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BHL Up Close: A Pessimist Who Laughs

A conversation with French intellectual superstar Bernard-Henri Lévy
by Brett Kline and Randall Koral

In the mid-1970s, a small group of young French intellectuals — dubbed the Nouveaux Philosophes — were Rome, primarily by rejecting Marx and his followers. They were against this trend of totalitarianism. Paul Celan was among this new generation of thinkers was Bernard-Henri Lévy — professor, journalist, and author, who found himself defending his brand of left-leaning anti-Marxism in the press as well as in the halls of academia. While dismissed by many critics as a “pop philosopher” and a media hound, his second book, La Barbarie à Visage Humain (1977), became an international success.

Through the years, the Nouveaux Philosophes movement has reared to its original components. Fewer articles by or about these literary talents, no more angry colleagues at the Sorbonne — in short, no more big deal. The Nouveaux Philosophes are currently discussed with the same nostalgia as, say, les événements de May 68. Lévy, now 35, sequesters himself in a small, bare-walled office at Editions Grasset on the Left Bank, where he is busy writing his first novel. B.H.L. is as pessimistic as ever about the state of the world, but is optimistic about the future of French philosophy, and predicts a major upsurge in French literature.

PASSION: Are you as pessimistic now as when you wrote La Barbarie in 1977?

BHL: Yes, now more than ever. I think it was Camus who said we only have two choices in these dark moments: to be an optimist who cries or a pessimist who laughs. I am a pessimist, who laughs. A lot. But I am very pessimistic about the political situation of the planet. The sole reason for human beings to keep on is the simple fact that they exist.

Do you think that philosophers or writers should speak out or write about politics?

No, I don’t think they have to. Great writers by their work alone, can change the world. If you take the example of the great novelists, politically active as they were, I think they changed the world because the universes they sketched and the characters they created had a function of generations in terms of evaluation of existence. The force in a novel by Stendhal, by Malraux, by Proust is that people no longer measure their existences, their values, the noble and ignoble, the good and the evil, in the same way after reading the book. That is a way of changing the world.

We have learned all of these things less from reading a treatise on morality than from several classic or modern novels which have repeatedly marked our thinking. I think that writers, by nature of the fact that they write, are people who disturb the order of the world.

How do you perceive current French politics?

Listen, the story with current French politics is obvious. I do not have to say it, but for the reason of opposition, of extreme vigilance, of great vigilance. My opposition was based especially on one point. I thought that, on certain issues, the political matters the Soviet government of today is putting on the boots of the old French right-wing, the most traditional and the most pungent. I wrote that we have the most outdated, archaic regime and the most profoundly Fascist in a very long time. Aside from that, there are some Socialists for whom I have the greatest esteem...

Are intellectuals should be voting floaters, by principle, by definition and by vocation. They are well-informed people with the power and the necessity to judge blow by blow, to take positions on the issues.

What is the role of intellectuals in the world today?

I am ready to take a position on Chad and Israel and Afghanistan. I feel we must not retreat from our automatic alignments and fixed positions on French politics. And I have not said it in the press but told it directly to the President of the Republic.

What about Max Gallo?

I would say to Max Gallo that he was right, that he left wrote a magnificent article in the newspaper L’Express about Max Gallo, where he was right, that he left wrote a magnificent article in Le Monde. He wrote that the Left won the elections because it had lost its influence. The Left won the day that it died. He explained how, contrary to the Front Populaire in 1936 when all the intellectuals were behind it, today the intellectuals are silent.

So is the role of intellectuals more to criticize or to support the government?

The role of the intellectuals is, fundamentally, to constantly criticize. An intellectual is not a politician, but he is there to speak. An intellectual is not on the side of the people either. I believe that an intellectual is on the side of Truth, of Justice, of the Good. In any case, that which supposes to be Truth, Justice and Goodness. But he is not on the side of the people. Or, if he is, he would have to be on the side of the German people when they supported Hitler, or the Soviet masses today who accept Andropov’s government, or the French people when they denounced the Resistance. No, an intellectual does not have to be on the side of the people. So I have never placed myself at the service of the people, only at the service of the truth.

