The Last True Leftist

Left in Dark Times: A Stand Against the New Barbarism
by Bernard-Henri Lévy
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Reviewed by James Kirchick

In the summer of 2007, Bernard-Henri Lévy appeared on a radio program hosted by Alain Finkielkraut, his comrade on the French intellectual left. The subject under discussion was the genocide in Darfur. Lévy's sparring partner was Rony Brauman, one of the founders of Doctors Without Borders. Brauman had traveled in some of the same rarefied intellectual circles as Lévy and Finkielkraut, though, as Lévy soon discovered, he had not wound up in exactly the same place.

During the debate, Lévy referred to Brauman as a "former humanitarian." It was an ominous description, and Brauman certainly did not seem overly concerned by the carnage in Darfur. In fact, he found the use of the term "genocide" itself sensationalistic, because the death rate had decreased since the early years of the conflict. What really disturbed Lévy, however, was Brauman's assertion that, "This war, anyway, is a war among the Sudanese"—precisely the same rationale adopted by many Europeans in response to those who called for intervention against ethnic cleansing during the Balkan wars of the 1990s, a cause near and dear to Lévy's heart. Indeed, his was one of the earliest voices calling for military action to stop the slaughter.

It was even more painful for Lévy to hear such things from Brauman, because the two had shared a decades-long cooperative relationship. Among other worthy endeavors, they had formed an anti-famine organization together, advocated on behalf of Cambodian genocide victims, and helped raise awareness of Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam's human rights abuses. Given Brauman's personal history, Lévy was shocked by his erstwhile partner's decision to "sit out Darfur," the first genocide of the twenty-first century.

Brauman's passivity worried Lévy so much because he suspected that Brauman would support coercive actions against the Sudanese government but for the fact that Darfur had attracted a huge groundswell of concern in the United States, which in turn could lead to American military intervention against the regime in Khartoum, which is responsible for equipping and arming the *janjaweed* murderers. As Lévy explains, Brauman sees America as "the nerve center of a system of power that imposes a regime of unequal exchange on the planet" and the perpetrator of manifold crimes against innocent people. Therefore, good "anti-imperialist" that he is, he refused to fall into the "vulgar trap" of siding with the United States to stop a crime against humanity he would otherwise condemn.

Brauman's journey from impassioned left-wing humanitarian to anti-American ideologue downplaying the tragedy in Darfur is one that more than a few left-wing intellectuals have made over the past several years. Lévy thoroughly examines this disturbing phenomenon in his latest book *Left in Dark Times*, which is dedicated to explaining what "makes a man like Rony Brauman blind and deaf to the tragedy of the Darfuris."

Bernard-Henri Lévy is uniquely well suited to the subject. The quintessential "public intellectual," he belongs to a small but celebrated group of prominent French thinkers who blur the roles of academic, journalist, and activist. Their status is very much a unique product of French culture, which glamorizes its intellectuals to the extent that some of them enjoy the type of celebrity usually reserved for pop stars. Even by this standard, however, Lévy—heir to a huge lumber fortune, film director, married to a famous actress, always with his shirt suggestively unbuttoned halfway down his chest—is in a class by himself, and has earned the rare distinction of being known by an acronym: BHL.

Lévy is not just an intellectual celebrity, however. He is also an important and lifelong critic of both left- and right-wing totalitarianism. His first major work, *Barbarism with a Human Face*, published when he was just 29 years old, denounced Marxism as doctrinally irreconcilable with democracy and, as a result, caused an uproar among left-wing European intellectuals. It also launched the movement of young French thinkers known as the New Philosophers, who dissented from the political orthodoxy embodied in the global New Left with their strident critiques of the Soviet Union and its founding principles.

Left in Dark Times is well in keeping with Lévy's iconoclastic past.

