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Left Out

What the downfall of the European Left can teach American liberals.

LEFT IN DARK TIMES: A STAND AGAINST THE NEW BARBARISM

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In 2007, a few months before the French presidential election, a gleeful Nicolas Sarkozy called the philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy. André Glucksmann, who had been Lévy's comrade in the struggles against totalitarianism since the 1970s, had announced in *Le Monde* that he had had it with the hypocrisies and betrayals of the Left. He was crossing the line and backing Sarkozy, the candidate of the Right he had once opposed.

Sarkozy quickly exhausted his limited supply of small talk and got down to business. "What about you?" he asked Lévy. "When are you going to write your little article for me? Huh, when? Because Glucksmann is fine. But you... you, after all, are my friend."

Lévy was embarrassed. He had indeed known Sarkozy for years, and had briefed him before a famous television confrontation with Tariq Ramadan, the leading Muslim Brotherhood apologist in Europe. Sarkozy challenged Ramadan

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over his support for a “moratorium”—instead of an outright ban—on the stoning of Muslim women found “guilty” of adultery. Soon after their debate, Ramadan moved from France to Britain. Once there, he wasn’t treated as an ideologue for a reactionary movement whose founders had been inspired by European fascism, but was feted by the nominally liberal academics of Oxford University and courted by ministers in the nominally left-of-center Labour government. Was this the European Left Lévy was meant to support?

Nor did Lévy need Sarkozy to tell him (although that didn’t stop Sarkozy from telling him) that Ségolène Royal, the socialist candidate and his leading opponent, had already met one of the leaders of Hezbollah—whose top leader, in 2002, had welcomed the gathering of world Jewry in Israel because it “save[s] us the trouble of going after them worldwide.” She also had kind words to say about the sleek efficiency of the Chinese justice system, which condemns up to 10,000 prisoners a year to death. “It’s over, Bernard,” Sarkozy told him in effect. “You know it better than I do. The nobility has gone. The altruism fled. All that’s left of the Left is malice and cowardice. Join your friends. Join me.”

But Lévy couldn’t. “Personal relations are one thing,” he said. “Ideas are another. And no matter how much I like and respect you, the Left is my family.” It wasn’t much of an answer—and Lévy knew it. *Left in Dark Times* is his more considered attempt to explain how the left-liberalism he had dedicated his life to had gone wrong in Europe—and how it could easily be perverted in America as well, if liberals do not heed his warnings.

At first glance, American readers may find it easy to dismiss Lévy. The French leftist culture in which he has flourished will strike most as strange beyond measure. America has no Marxist tradition worth mentioning and no experience of Nazi occupation. The totalitarian temptation of communism which enchanted so many French men and women in the twentieth century never enchanted many Americans. Lévy’s searing assault on the ideology of their successors in twenty-first century France may seem to have little to do with anyone outside Europe.

Lévy adds to the impression of otherness by cutting an exotic figure. I met him when we argued against a motion that “democracy isn’t for everyone” at a debate in London last year. He appeared in the green room in an immaculate white suit, looking every inch the dandy, as beautiful in his way as his wife, the actress Arielle Dombasle, who dazzled by his side. Bob Geldof walked across to talk to him, and as my eyes flitted from Geldof to Lévy and back again, I was hard-pressed to tell which was the rock star and which the philosopher. The audience, exhausted by Iraq, was dead against us when we went on stage, but we swung the meeting around and routed our conservative opponents. I like to

think that it was the force of our arguments that won the night, but the spectators may just have been bowled over by Lévy's glamour.

The celebrity thinker is hardly a feature of American politics—do John McCain and Barack Obama crave the support of the equivalents of Glucksmann and Lévy?

But American readers would be wrong to dismiss Lévy as a glamorous foreigner, for a reason I don't think many liberals have grasped. Americans on the Left may not thank me for saying so, but they have been lucky in one respect to have had George W. Bush as their enemy. He has united the opposition; he has been the glue that has held men and women with wildly contradictory ideas and aspirations together. Hatred of Bush has given the American Left a new salience and a new power, something it hasn't had since the early days of the Clinton era, but it has not given it a unified vision.

In January, Bush will be gone, but little else will have changed. A President Barack Obama will still face a psychopathic variant of Islam prepared to murder without limit, an Iran pushing for the bomb, and the newly confident autocracies of China and Russia. If he has the nerve to take them on, he will find that the American leftists or progressives or whatever we are meant to call them these days are nowhere near as united as they now seem. Former allies will soon start raging against him as they raged against his predecessor; in some corners of the movement, the clenching of fists has already begun. The arguments we are having in Europe are about to hit the States. Lévy is worth taking seriously because he forewarns in the hope that his Americans will be forearmed.

