

portrait

by Tim King

BERNARD- HENRI LÉVY

The courage of this Parisian "war philosopher" is not to be sneered at. But his latest book on the murder of Daniel Pearl fails in basic journalistic discipline and verges on dishonesty

IT IS EASY to mock the incestuous and venomous world of the Parisian intellectual. But the Left Bank has lately descended into what the philosopher Alain Finkielkraut calls "the brutalisation of intellectual life." Editors and writers threaten each other; thinkers are as likely to exchange obscenities as ideas. It is partly to keep away from such unseemly behaviour that Bernard-Henri Lévy, France's best-known intellectual, prefers to work in the comparative safety of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Algeria. Just as there are war reporters, Lévy is a war philosopher. He risks his life to bring us insights into the minds of the world's warlords.

Risk taking seems to run in the family. Bernard-Henri's father was born into a poor Jewish family in Algeria, fought in the Spanish civil war and later for the Free French, before importing exotic wood from west Africa and making serious money. Lévy *fits* burst into the French consciousness in 1977 with publication of the anti-Marxist *La Barbarie à Visage Humain*, an overnight sensation. At the time, this was bold. Marxism was still the intellectual religion. Lévy, like the anti-Soviet philosopher André Glucksmann, saw that people were being crushed in the name of this religion. In 1971, Lévy went out to Bangladesh during the civil war. Much later, he would help focus European attention on the plight of the Muslims in Bosnia, while Glucksmann defended the Chechens. For their pains they were reviled by the likes of Foucault, Derrida, Barthes and Lacan.

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Known as the new philosophers, Glucksmann and Lévy were unclassifiable, belonging neither to the caviar left of Mitterrand, nor to the right.

When not confronting Colombian drug barons or Angolan guerrillas, Lévy turned his hand to essays, novels, a play, journalism and a very expensive feature film shot in Mexico with Alain Delon. He has intermittently edited four newspapers, one in Kabul. In 1993 Lévy, the self-avowed libertine, married Arielle Dombasle, voted by *Paris Match* readers one of the ten most beautiful women in the world. "BHL" became a media star, and a magnet for national envy.

But Lévy, like Sartre, thrives on others' hatred. "A writer is all the greater the more greatly he is hated," Lévy writes in his 500-page study of Sartre, whose flat was bombed twice by his countrymen because he believed Algeria should be governed by Algerians. "Hatred and influence go together," continues Lévy. "You cannot pick up one without being handed the other." Many eminent French thinkers declared that Lévy's 1981 book about France during the occupation should be burned, and Lévy along with it. "Given my surname, this was not in the best of taste," he remarked. Lévy helped create SOS Racisme, a helpline for victims of racist violence.

Anti-American feeling is not new in France, but this year it has been ubiquitous. To be, as Lévy is, anti-anti-American is to be isolated. To be pro-Israel, which Lévy has long been, takes courage. The word "intellectual" was popularised in the 1890s to stigmatise the defenders of the Jewish Dreyfus. Lévy, say some of his detractors, cannot understand France because he was born in Algeria, and because he is a Jew.

In February 2002, Lévy was in Afghanistan, sent by Jacques Chirac on an official mission to consider ways of building a nation out of the chaos left by the Taleban and American bombs. The war philosopher was in President Hamid Karzai's office when the phone rang. The kidnapped American journalist Daniel Pearl had been ritually butchered, on camera, by Muslims in Karachi. When Lévy saw the videotape, the cold-blooded images of Pearl's head being severed by a knife, he recognised his next assignment. Abandoning his diplomatic mission, he flew to Pakistan to stand in the wretched, two-room hovel where, Lévy quickly concluded, Pearl had been kept prisoner for six days before being murdered. To breathe that air saturated with hatred, to gaze upon those squalid walls which had defined the limits of Pearl's final hours, was to imbibe his martyrdom: "My father is a Jew. My mother is a Jew. I am a Jew," was Pearl's final statement on camera. The visit to Pearl's place of execution provides the most compelling pages in Lévy's subsequent bestseller *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*, now published in America and Britain. Lévy's investigation, however, and the way he wrote about it, proved less successful.