Something, he believes, has gone seriously, perhaps dangerously wrong with today's left. The noble tradition of anti-fascism, which once firmly distinguished the left from the right, has transformed into an unthinking "anti-imperialism" that places itself in opposition to the United States and its allies and sees third world thugs and terrorist groups as nuisances at best—that is, when it does not embrace them as modish guerilla heroes. Radical Islam, despite its reactionary principles, doesn't anger people on the left to the extent that George W. Bush does, if it angers them at all. While the war in Iraq drew millions of people across the world into the streets in protest, countless acts of intimidation and brutality perpetrated by radical Muslims, from the violent reaction to the cartoons depicting Mohammed in a Danish newspaper to the crime of 9/11 itself, have never drawn more than a tiny number of protesters. Tracing the history of the left over the last century, Lévy tries to explain how so many people purporting to hold "progressive" views have come to see American policies and actions as the "root cause" of radical Islamic terror and, more generally, the greatest force of evil in the world.

His conclusions are not reassuring. Today's left, Lévy fears, has succumbed once again to the totalitarian temptation and in so doing has abandoned its pretensions to anti-fascism. Having "lost its moorings," the left has begun to mimic some of the worst tendencies of reactionary conservatism. It has become, to use Lévy's choice phrase, an "oxymoronic left."

The inside jacket of *Left in Dark Times* describes it as "an unprecedented critique" of the contemporary left. This is somewhat overstated. There have been many such critiques in the years since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. A small yet vocal group of British writers has led the pack, exposing the moral equivocating, apologetics for radical Islam, and knee-jerk bashing of America and Israel that characterize much of today's left-wing opinion. In 2007, Nick Cohen, a columnist for the *Observer*, published what was perhaps the angriest of these books, *What's Left?* He was soon joined by *Guardian* writer Andrew Anthony, whose *The Fallout* documents "how a guilty liberal lost his innocence." The majority of Christopher Hitchens's work since September 12, 2001—excepting his vigorous campaign against belief in God—has been devoted to exposing the fecklessness of his former comrades. Nevertheless, Lévy's contribution to this ongoing controversy is both welcome and, considering his previous work, inevitable.

He begins by explaining why he considers himself a man of the left, recounting a recent conversation with his friend Nicolas Sarkozy, then a candidate for the French presidency. With more than a little bit of pride, Sarkozy informs the author that several of Lévy's comrades, including the influential New Philosopher André Glucksmann, have endorsed him over the Socialist candidate Ségolène Royal. Lévy demurs, informing Sarkozy that his support for Royal is a "familial obligation." Sarkozy, however, is shocked that his friend could consider such people "family," considering Lévy's tortured history with the left over its reflexive anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism, its lack of interest in the plight of the Vietnamese boat people, its casual denial of the Cambodian genocide, its apologetics for the Soviet Union, and its persistent dabbling in antisemitism. "These people who've spent thirty years telling you to go f—yourself?" Sarkozy asks incredulously.

For Lévy, however, being a man of the left means more than just sharing a set of views about a discrete range of issues. What it comes down to is "reflexes," and his reflex has always been to stand with the downtrodden. This predisposition has led him to every godforsaken corner of the planet where people are starving, it's what inspired him to start the civil rights group SOS Racisme, and it's what makes him a democratic socialist today.

Lévy understands better than most, however, that the admirable impulse to side with the victims over the perpetrators, the rich over the poor, and the weak over the strong has often been perverted in leftist thinking. Before deciding which side to take on any particular issue, Lévy claims, people like MIT professor and left-wing guru Noam Chomsky first investigate which faction has established itself as anti-American or "anti-imperialist" and then put pen to paper. It does not matter if this impulse often leads Chomsky "to choose the side of the perpetrators and not of the victims," as he has done countless times, from claiming that the Khmer Rouge slaughterhouse in Cambodia was a "*New York Times* creation" to his post-9/11 apologetics for al-Qaida's terrorism. Today, it is the near-consensus view among left-wing intellectuals that the American "empire" was the cause of al-Qaida's justified resentment.