The first part of *Left in Dark Times* explains what Lévy meant when he told Sarkozy that he was still a member of the family of the Left. He sees the best of leftist conscience as a series of responses: the Dreyfusard reflex, which encourages us to defend the individual against church and state; the anti-Vichy reflex, which rejects any version of racism or anti-Semitism; the reflexes of the 1968 protest movement, which opposed authoritarianism and censorship; and finally, an anti-colonial reflex, which revolts against the oppression of one people in the name of another. Lévy knows that from the Dreyfus Affair through the Nazi occupation to 1968, there were many on the French Left who sided with the enemy. But on the whole the causes that inspire him were fought by the Left against the Right.

Not now. As the wily Sarkozy realized, in Europe men and women who believe in universal human rights, the emancipation of women, and freedom from tyranny spend more time fighting leftists than rightists.

What was truly exotic about our debate in London was not Lévy's tailoring but the fact that our opponents were traditional conservatives. Nine times out of ten, the motion that democracy is not for everyone isn't sponsored by right-wing, establishment believers in privilege and cultural determinism, but by apparent leftists who regard it an extension of "imperialism" to argue, for instance, that it is always wrong to stone women to death.

What motivates them is anti-Americanism—and here is a second reason why stateside readers should pay attention. Today anti-Americanism is the main, often the sole, defining feature of European leftist opinion. Lévy produces the best analysis I have seen, since Richard Wolin's 2004 *The Seduction of Unreason*, of how European liberals are taking over a reactionary idea. In the early twentieth century, fascist and proto-fascist writers were appalled by America's

"unnaturalness," he writes: its rejection of tradition, hierarchy, and organic bonds between people and place; its consumerism, standardization, racial mingling, and mass culture. For good reason, they feared America's appeal to the European masses. Liberals, by

contrast, respected the emancipatory potential of a society built on a social contract rather than racial ideas of blood and soil. Today, it is the leftists of *Le Monde Diplomatique* who pick up the tropes of the old far right, along with, of course, radical Islamists, and warn that American culture is colonizing our brains, insidiously corrupting innocent Europeans and turning them into the dupes of the supposedly all powerful U.S. corporations. As Lévy says, the only America that most of his comrades want is the isolationist nation of Michael Moore and Pat Buchanan, a far away America; an America that is happy for the rest of the world to go to hell.

Anti-Americanism didn't start with Iraq, and it is not limited to the European Left. In the days after the Islamo-fascist attacks on New York and Washington, the apologia did not come from right wingers, as it would have in the Thirties, but from the likes of Noam Chomsky and Susan Sontag. Nor is it only Bush's foreign-policy activism that provokes their opposition, but any American activism, including the sort of activism they once supported. Lévy captures the Left's shift from universal values to obsessive anti-Americanism with a vignette of a confrontation with a former friend, Rony Brauman. Brauman once traveled the world helping the victims of crimes against humanity, regardless of whether their suffering could be blamed on America or not. Over the years, though, Brauman's indignant voice grew quieter, until he stopped condemning atrocity and began

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picking fights with the liberal interventionists whose cause he had once supported. In 2007, during a radio debate about the genocide in Darfur, Lévy tried to find out why. When Lévy brought up the killing of Jews by Vichy France as an analog, Brauman cried that the two were not comparable: “The war in Sudan is more complicated, and the Sudanese should sort it out themselves.”

At that moment, Lévy understood the new mindset. Behind his former ally’s casuistry lay the recognition that there was a powerful movement in American public opinion to stop the crimes in the Sudan. But like other wisened-up intellectuals, Brauman had read his Chomsky and his Baudrillard. He knew that America was not a democracy, but “the command post” of an empire that brainwashed the masses by manufacturing consent. Support America on one thing and you would have to support her on everything—and you were not going to catch a man

as smart as Rony Brauman falling for that. “I was looking at a champion of human rights,” Lévy writes, “who was telling me, without the slightest hint of embarrassment that he’d decided to sit out Darfur, to write it off as just another piece of our era’s collateral damage.”

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As I was writing this article, I guessed that I could find Braumans of my own in the American liberal press. I clicked on *The Nation’s* website and was not disappointed. “It remains to be seen whether an Obama administration can articulate a coherent progressive purpose for American foreign policy in the post-Bush era,” the first article I read declared. “So far, at least, his team appears to be falling back on the liberal interventionist notions of the 1990s.” A random dip into America’s leading leftist journal instantly gave me the argument that it would have been “progressive” to leave Bosnia’s Muslims to be murdered and driven into exile in the 1990s and—by extension—that it is equally “progressive” to allow Robert Mugabe to push Zimbabwe into a man-made famine today.

