

## Left Is Right

*The Left that Bernard Henri-Lévy criticizes is worth saving.  
A response to Nick Cohen.*

**T**o appraise the work of Bernard-Henri Lévy while keeping one's balance is a world-class challenge. Lévy is an extravagant moralist who brings out extravagance in his readers. On the positive side, he is eternally vigilant against human misguidedness, and he stands by the side of the angels. So it is to his credit that, in reviewing Lévy's worthy but exasperating new book *Left in Dark Times: A Stand Against the New Barbarism*, Nick Cohen ["Left Out," Issue #10] is enthusiastic. He approves of Lévy's "searing assault" on the French Left for its romances with "the totalitarian temptation," its dalliances—or worse—with anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism, Islamist terrorism, and other currents of wickedness. He goes further, in fact, assuming in black-or-white Republican fashion that those who reject a bomb-bomb foreign policy are turning cold shoulders to totalism's victims.

---

TODD GITLIN is professor of journalism and sociology and chair of the doctoral program in communications at Columbia University, the author of twelve books, and a blogger at TPMcafe.com.

But Cohen does not stop at appreciating Lévy's polemic. He plunges overboard to approve his affectations as well, both stylistic and political, praising his demonological pronouncements. Cohen calls him "an exhilarating writer," endlessly praising his prose. For my part, I find Lévy a preening, overbearing, overwrought writer, finger-in-face pugnacious, his lucid arguments and pointed epigrams ("it is never a good sign when a great writer devotes too much time to the question of identity") swamped in a torrent of insinuations, oblique references, watch-me pirouettes, and Dick-and-Jane rhetorical questions. Yet Cohen seems to find Lévy's flourishes as thrilling as his argument. His adoration of Lévy the stylist distorts his appreciation for Lévy the political thinker: Cohen is so entranced with the writing that he misses the nuanced force of Lévy's reasons for remaining on the Left, despite the worst of its history.

**T**o be fair, one might extend Lévy a national alibi. He did not invent his self-dramatizing style; it is a patrimony. His flamboyance is a self-parody of a national style that begins and ends every paragraph with a triumphal slapping down of the hole card, accompanied by shouts of take-this-you-fool and only-a-moron-could-disagree and weren't-you-listening-to-me, sometimes cartwheeling out of control, sending his sentences, not so infrequently, into spasms of incoherence. This is scarcely the only French style—you won't find it in Proust, and Camus is largely free of the bloat—but it is all too common. The style is so belligerent as to pound the argument, at times, into indefensibility. Which is, as the French say, a pity. And I weary of Lévy's one-sentence paragraphs.

Not to mention his half-sentence paragraphs.

Nevertheless.

Lévy's flourishes, his rhetorical questions, his how-can-you-be-such-an-idiot? declamations are the icing and not the cake. About the awfulness of anti-liberalism, anti-Europeanism, anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism, all the vicious, willfully ignorant oversimplifications of our time, all the unthinking assumptions that the enemy of the enemy is automatically righteous, and the urgent need to resist all of these curdled attitudes masquerading as accurate ideas, Lévy is absolutely right. Again and again, his ringing sarcasm nails hypocrites to the walls of their own self-enclosure. To cite only a sprinkling of his many devastating examples: On French anti-Americanism, he devastates those who accuse America "of having been too late to enter the war against Hitler . . . and, when it finally made up its mind, of using methods that could have been Hitler's," while they celebrate the France that, "during the Civil War, manage[d] to be the only country in the world that was both hostile to slavery . . . and favorable to a Southern victory." He is devastating about the 2001 high-horse riders' masquerade in Durban

(also known as the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance), which in a world that includes genocidal Sudan, civil-warring Congo, and Nigeria, tyrannical Burma, totalitarian hunger-manufacturing North Korea, nation-destroying Zimbabwe, and the Jew-hatred propaganda industry that thrives in the Arab world, decided that Israel is a singularly damnable regime. Deploring “a Left that feints to the Right,” addressing radicals who get their kicks taking walks on the wild side with revolutionary violence—including the currently fashionable, alternately coruscating and clownish pseudo-theorist Slavoj Žižek—he zeroes in on their penchant for the political theory of the Nazi Carl Schmitt, a liberal-hater for whom the fundamental distinction in politics was that between friend and enemy.