The notion that America is an empire particularly angers Lévy. As a Frenchman born in the former French colony of Algeria, he knows exactly how baseless a claim it is. The United States—however one may wish to criticize it—has never been an "empire" in the traditional sense

of the word. In fact, Lévy writes, America's "main historical thrust has always been toward isolationism." To compare American behavior, past or present, with what "China is doing today in Tibet; or what the Soviet Union used to do in its satellites, and what Putin's Russia is still trying to do wherever it can; or what happened under older peoples at the peak of their power, like the Turks, the Arabs, the Aztecs, the Persians, the Incas," is both historically erroneous and a form of moral equivalence that trivializes the suffering of people subjected to real imperialist rule. Lévy sets the record straight as only a fierce critic of European imperialism and world-weary journalist who has reported extensively on post-colonial societies can do, and his critique of voguish "anti-imperialist" anti-Americanism is nothing short of brilliant.

His passionate defense of America is likely inspired by the fact that, unlike many European intellectuals, Lévy has made a conscientious attempt to understand America and experience American life firsthand. In 2006, he published *American Vertigo*, a record of his nearly yearlong journey across the United States. The expedition was a latter-day recreation of the trail trod by a previous Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville. While one can argue with Lévy's conclusions about what America is—and many have—he does know what America is *not*, and it is most certainly not the demonic caricature of the anti-American imagination, insidiously controlling world events so that everything bad happens because of or in reaction to it.

For Lévy, America is not just a country, but a "region of the soul." It represents the aspirations of people all over the world who yearn to live in a free society where one's ethnic origins are not a barrier to success, at least in theory. This, Lévy claims, is what drives resentment toward America. European intellectuals, stained by their support for both left- and right-wing totalitarian ideologies throughout the twentieth century, have repeatedly been proven wrong by history, while America's success—its relatively harmonious racial relations, its prosperous economy, the popularity of its culture around the world, the long line of foreigners waiting to immigrate—seems to confirm that its way of doing things may not be so bad after all. Their antipathy is only compounded by the fact that America is also the most successful realization of the principles put forth by the European Enlightenment. As Lévy puts it, "The little, fragile, precarious upstart, the one we thought was so congenitally defected that it would hardly be able to walk without crutches," eventually succeeded in

actualizing European ideals better than Europeans themselves. That kind of success is difficult to forgive, let alone admire.

Anti-Americanism, however, is only part of what's wrong with what Lévy calls "a left that has done everything to empty itself of its substance." The other factor is conspiracy theory. Delusions about secret cabals running the world or, as Lévy puts it, "the obsession with the plot," used to be a feature of right-wing politics, but it increasingly characterizes those on the political left. Mainstream left-wing intellectuals in both the United States and Europe seriously believe that after the 9/11 attacks a secret cabal of Jews—usually identified as the "neocons"—hijacked the American government and military in order to wage war on the Muslim world. Such paranoia was never a progressive phenomenon. Whatever its real-world failings, Marxism was at least a rigorous, empirical method of analyzing history, economics, and politics. Today's leftists have forgotten their Marx. "This is no longer analysis but magic," Lévy writes about the left's newfound affinity for intricate conspiracy theories. "We're no longer talking about concepts; we're taking about the occult." Ironically, says Lévy, today's left-wing anti-Americanism is heavily influenced by themes borrowed from the pre-World War II right. The work of self-styled progressive Michael Moore, for instance, essentially reiterates "the old isolationist, populist, hyper-nationalist, and bigoted themes of the Pat Buchanans and other far-right Americans."

A central component of this culture of conspiracy theory is, of course, Jewish power. As Lévy's fellow New Philosopher Alain Finkielkraut once said, "Conspiracy thinking is again taking over simple minds, and conspiracy leads sooner or later to the Elders of Zion." Lévy appears to agree, and he is something of an authority on the subject. His 1981 book *The French Ideology* traced the historical development of French antisemitism and concluded that it was not an exclusively left- or right-wing phenomenon but an ideology shared by thinkers on both sides. Like his fellow New Philosophers Finkielkraut and Glucksmann, Lévy is Jewish, and though completely secular, he acknowledges the debt that he and other like-minded intellectuals owe to Jewish thought. Indeed, Lévy has publicly stated that his Jewish identity was a decisive factor in his visceral call to arms against genocide in Bosnia and now Darfur.

