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Booksshelf / By Tunku Varadarajan

A Philosopher Leaves His Study



The jacket of "Who Killed Daniel Pearl?" describes the author, Bernard-Henri Lévy, as

"France's leading philosopher." This may well be true, but such a claim could have the effect, among non-French readers, of prompting more doubt than trust. And yet I commend this book. Although written by a philosopher who is given—literally—to bouts of navel-gazing, it is not a philosophy book. If it were, then he could be said to have invented a genre: "forensic philosophy."

Mr. Lévy is better described here as a forensic *fabulist*, who weaves his tale by extrapolating vigorous from hard information gathered from the Pakistani police, Indian intelligence and his own painstaking research. Sometimes his flights are so undisciplined as to be flights of fancy, in which he leaves the zone that might properly be called extrapolation. This imparts to his book a lurid, *haut-tableid* quality.

An example is his description, as if through Daniel Pearl's own eyes, of Pearl's decapitation. Another is his conviction that Pearl—the Wall Street Journal reporter who was murdered in Karachi, Pakistan, in January 2002—was killed not because, as an American and a Jew, he was a perfect symbolic target for terrorists wishing to intimidate the West but because he'd stumbled upon details of Pakistan's involvement in a terrorist "dirty" bomb. (It should be said that his editors, in constant contact with him, knew nothing of such a discovery—and given journal practice, he'd certainly have told them if he had such news.) The problem is not whether Pearl did so stumble—who can know what he found? And Lévy's conclusions can sometimes seem greater than the sum of their parts.

WHO KILLED DANIEL PEARL?
By Bernard-Henri Lévy
(Melville House, 454 pages, \$25.95)

But at least he attempts the math. He's one of the few to ask hard questions about Pearl's death, harder than the questions the Pakistani investigators appear to have asked of the suspects—harder, even, than the questions the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad was willing to ask to explore the links between the man convicted of Pearl's murder—Omar Sheikh— and Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI); and to raise questions about the links between the ISI and al Qaeda, not just before Sept. 11, 2001, but after. These aren't airy questions that can be dismissed—as some will try to do—as the imaginations of a French top. It is a fact that Gen. Mahmood Ahmed, then head of the ISI, wired \$100,000 to Mohamed Atta before 9/11 through an intermediary. (This was reported in the Journal on Oct. 10, 2001.) So what have we done about it? Mr. Lévy asks. What indeed?

It is a fact that Omar Sheikh, the man behind Pearl's murder, turned himself in

to an ISI brigadier on Feb. 5, 2002, a full week before his "arrest" was announced to the world by Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's president. So what have we done to make the Pakistani authorities account for that missing week? Mr. Lévy asks. What indeed?

It is a fact that, in December 1999, Omar Sheikh was freed from an Indian jail—where he was serving time for kidnaping American (and British) citizens in Delhi—in exchange for the release of 150 Indians whose flight had been hijacked to Kandahar by Islamist terrorists. (According to an eyewitness, Mr. Lévy reports, Sheikh was received in Kandahar by an ISI operative.) He returned to Pakistan, lived openly, married and had a child. Why was no attempt made to apprehend him, and why did the U.S. never seek his extradition? Mr. Lévy asks. Why indeed?

But the book is about more than awkward questions, questions for which there will be few takers—as the author freely admits—for such time as Gen. Musharraf is regarded as an ally in the war against terror. The book also bares Mr. Lévy's own identification—to the point of obsession—with Pearl. He sees in Pearl someone exactly like himself. On an obvious level, they're both Jews and share a vocation. (Refreshingly for a philosopher, Mr. Lévy is always prepared to describe himself as a "journalist.")

But at another level, which occasionally borders on the creepy, he appears to want to be Pearl. He visits all the places Pearl had been to in Karachi and goes so far as to sleep in the same sordid hotel that Pearl once went to. (He has to content himself with the same floor, since the exact room in which Pearl slept was occupied.) For sure, this retracing of steps is a respectable device to ascertain what happened to Pearl and to capture the mood of Karachi's Islamist *demi-monde*; but some of it borders on posthumous stalking.

Yet the most disconcerting parts of the book deal with Mr. Lévy's pursuit of Sheikh, his other *ide fixe*. He travels everywhere that Sheikh had been—Bosnia, his Delhi jail, the London School of Economics, Kandahar and an infamous Karachi *madrasa* (which Mr. Lévy calls "a terrorist Vatican"). "Everywhere I go I feel he has been," writes Mr. Lévy, "and yet I find no trace of him." He seems almost relieved.

Mr. Lévy has a good heart and a noble sense of outrage. He is also fiercely proud of our civilization without being contemptuous of the Muslim world. Ig-gaudy history as a public intellectual. You cannot but admire a man who has so much compassion for Pearl. And you can't help wishing that at least some of his questions will be answered one day.

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