These are rancid fish in a barrel at which Lévy takes aim, but—or therefore—they richly deserve his withering, inflexible scorn. For anyone who takes part in these polemics, or feels the yearning to jump in, his rhetorical services are bristlingly useful, except when they are excessive. And excessive he gets when he is making up his enemies list, an excess that Nick Cohen, who practices his own version of which-side-are-you-on polemics, overlooks. For Lévy can be sloppy. Consider his treatment of Jimmy Carter. “I won’t discuss the case, in the United States, of the ex-president Jimmy Carter,” he begins one paragraph, proceeding, of course, to discuss it, continuing that Carter “never misses a chance to make way for a hatred that, in Europe and certainly in France, would immediately be seen for what it is. Consider his April 2008 journey to Damascus, when he gave unquestioning moral support to the leadership of Hamas.” But according to the BBC, “Hamas spokesmen said Mr. Carter had asked for it to stop rocket attacks on Israel and to enter talks for the release of an Israeli captive.” This doesn’t sound like “unquestioning moral support” to me. Such sloppy demonization is all too typical of Lévy at his worst. He takes no prisoners. Enemies must be crushed. When Bernard-Henri Lévy decides you have gone to the dark side, he gives you a shove and buries you. And Nick Cohen appears to be the one handing him the shovel.

**N**evertheless, Lévy is more than a name-caller. He claims two noble callings. One is analytical. Pick your way judiciously through his book and you see that he has a definite feel for the weird dynamics of nasty ideas. For example, he makes a convincing case that anti-Semitism is a mutable virus, that its current incarnations in Europe are not the older variants, and that “anti-Semitism, if it returns . . . will be a union of Holocaust denial, anti-Zionism, and competition among victims.”

The other benefit of the book is that Lévy gives many reasons for wanting to resurrect what he nicely calls “the melancholy Left of Camus,” an unillusioned

Left that celebrates its vast achievements without being seduced by a “lyrical left” that never met an end-of-history fantasy it didn’t embrace.

What this all means for America is murky, despite Cohen’s warning that the afflicted Left of France could easily migrate across the Atlantic. It bears remembering that the sort of left Lévy has in mind is the French style of intellectual-heavy enterprise that Americans laugh off. There was a time—41 years ago, to be exact—when a left-wing demonstration was led by writers (Robert Lowell, Dwight Macdonald, Norman Mailer, and others at the kick-off to the Pentagon march of 1967), but those days are long gone. The purchase of public intellectuals is different in Paris. A few months ago, I participated in an hour-and-a-half-long morning show on *France Culture* radio, discussing the fate of the press and the American presidential campaign. There were breaks for news and brief round-table insertions, but in the main I was asked intelligent questions by a well-known interviewer, Ali Baddou. America’s public radio and TV shy away from such ventures. “Intellectual” is still a label that Barack Obama is pressed to flee for his political life. Thus, when Cohen warns that the American Left will soon face the same dilemmas as the French, that American liberals after Bush run the risk of sliding down the Europeans’ morally squalid slope, he fails to grasp how marginal intellectual life is altogether on this side of the ocean.

**Lévy’s idea of a Left still matters morally even for Americans whose purchase on political and intellectual life is so weak.**

At its most precious, the Left that Lévy affirms is a coterie Left, an abstract and gestural Left that is self-limited even when it is renowned and prestigious. But Lévy’s idea of a Left still matters morally, even for Americans whose purchase on political and intellectual life is so weak. He wants a Left of values, one that would take part in (not *lead*) a larger political movement extending far beyond intellectuals. Credit Lévy with trying: He doesn’t just denounce what he calls “a frightened Left, shaky, scared of the sound of its own voice if it’s made to recall its previous daring statements, a Left that is no longer the avant-garde of anything at all, except, perhaps, for the sake of being avant-garde.” He is a perpetual-motion cottage industry of just causes. However much he loathed Saddam Hussein and his cheerleaders in Paris, he didn’t fall for the disastrous Bush expedition in Mesopotamia. Not least, Lévy and his friends deserve great credit for a noble attempt to get Francois Mitterrand to lift a finger for Bosnia in the ‘90s. Then and at other times, they didn’t just write manifestos. They lobbied, and moved toward a new political party, and if they failed—only to