The American Left is not always as different from the European Left as readers may imagine, not least because several of the ugliest features of European leftism are American imports. Lévy finds it highly significant that when the American academics Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer disinterred conspiracy theories about powerful Jews to explain away the Iraq War, they were not embraced by right-wing European journals, as anti-Semitism was in the twentieth century, but by their left-wing rivals. I speak from experience when I say that among English academics, Walt and Mearsheimer’s notion that the Iraq War was organized by a Jewish cabal is everywhere, and those who hold it think that their regurgitation of the oldest fantasy of the far right is proof positive of

their liberalism. Denunciations of “Jewish warmongering” came from Charles Lindbergh and “America Firsters” in the 1930s and 40s, Lévy says. Now we have “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 itself.”

The inevitable result is the abandonment of solidarity with those victims of oppression whose suffering does not fit into the “anti-imperialist” worldview. If crimes cannot be blamed on America, the West, Israel, or the Empire, they vanish from the leftish consciousness. In a magnificent passage, Lévy asks

What happens to you if you think, like a Burundian Tutsi, that the fantasy of Hutu Power, and not a scheme carried out by Texas oil men, is the source of your problems? Or like a survivor of the extermination of the Nuba, in the most distant corner of the Sudan, that it’s your uniqueness that singled you out for misfortune and explains the determination of the Islamist regime in Khartoum to get rid of you? What happens if you’re Burmese, Tibetan, a Syrian Kurd, a Liberian? What is to become of you if the disaster you’re dealing with has nothing to do with the evil of the Empire, its conspiracies, its plots—but everything to do with the corruption, for example, of a state apparatus, or of unscrupulous national elites?

Well, nothing. You’re out of luck. You’re a thousand times less important, a thousand times less interesting to “progressive” consciences, who have much less reason to fret about your particular case than about, for example, a humiliated-Muslim-who-has-resorted-to-terrorism-in response-to-that-humiliation.

This is intellectual argument at its most urgent and engaging. But because Lévy is an intellectual historian and a *soixante-huitard* to boot, he can’t always understand the social forces propelling the ideas he so effectively demolishes. He does not notice that a side effect of his generation’s admirable campaigns for the emancipation of women, an end to racism, and equal rights for homosexuals is that modern liberals are unwilling to criticize oppression in once-subordinate cultures, nations, or communities. In Western minds, much of the planet has become depoliticized. Instead of seeing a conflict in Iran between liberals and reactionaries and taking the side of the liberals, a large swathe of Western opinion feels that it is illiberal to fight the theocratic enemies of every good liberal principle. The struggles within cultures no longer stir their souls or move their hearts.

Europe’s Muslim minorities are suffering the consequences. When the liberal-minded among them turn for support to whites who call themselves liberal, they find that their supposed allies are in bed with the enemy and pretending that the most reactionary variants of Islam is the authentic voice of the oppressed. The English progressives who supported Tariq Ramadan or marched in

demonstrations against the Iraq war organized by the friends of Saddam Hussein are all too common.

Lévy dissects their ideological contortions with brio, but his second failing is that he doesn't grasp how comfortable with the consumer society many European leftists have become. Their unwillingness to intervene and their fervent condemnations of the "hypocrisy" of those who would uphold universal human rights have a pseudo-radical ring. But in truth they aren't so different from the corporate leader who doesn't want ethical foreign policies to restrict his profitable investments in despotic countries, or the boor at the bar who says the African savages should be left to murder each other.

Lévy is an exhilarating writer because he has a protestant contempt for orthodoxy. If he were a minority of one, he would still see himself as the true voice of the Left. Yet there is an equally convincing universalist view of intellectual life that holds that you cannot be right against the world. If the Pope and all his cardinals agree on doctrine, then that is doctrine. Even if they are wrong, even if they are standing previous doctrine on its head, you cannot break with them and still call yourself a Catholic.

Likewise, if the majority of people on the European left continue to have no project beyond anti-Americanism; display no willingness to confront misogyny, homophobia, and anti-Semitism when they appear in other cultures; and have no interest in the oppressed if they are oppressed by the wrong type of oppressor, can Lévy carry on calling himself left wing? Should he want to?

When Lévy told Sarkozy that he could not vote for him because the Left was his family, Sarkozy cried, "What? Those people who have spent 30 years telling you to go fuck yourself? Do you really think I'm an idiot, or do you really believe what you are saying?"

The language of the leader of the French Right was rough, but he asked a good question. It is a question that will soon occupy the American Left's attention. True liberals should set out now to win the ideological battles that will come after Bush's departure, so that no gleeful conservative can ever ask the same question of them. ■