Intellectuals are often criticized for being elitist and for having nothing to do with the everyday world. People are very misinformed about intellectuals. If one does not hear anything from them, it is because they are working. But listen, one of the best shared passions of fascism is anti-intellectualism, first and foremost. It is true that intellectuals dispute amongst themselves, that they are often overwhelmed by vanity and dory passions, and that they often pass their time at playing and games. Nevertheless, the generalization that intellectuals are by definition full of shit, that they talk garbage, that they don’t deal with real problems and that they are not in contact with the concrete part of life, this will always be a fascist theory. Every fascist and totalitarian regime has always begun with this theory, that the intelligentsia was some kind of parasite on the social body and that the people should be driven away. And the worst form of anti-intellectualism is that of the intellectuals themselves. When an intellectual becomes anti-intellectual, tyranny is not far behind. And the intellectuals are the intellectuals today who have placed themselves at the service of the repressed socialist government.

You say that the political outlook is bleak without much hope. What is going to happen on the philosophical level?

On the philosophical level, I am very optimistic. I think that French philosophy is doing very well. Contrary to the usual assessment, there have been so many great thinkers, books and ideas as in the present. And I am not talking about Raymond Aron. Raymond Aron is a great thinker. No, Raymond Aron is an esteemed person, of course. But I very much like this. Someone who has often been right. Someone whose articles have often been enlightening. But all that does not make an author. All that does not make a thinker. Raymond Aron is a brilliant journalist and professor, but the fact that the best journalist and professor in France is given the title “Intellectual Number One” is very disturbing phenomenon. It is a sign of regression. But I am sure, as long as I am alive, that there will be others, some of whom I don’t like, people as Fouchet, Deleuze, Lyotard, Badiou, Derrida... France is full of brilliant philosophers, thinkers, journalists, philosophers, new philosophers as a group. I do not feel myself to be a member of any collective body. If philosophy is a collective, I am not a philosopher. If France is a collective, I do not feel French. It is to be Jewish is to be a member of a community, the famous Jewish community, then I do not feel Jewish. I cut across all these identities, that is, I feel singular.

What are your feelings about the future of French intellectual life?

I’m optimistic about the future of French literature. I think that we will witness a fantastic revival of literary production in France in coming years. About the renewal of literature, there is none that I dislike. This renewal is led by Philippe Sollers. One of the merits of his book Femmes is that it will historically be the point where the bars that contained French literary production, which confronted us with painful writers like Michel Tournier and Patrick Modiano, were smashed.

Does literary history have to come from the Left?

I think that there is a vein of right-wing literature that is still alive with a few people who don’t lack talent. I would go as far as to say that I agree, Jean D’Ormesson or Jean-Marie Rouart to many of our young writers of the Left.

What do you think of the New Right in the context of French hope? What is going to happen on the philosophical level?

The New Right? I believe that it was a creation — wanted, organized and orchestrated — by the left-wing media. Max Gallo is right. The Left was dead, exhausted, like an old boat that had knocked out its batteries and suddenly was faced with no more adversaries. The Left was a sort of Rock Graziano clubbed by a century of successive battles. So it resuscitated itself, the New Right, with hormonal injections. It was really a business of waking the dead.

Your life has changed since the Nouveaux Philosophes are no longer big news in France. What is the difference?

I feel that when I speak or when I write, I am front page news. The last book I published was a collection of essays of no great importance. It was the night of the new, the papers, radio and television. For right or wrong, my life has changed from this point of view. These days I am voluntarily silent, as that happens to me time I prepare a book.

My life has changed, but it is not a question of Nouveaux Philosophes. It is not. It is simply that by years now, the times change. I prepare a book, I keep quiet, I observe the silence necessary for my writing. I can’t write and speak at the same time. I can’t write and hear myself at the same time. An intellectual can not live in this state of permanent insomnia of the mind while participating in constant political debate.

So, if you do it, do you go out a lot?

I go out very little. I’m the type who doesn’t talk to the world. You know, I like to read books.

When do you go out, where do you go?

It happens that I dine with friends, usually in the same Parisian restaurants. The same two or three. I am a man of ritual. I dine at the same time, I dine at the same brasserie, such as the Balzar or Bofinger, and I dine at the Twickenham, which is my second home.

What about the Closers des Lilas?

It is very little. One meets too many undesirable there. It is perhaps interesting for a journalist. You go there when you are looking for information. I am satisfied with information. I prefer to stand off to the side.

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