

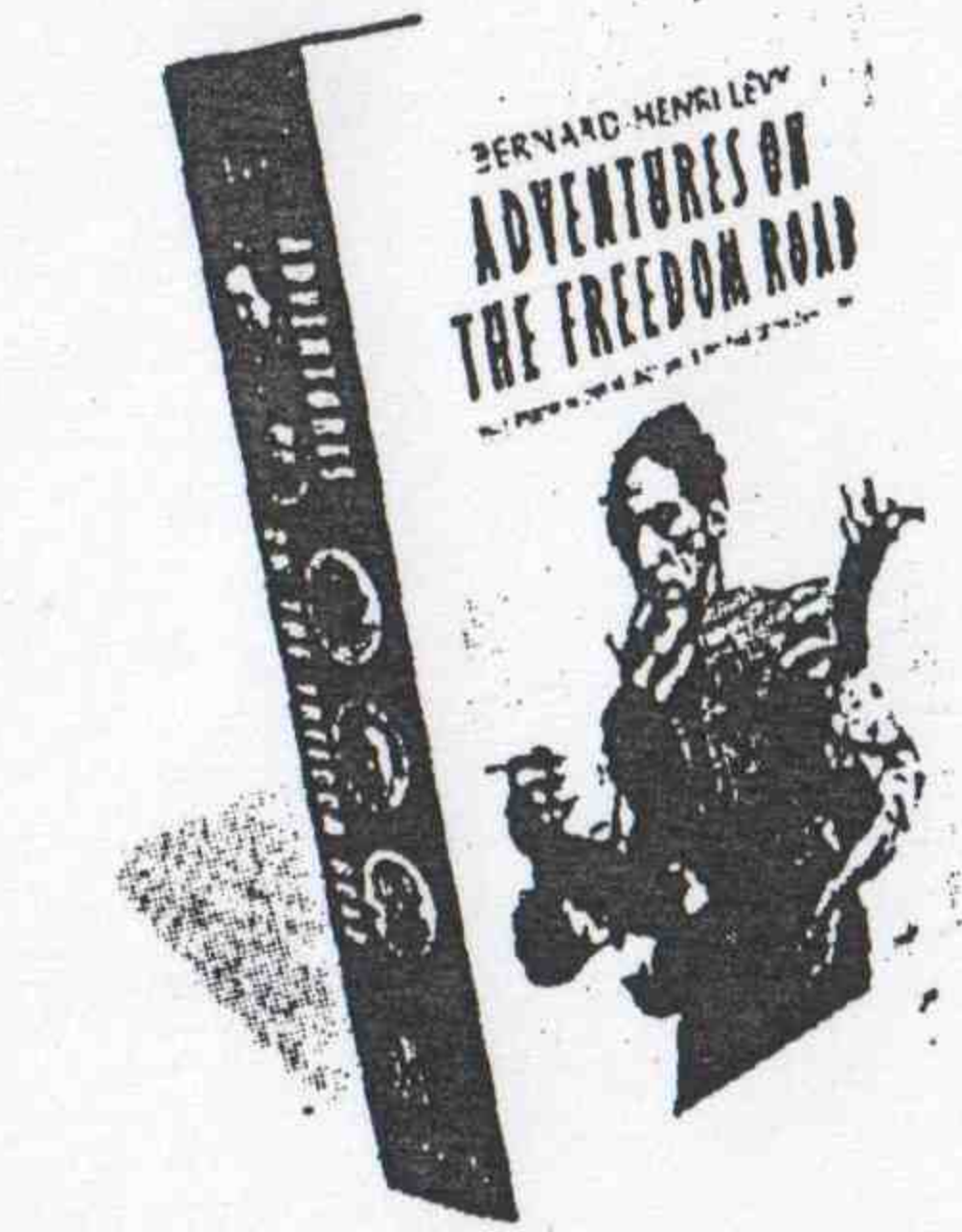
# France's most reluctant revolutionary

**F**RENCH intellectuals have always taken themselves seriously, deploring frivolity about the big issues. Bernard-Henri Lévy bears a triple burden of history – French *intello*, an ex-communist, and Jewish: the full weight of the events of 1789, 1870 and 1941 fall heavily upon him, that is, the Revolution, the defeat of France by Prussia, and the murder of Europe's Jews under the Nazis. Born in 1948, he is one of the *nouveaux philosophes*, that is one who has passed through Marxism via Structuralism and out the other side into a form of humanist scepticism. Like his colleague, Glucksmann he has, by 1991, arrived at the anti-totalitarian position Orwell and Koestler reached in the late 1940s after *The God that Failed* was published.

This volume is an easy-to-digest confection comprising *pensées*, interviews and mini-profiles run up as a TV series sequel book. In Britain we have Lord Clark of *Civilisation* on telly talking about pictures; the French get Lévy on Sartre, Malraux, Camus, Aragon, Breton and Althusser. Given Lévy's predispositions, it's not hard to predict who gets it in the neck – any communist or fellow-traveller. Only Camus and Malraux come out of Lévy re-evaluation with any moral authority.