see Mitterrand's successor, the rightist Jacques Chirac, show more concern for beleaguered Bosnia than the wily Mitterrand ever did—they were still deeply admirable. It is one thing to long for movements to do the difficult work of creating new political forces. It is quite another to smirk at Lévy's efforts to make the most of an unfavorable situation that the Left has botched—all the organized lefts, the brain-dead Communists, the corrupt and opportunistic Socialists, the hallucination-prone Trotskyites, the paranoid anarchists, and the rest of the retrograde crew.

**C**ohen, practitioner of his own all-or-nothing style, worries too much about the worst of the American Left. He blithely couples Noam Chomsky with Susan Sontag, whose famously outrageous *New Yorker* squib after the September 11 massacre does not sink to anywhere near the level of Chomsky's decades-long, systematic blame-America-first politics. Surely there is a fundamentalist Left, some of whom Lévy rightly takes on: Chomsky, Gore Vidal, Arundhati Roy, and Naomi Klein are among the best known (Michael Bérubé's forthcoming book, *The Left at War*, is devastatingly detailed about their moral and intellectual shoddiness.) They can be opposed—should be opposed—not because they are on the Left but insofar they trample on reason, on solidarity with the oppressed, on the inalienable rights of human beings—in short, on the Left's own values. But they are far, far from taking on a meaningful role in American politics anywhere comparable to their intellectual compatriots in Europe.

Cohen's own extravagance carries over into a certain indiscriminate belligerence. In his review, Cohen asks, "If the majority of people on the European left continue to have no project beyond anti-Americanism; display no willingness to *confront* [my italic] 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?" Yes, he should want to, because values matter. In the actual life of nations, no camps are pure. All hands are dirty. If the political world remains largely bifurcated, the question, unaddressed by Cohen but implicit in Lévy's Left allegiance, is: Are the values of the Right superior?

I too want Cohen's "confrontation," but "confront" doesn't automatically entail xenophobia and cruise missiles. This is why Lévy's distinction between baby and bathwater remains honorable and necessary. When Cohen writes of the need to "take...on" "psychopathic" Islamism, nuclear-bent Iran, and "the newly confident autocracies of China and Russia," what does he mean? Does anything go? Does anything not go? If the United States doesn't resort to preemptive attacks, has it gone soft? "A large swathe of Western opinion," Cohen

writes, “feels that it is illiberal to fight the theocratic enemies of every good liberal principle.” Well, it depends what you mean by “fight.” If I admire the plucky Georgians—even those who still revere the memory of Stalin—but refuse to sign up for war against Russia, am I an appeaser? If my soul is stirred by Afghan women demanding their rights, but I worry about a NATO strategy that bombs a lot of inconvenient civilians, have I gone over to the enemy?

Moreover, is it really the case that “modern liberals [all of them? most of them?] are unwilling to criticize oppression in once-subordinate cultures, nations, or communities”? Cohen can see no one on the American Left but sinners. He even blames the American Left for the anti-Israel lobby book by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, though they are international relations realists, not men of the Left. What of the anti-anti-American Left? I offer any issue of *Dissent* for counterexamples. I imagine readers of *Democracy* might take issue, and umbrage, as well. Immodestly, I might offer hundreds of passages in my own work railing at such oppressions. I don’t know which Left is bigger, or less influential. I don’t see how Cohen can know.

For all Lévy’s self-puffery, he shares in the decency of which Martin Buber spoke when he said of his murdered friend, the German anarchist-socialist-pacifist Gustav Landauer, the victim of storm troopers in 1919: “He fought in the revolution against the revolution for the sake of the revolution.” We are well done with revolutionary fantasy—I think, I hope—but Lévy’s “melancholy Left” remains the sane and staunch alternative that cannot be permitted to die. ▀