All his major work is, at a certain level, a form of

self-study. If Lévy's best book to date is his study of Sartre, it is because in it he could freely describe himself. Lévy's Sartre has all the outlines of Lévy (the brilliant, execrated but finally redeemed philosopher, novelist and playwright). And he clearly hoped writing about Daniel Pearl was going to give him the same opportunity. In the opening pages he describes Pearl as "this fine journalist, citizen of the planet, a man curious about other men, at home in the world, friend to the forgotten, standing in solidarity with the downtrodden, a luminous character who had chosen to answer evil with good and above all to understand." It is easy here to make out Bernard-Henri Lévy gazing in the mirror; less easy to make out Daniel Pearl. Colleagues on the *Wall Street Journal* suggest Pearl was not like that—or if he was, there was also the prickly, ambitious man, possibly not destined to remain long on the newspaper. Lévy has not convincingly explained why he could get no comment from the *WSJ*, or from many of Pearl's colleagues or friends. Pearl's widow makes a fleeting appearance for form's sake, adding nothing.

Perhaps sensing his mistake, Lévy spends only 80 pages out of 495 on Pearl himself. He quickly decides that Omar Sheikh, the convicted mastermind behind the kidnap, if not the execution, is going to give him better material. So he sets the stage for a Manichean confrontation: that of a truth-seeking Jew murdered by a Muslim fanatic. The exciting thing for Lévy is that Omar Sheikh is not an illiterate peasant, brainwashed in some ayatollah's *madrasa*, but an LSE-educated Londoner. Thus he can identify the evil as being here, in our midst. And that is the first disappointment with Lévy's book. No sooner has he begun to sketch a vision of the world which is satisfying in its complexity, than he simplifies it back into one in which evil is ranged against good. The opening chapters and closing pages of *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?* should be music to the ears of neoconservatives.

But Lévy the writer has a problem. It is too risky to "fabricate" (Sartre's word, used to describe his own portrayal of Flaubert) Daniel Pearl in his own image, because there are so many people who knew him and care about his memory; and Omar Sheikh is evil incarnate (Lévy doesn't want to inhabit that). His solution is to bring centre stage a character he finds more interesting: himself. This has been fuel for his

critics. He is much more at ease describing his own adventures meeting undercover agents or rabidly antisemitic police officers, lying his way into holy places or getting face time with world leaders to discuss the Pakistan problem.

There is no equivalent to Lévy in Britain or America. He is a genuinely powerful figure, and this is another reason the French intelligentsia dislike him. For years he was close to François Mitterrand—until Lévy discovered that Mitterrand had been decorated by Pétain. His father was an associate of François Pinault (head of France's largest retailing group and a friend of Jacques Chirac, who in turn launched Lévy on his diplomatic career in Afghanistan). Lévy is on the board of Yves St Laurent. He is woven into a network of the *Grandes Ecoles* which has control over almost every branch of French life. And not just French life. Lévy feels, when in Israel, that he can call up Ariel Sharon and invite himself round for a chat. He is at home anywhere: guerrilla camp or president's office. Indeed, what was that plan he was mulling over in President Karzai's office when news came through of Pearl's murder? The proposal of his report on the reconstruction of Afghanistan was to create an *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* in Kabul ("we did it in Algeria," he told the *FT*, "why not in Kabul?"), a network of administrators who would, presumably, think as Paris dictates. Lévy's evolution has taken him from the supple, multifaceted philosophy of his

youth to a position where he now advocates what is known as *Franco-Français post-imperialiste imperialisme* (postcolonial French imperialism).

In his book about Pearl, he seeks proof for what he already believes and so fails in the basic disciplines of a reporter. He finds the house in east London where Omar Sheikh grew up, which he describes as a "typical English cottage." Then in a rather bizarre scene, he gives us Monsieur Lévy creeping round the outside while the family is asleep, peering through the windows to note a ready-laid table: eggcups, cereal, pitcher of milk and flowered plates. It's Tintin in the land of the English breakfast. He says that this adventure took place in Colvin Street, which is not listed in the *A-Z*. Lévy may mean Colvin Gardens, E11. He says Omar's father works at Perfect Fashions, 235 Commercial Road in Wanstead. Actually, that's 125 Commercial Road in Aldgate. The LSE



BRIAN GABLE