It is not surprising, then, that the recent increase in antisemitism worldwide occupies a substantial portion of *Left in Dark Times*. It is absolutely

essential to Lévy's depressing story of the contemporary left's moral and intellectual collapse. Many critics have noted this disturbing trend, and argue that the "new antisemitism" is merely an updated version of an ancient hatred. They claim that Israel, which wasn't around for early-twentieth-century antisemites to slander, may have given Jew-hatred a new target, but the anti-Jewish myths of yesterday and today are the same.

Lévy disagrees. Previous incarnations of antisemitism, he writes, have centered upon notions of Jewish deicide; Jewish control of financial institutions; the Jews as an obstacle to cohesive nationalism or, conversely, to cosmopolitanism; and, in the last century, the Jews as a distinct, inferior, and uniquely perfidious race. Today's antisemitism, however, is more subtle and complex. Certainly, older forms of antisemitism still exist and are widely espoused in the Muslim world, but in Europe such anachronistic rhetoric "is not strong enough to whip up a crowd to a pogromist frenzy." Lévy doesn't dismiss the idea that classic antisemitism could return to Europe; he's worried, rather, that it may do so in the language of the same progressive and cosmopolitan ideology that claims to oppose it.

Most pernicious about the new antisemitism, Lévy argues, is that it disguises itself in the traditional left-wing rhetoric of anti-fascism. Old-fashioned antisemites could usually be relied upon to voice their bigotry without dressing it up in language palatable to a mainstream audience. That is, they bluntly claimed that the Jews were an inferior race that had killed Jesus and ritually murdered Gentile children. Today's antisemitism, however, sounds all too much like *bien pensant* anti-Americanism, with its talk of secret plots, global domination, and "wars for Israel."

Lévy isn't shy about naming names. He singles out Cindy Sheehan, a hero to American anti-war activists, for alleging that her son died as a result of a war engineered by American Jewish government officials; he all but calls former U.S. president Jimmy Carter an antisemite for his "unquestioning moral support to the leadership of Hamas"; and he claims that professors Stephen Walt's and John Mearsheimer's book *The Israel Lobby* is so mendacious and conspiratorial that laws banning Holocaust denial might well proscribe its publication in France.

The left's obsession with Israel is not just unbecoming, however. Lévy believes that it has debased the intellectual faculties of liberals. For many on the left today, everything bad in the world, from sectarian violence in

Iraq to hateful preaching in Pakistani madrassas, can be explained away as symptoms of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet in reality, says Lévy, "this decisive Palestine is nothing more than a geographic reference, a very uncertain place name, a signifier at most." He has visited all these places where the local Muslims are supposedly obsessed with Israel, and has found little evidence to support the conventional wisdom on the subject. According to Lévy, the call to "solve" the Palestinian issue usually betrays the assumption that all the Middle East's problems can be reduced to a single easy explanation. This misconception has become so routine that Israel is now nothing less than a "spell that restricts progressive thinking."

Is Lévy attacking straw men? Is he wasting our time by criticizing obscure individuals and their hackneyed, albeit morally repugnant arguments? It is true that the ranks of academia are filled with the sort of people who see no distinction between George W. Bush and al-Qaida, and periodicals like *The Nation* continue, in the words of its former columnist Hitchens, to be "the voice and echo chamber of those who truly believe that John Ashcroft is a greater threat than Osama Bin Laden." Mainstream American liberalism, however, both ideologically and in its organized political form in the Democratic party, is not about to be taken over by these forces. President Barack Obama frequently invoked American exceptionalism in his campaign speeches, and he angered more than a few radical Muslims—not to mention his left-wing base—when he promised to attack terrorist targets in Pakistan if Islamabad was unwilling or unable to do so. Moreover, the spate of pro-American European leaders elected in recent years augurs well for those who believe in the importance of a transatlantic alliance committed to the defense of Western freedoms against the bullying of a Vladimir Putin or the terrorism of an Osama Bin Laden. In light of all this, isn't much of Lévy's criticism of the left just posturing and sly self-promotion, a cynical symptom of what intellectuals must do to keep their brand current?