The title of this volume in French is *Les Aventures de la liberté*, a clear play on Sartre's cycle of novels *Les Chemins de la liberté*. 'Adventures' implies adventurers and Lévy's critique of the whole leftist-revolutionary intellectual tradition embraces fascist *intellos* as well, such as Drieu la Rochelle, who supported the Nazis out of 'revolutionary' rather than 'reactionary' sentiment.

To read this book from the British-American empirical perspective is to enter into a wholly alien universe where devout Catholic mystics like Althusser are converted suddenly to extreme Marxism by a lover who becomes



## Adventures on the Freedom Road

By Bernard-Henri Lévy  
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his wife – whom years later Althusser strangles to death in an act charitably ascribed as 'madness'. This is all simply far too operatic for our cooler blood. Just as Malraux offered to save Drieu la Rochelle's bacon in 1944 by offering him a post in the Resistance, so Jacques Chirac bent the law to allow the 'Marxist' Althusser, (then Lévy's professor at the École Normale), to escape a trial for murder by being declared insane. The sense of a secular priesthood looking after its own is marked throughout this study. The ideological differences are really theological disputations: caste is what matters, "a new aristocracy", as several members call the Communist Party cadres approvingly.

Lévy does indeed diagnose the conditions of the French intellectual as that of a secular priesthood, called upon to arbitrate between ideals such as Truth, Liberty and Justice and the institutions of the State. What he does not seem to see



Bernard-Henri Lévy: candid critique from a modern Voltaire

is the underlying thread of opportunistic power-seeking. Malraux's sudden *volte face* from fellow-traveller to Gaullist minister; Drieu la Rochelle's assumption of power at the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, an organ he had been debarred from before the defeat in 1940; Cocteau's cavorting at the German Embassy and in Nazi salons during the Occupation.

The French obsessions with becoming 'modern' – catching up with Germany and reversing 1870, with 'purity' and 'creating a new man' – are wholly absent in the British-American mental landscape. Once again, reading this revisionist philosopher's history of his country's thinkers, I was reminded of the gulf that exists between the countries which had a successful Protestant reformation, and thereby eventually installed freedom of conscience and effective checks and balances on State power – and those like France which did not.

The idea of a British writer in-

stituting a rival Church, complete with rigid dogma, hierarchy, an index of banned books, ex-communication and so on, is simply absurd. Yet this is exactly what André Breton did with the Surrealist movement. Seen through the eyes of a secular Protestant descendant of the 1688 Revolution, all French intellectual endeavour seems a long and unsuccessful attempt to limit or at least hijack the power of the State, or else to substitute it with some sort of permanent revolution à la St Just or Ché Guevara.

Since Robespierre, all French intellectuals have been tempted by the possibilities of supreme government power. It was not for nothing, for example, that Régis Debray used the soubriquet 'Danton' as his *nom de guerre* in Bolivia with Che. Nor, I suspect, was Malraux's choice of 'Colonel Berger' (Colonel Shepherd) entirely without guile.

It is ironic but not at all surprising that two French Jews, Lévy and Glucksmann, should be the heretics who have called into question the whole validity of the orthodox French revolutionary-intellectual tradition. Marx, Lenin, Castro, Che and Mao were each co-opted over the years as honorary Frenchman, as revolutionary *assimilés*; having failed to achieve either a lasting imperial or international capitalist hegemony, the French cadres have made revolution, philosophy and 'history' their own shadow imperium.

Lévy and his generation know that all this is over. The Catholic-Marxist wife-murderer Althusser was 'the last revolutionary'. Foucault, in an interview with Lévy, dared to suggest the unspeakable: "What if the whole revolutionary tradition was completely wrong?" Roland Barthes speaks with complete defeat about 'intellectuals being waste matter, like the organic waste produced by a body after digestion.' It is clear the current mood is frankly nihilistic.

The failure of Nazism and Com-

munism and the bankruptcy of the revolutionary tradition in France leaves Frenchmen in a world dominated by Anglo-American capitalism and culture and with the threat of a new, rising capitalist dynamic in Asia. In Europe France is political *animateur* of a European Union which is wholly un-unified, and facing severe structural economic crises. To all of this Lévy has nothing positive to suggest.

This book is singular evidence that despite cosmetic changes nations and peoples face the same existential and even geo-political dilemmas throughout history. Can France ever reform itself, rather than be continually convulsed by revolutions after autocratic *ancien regimes* have been finally overthrown after much struggle? Gradualism is simply not a Latin tradition.

When someone suggested that Sartre be imprisoned, de Gaulle replied: "*On n'embastille pas Voltaire*" ("One doesn't put Voltaire in the Bastille"). Lévy is now cast as the Voltaire of the *intello*-revolutionary establishment, the darting sceptic who demolishes with wit and bravura. Bearing in mind the fate of Dreyfus, with whom he starts the book, what Lévy's own fate would be in a born-again nationalist Le Pen France, itself perhaps not too far away, is less certain.

The unspoken subtext of this intriguing book is "Just how far can a French *intello* who is also Jewish be secure in feeling really French?" It was the French Christian writer Brasillach, Lévy reminds us, who told the Germans in 1941 "not to forget the little ones either" when the French Jews were shipped to the gas chambers; and the Germans took him at his word and deported the children too. Not surprisingly, the only intellectual who gets a completely clear bill of health from Lévy is Herzl, the founder of Zionism and advocate of a national home for the Jews.

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