

A Thinker's Adventures in Liberty

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do well-intentioned intellectuals make political mistakes?

To this central, rhetorical question, "Les Aventures de la Liberte" offers a multitude of case-specific answers, which it seeks to mash into some larger truths.

Lesson one: Intellectuals are people too. Like lesser mortals, they make mistakes. So it was that Stalinist fellow travelers of the 1950s and 1960s clung to their faith as a guarantee against fascism, blind to the reality that Stalin's "red" was not a great improvement over Hitler's "dead."

Lesson two: Memory is fickle. Camus unleashed his infamous "mother" formula at the end of a long, tiring week of speeches,

intending only a clever rebuke to an annoying heckler. While his writings and public statements are replete with condemnations of France's Algeria policy, it's the throwaway line that people remember.

Lesson three: Intellectuals sometimes forget that ends are no better than the means deployed to achieve them. A constant refrain of former apologists for authoritarian regimes — after the obligatory, "I didn't know what was really going on" — is that the unassailable theory they espoused was never really given a practical workout. "Stalin wasn't a real Marxist." Or even "Mao wasn't a real Maoist." Intellectuals, whose lifeblood is ideas, need to be reminded that the true test of an idea is in its application.

Lesson four: Intellectuals sometimes insist on fixing that which is not broken. The noble impulse to improve the human condition and its resulting institutions provokes, among some, a revolutionary reflex. After World War II, liberal democracy was discredited because it had not prevented the rise of fascism. What Mr. Levy calls a "radical temptation" to create a "perfect" system took hold, pushing whole generations of thinkers into the arms of false prophets.

This last lesson, mixed together with the preceding one, leads Mr. Levy to a curious apologia for some of his contemporaries. The Maoists, he argues, in their quest for the pure perfect revolution, were drawn inexorably to the most radical of ideas. After all, preceding revolutions had failed because they had not gone far enough. When their absolutist ideas were actually put into practice — such as in the killing fields of Cambodia — Western

Maoists finally understood that the revolutionary dream is "barbarian," and rebelled against it.

Mr. Levy asserts that, in order to realize their mistake, it was necessary for these intellectuals to travel far down the path of error. By taking the extra step and being confronted with the results the revolutionary intellectuals did everyone a favor. After Cambodia, or Khomeini's Iran, no longer was it possible to claim that the revolution had not been carried to its conclusion, or that pure ideals are preferable to the democratic reality. Western intellectuals' misguided espousal of Maoism, Mr. Levy seems to believe, was the "condition necessary" for their new-found comfort with imperfect democracy.

This defense of Maoist excess among Western thinkers is as understandable as it is regrettable. After all, Mr. Levy began his intellectual career in their ranks. The pity is that this retroactive justification takes away from the real heroes of Mr. Levy's work: the intellectuals who, against the odds of prevailing opinion, had the courage to be right.

Time and again, after detailing the unfortunate engagements of so many renowned thinkers, Mr. Levy describes "the other France" — Dreyfus' defenders, the anti-fascists, Stalin's critics, anti-colonialists, and so on. "Les Aventures de la Liberte" tries to uncover not just why members of a certain elite can be wrong, but how, in the confusion of the moment, some can also be right. Mr. Levy's inquiry has no answers, but it serves as a fine excuse for this entertaining, provocative history.