Not so, Lévy argues. A small number of extremists, left unchecked, can have a massive impact on human history. He cites the tiny group of exiled Bolsheviks who plotted a global revolution during the early years of the twentieth century. This certainly seemed like a harebrained scheme at the time, until the conspirators managed to overthrow the Russian provisional government and rule the country for seven decades. And then there was "that little group hanging

out in the back rooms of Munich beer houses," a frustrated young painter named Adolf Hitler among them. It was not long before he and his followers went from ruminating about national humiliation over lagers to starting a world war of unprecedented violence. Neither of these groups of marginal ideologues was considered a particularly gruesome threat at first, and no one seriously thought they could take over a town council, much less engineer millions of deaths. In a similar fashion, the fact that George Galloway stands little to no chance of becoming prime minister of Great Britain does not mean that the ideas he espouses cannot gain popularity over time. Indeed, it is a dangerous thing to underestimate the appeal of certain illiberal ideologies. In 2005, for instance, the aforementioned Noam Chomsky—whom Lévy brilliantly characterizes as a "maniacal negationist" for his cynical and dishonest corpus of political writing—was voted the world's foremost "public intellectual" in an online survey conducted jointly by *Prospect* and *Foreign Policy* magazines. Ideas, Lévy reminds us, have consequences.

As a lifelong member in good standing of the political left, Lévy is in an excellent position to diagnose its current ills—or, in his words, "draw the cartography of this darkness"—partly because he has done so before, albeit in relation to a different form of totalitarianism. Indeed, *Left in Dark Times* is not altogether different from *Barbarism with a Human Face*. Both books seek to rescue the left by examining the seeds of its own potential self-destruction, and both represent a crisis of confidence for the author: his confidence in what the left *should* stand for, and his confidence in his own place on the political spectrum. This new crisis appears to have been on Lévy's mind for a very long time. In 1995, for instance, Lévy told the London *Times* that, "It may not be the end of history as Fukuyama has suggested, but the return of history which may cause intellectuals to go through a metamorphosis which will restore their status." Six years before 9/11, Lévy was warning that all was not well in world affairs, and that self-proclaimed liberal intellectuals would once again be tested by their response to illiberal ideologies.

Lévy's grandiose writing style takes some getting used to, and his work does not benefit from translation. His sentences often drag on far too long, and he sometimes takes several paragraphs to explain an idea which would benefit from a more concise approach. But none of these stylistic quibbles ought to detract from what is an otherwise powerful, if depressing, book. Reading it, one wonders why the author doesn't just

throw up his hands, declare his break with the left, and make the move that so many other thinkers once in his position—the neoconservatives among them—made a generation before. Perhaps it is because Lévy believes that, as philosopher Michael Walzer once put it, a "decent left" is still possible. It's this belief that drives him to ask the important questions many of his comrades are doing their best to ignore: Is being "left-wing" mutually exclusive of appreciating America's global leadership, Israel's creation and existence, and the possibility of democratization in the Muslim world? Is it not possible to favor a universal health care system, gay marriage, abortion rights, progressive taxation, and the welfare state while also abhorring radical Islam and committing oneself to the fight against it?

Let's hope so. The genuine heirs of the anti-fascist tradition have been fighting for the soul of the left for a long time, and their victory is in the interests of everyone who values secularism, democracy, and individual freedom. Unfortunately, there is less and less available space for leftists who hold fast to these principles. For the time being, however, we can rest assured that Bernard-Henri Lévy will remain standing against the rising tide.

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