernard-Henri Lévy, widely known in Paris as BHL, acknowledges the problem. In his new book, he writes that 'the famous split between Left and Right that has structured French politics . . . has become harder and harder to believe in.' That is because, to his dismay, much of the Left, cuckolded by history, no longer believes in progress or modernity. He describes the contemporary Left, with its signature scowl of anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism, and anti-liberalism, as 'that great backward falling corpse which the worms have already started to chew.' The corpse is what he confusingly calls 'the right-wing left'

Despite his disdain for much of the current Left, and despite the fact that many of those closest to his point of view in France endorsed the presidential candidacy of the 'right-wing' flag bearer Nicolas Sarkozy, a personal friend, Lévy refused to abandon the Socialist ticket. His dilemma, he told Sarkozy, was that no matter how much he liked, respected, and even agreed with the French president, he couldn't support him because 'the Left is my family.' Lévy's new book is an effort – part memoir, part essay, part polemic – to explain the nature of those family ties.

'And does my insistence, on sticking with the Left that has done everything to

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empty itself of its substance mean I’m clinging to yesterday . . . to nostalgia? . . . Yes, maybe,’ Lévy writes, ‘But not only.’ Lévy’s ‘not only’ refers to the images he treasures of his father in the uniform of the Spanish Republicans who fought Franco; of the great resistance hero Jean Moulin; of the brave socialist Prime Minister of the 1930s, Leon Blum. He acknowledges that ‘images are not enough’ and describes the events that shaped his loyalties and those of his parents. These include the Dreyfus Affair, Vichy France, and the Algerian War, as well as being a young man during the uprisings of May 1968. He wonders if he is worthy of his illustrious ancestors, such as the ‘young left-wing captains in Portugal in 1975 bringing down the Salazar dictatorship.’ But here again, he backtracks and adds, ‘It is true that none of these events can completely justify the clear division of Right and Left.’ He recognises that some on the Right supported Dreyfus and the events of May ‘68, while ‘many socialists . . . pacifists and sometimes Communists’ took part in Vichy’s crimes. ‘These events,’ he concludes, ‘are split by the same dividing line that they purport to draw.’

Some readers will find themselves exasperated by Lévy’s very French form of discursive, emotional writing. It lacks both the concision and specificity of the best English-language essays such as Nick Cohen’s *What’s Left* which covers similar ground. BHL criticises Sarkozy for supposedly writing off the Arab and Islamic rioters of the *banlieues* who need to be incorporated into France, for example. But his moralising leaves no room to discuss the rigid terms of France’s statist economy, which makes it almost impossible to create jobs for the unemployed *beurs*, who have plenty of time to fester on welfare. And some of his concerns are far more salient in a European context than in an American one. Most Americans don’t realise that much of Tony Blair’s cabinet in England consisted of former far-leftists; or that Massimo D’Alema, Italy’s prime minister at the end of the 1990s, was formerly a communist; or that Lionel Jospin, French Prime Minister from 1997 to 2002, had earlier been a Trotskyist for two decades.

But, argues BHL, whatever the considerable failings of those older iterations of Leftism, until the fall of the Soviet Union the Left still had something like a positive agenda. Since then, Leftists – reduced to ‘the joint ownership of resentment’ – have increasingly turned against their parentage, the Enlightenment. The Left now defines itself so closely by its hatred of America and Israel that anti-globalisation activists even draw on counter-Enlightenment figures – such as the philo-Nazi political theorist Carl Schmitt – to create what BHL calls ‘a right-wing left.’

The Left's once proud universalism has devolved into an ethnic particularism, of the sort that once found its home in the fever swamps of the far Right. 'We are in a world in which, on the one hand, we have the United States, its English poodle, its Israeli lackey – a three-headed gorgon that commits all the sins in the world – and, on the other side, all those who, no matter what their crimes, their ideology, their treatment of their own minorities, their internal policies, their anti-Semitism and their racism, their disdain for women and homosexuals, their lack of press freedom and of any freedom whatsoever, are challenging the former' and are thus to be defended, Lévy laments. Here he refers, among other examples, to the case of British Leftist playwright Harold Pinter who became, during the Bosnian slaughter of the 1990s, an ardent defender of Slobodan Milošević.

The oddity in Lévy's argument is that in its well justified focus on radical Islam, he acknowledges, only in passing, the impact of the conspiratorially anti-modern turn of what might be called the Foucauldian left which took hold in the aftermath of the 1960s. He discusses Foucault in the context of French intra-left debates, but never as a precursor to 'the backward falling corpse.' For Foucault, disillusion with the USSR, as with Virginia Woolf who finally discovered that Hitler wasn't a nice guy, meant that it was their own liberal societies which were truly fascist. Woolf, and more systematically Foucault, sniffed out fascism everywhere in their own relatively tolerant societies. Foucault was the master of discovering 'little everyday fascism.' Similarly the leftist philosopher Louis Althusser, who had experienced what he saw as freedom in a German POW camp during WWII was dedicated to exposing 'that most frightful, appalling and horrifying of all the ideological state apparatuses . . . namely, the family.' For this cynical left, which barely makes an appearance in *The Left in Dark Times*, the achievements of liberal societies have only made matters worse. In the words of Jacques Derrida, one of the deconstructionist champions of the cynical left, 'no amount of progress warrants us to ignore the fact that never, in absolute terms, never have so many men, women and children been enslaved, famished or exterminated on earth.' No evidence is necessary since, as with the communists and fascists of old, liberalism is clearly the primary source of evil in the world.

Lévy has fought the good fight. His courageous book *Who Killed Daniel Pearl*, based on his extensive travels in Pakistan, unflinchingly described the radical evil of our time. But under the spell of a hopelessly confused nomenclature, BHL, sticking to his anti-Sarkozy guns, concludes with a call for what he terms 'melancholy liberalism.' The phrase may sound odd to American ears, but its content is quite

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familiar. It’s another name for the disillusioned liberalism of 1950s America, with its strong sense of nuance, irony, and complexity.

The liberal intellectuals of the 1950s, who would later be denounced by the 68ers as ‘sell-outs,’ had a healthy fear of mass politics and what David Hume called political ‘enthusiasms.’ It was a chastened liberalism worthy of admiration. With their keen sense of history, they understood the importance of Stalin’s doctrine of ‘social fascism,’ which defined the German Social Democrats of the late 1920s as the ‘real’ enemy to the exclusion of the Nazis and paved the way for Hitler’s takeover. Those like the liberal socialist Irving Howe, who stood at the left of the 1950s liberal consensus, were the first to espy a new version of that madness. They saw in the New Left’s Vietnam driven insistence that America was in fact the sinister AmeriKa as a burlesqued replay of the doctrine of social fascism in which the liberals were, not merely wrong, but once again the ‘real’ enemy. More fundamentally, they understood that what both the Nazi and Soviet regimes had in common, their anti-liberalism and their shared hostility toward bourgeois democracy, was as important as their differences. Though the fifties liberals they still clung to them, the categories of left and right had failed them.

For all his subtlety and sophistication, BHL is in many ways following in the tracks of those American 1950s liberals. But haven’t we learned something since then? After following BHL’s stylish twists and turns in describing the creation of a ‘right-wing left,’ the reader is bound to ask at least two questions. First, when is it time to leave a dysfunctional family? And second, is it not time to free ourselves, as much as possible, from a hopelessly outdated and unavoidably misleading set of political categories?

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