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Fascism, Alive and Abroad

By George F. Will

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From Hugo and Zola to Camus and Sartre, there is a long French tradition of public intellectuals as superstars. Bernard-Henri Levy, 54, continues this tradition self-consciously.

His studied conspicuousness extends to his clothing, which is invariably, as at a recent breakfast here, a black suit, a white shirt unbuttoned to expose some chest, and unbuttoned cuffs, too. His 30 books include a biography of Sartre. He appears frequently on French television. After his mission to Afghanistan at the request of President Jacques Chirac to advise on the role of French culture in reconstructed Afghanistan, Levy recommended, among much else, "hussars to spread the values of 1789" in the Afghan hinterlands. Levy is married to a beautiful movie star and singer. There is no theatrical American philosopher who manages Levy's blend of glamour, literacy and political engagement -- imagine actor Alec Baldwin as he evidently imagines himself.

Levy's book "Who Killed Daniel Pearl?" will earn him a broader American audience. It is a wild ride of a read, reaching conclusions the speculative nature of which does not vitiate the remarkable reporting that preceded Levy's reaching them.

The January 2002 kidnapping and murder in Pakistan of Pearl, a Wall Street Journal reporter, occurred, Levy surmises, because Pearl had discovered collaboration between Pakistan's intelligence service, Pakistani nuclear scientists and terrorist organizations. Neither the Wall Street Journal nor Pearl's father says that Pearl was

pursuing such a story.

The novelistic flights that interrupt Levy's journalism, as when he imagines Pearl's thoughts as he was about to die, are evidence of Levy's admiration for Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood" and Norman Mailer's "The Executioner's Song." But readers wondering how seriously to take Levy's speculations about Pakistan may be wary of this hybrid literary genre -- not-quite-journalism that blurs the line between reality and fantasy.

Even allowing for the fact that Levy calls himself a "partisan" of India, it is not fantasy that there have been many reports that the then-head of Pakistani intelligence was responsible for \$100,000 being wired to Mohamed Atta, the lead 9/11 hijacker. Because Levy sees a danger of Pakistani nuclear technology leaking to stateless terrorists, he thinks the United States' understanding of the war on terrorism is insufficiently frightening.

He opposed the war in Iraq partly because he believes Saddam Hussein was "a tyrant in his autumn, a phantom of 20th-century history, while, back there in Karachi, tomorrow's barbarous configurations were being concocted." Levy considers himself "of the left," but only because, he unhelpfully explains, of "my sensibility." However, he calls himself "anti-anti-American" and argues that the most virulent and long-lived French anti-Americanism is on the political right.

The left's anti-Americanism, which Levy calls "a routine of resentment," is a faded, almost perfunctory residue of a failed prophecy -- Marxist puerilities, the dated nature of which is not disguised by recasting the caricature of America in the vocabulary of anti-globalization. The right's anti-Americanism is more serious and passionate, for two reasons: It is an echo of fascism, which actually has more residual vitality than Marxism does. And the loathing of America, although morally obtuse, is at least a recoil against what America really is.

Anti-American French rightists, says Levy, disdain America as an "inauthentic" nation. They understand authenticity in tribal terms -- as a function of racial homogeneity reflected in cultural uniformity. Sound familiar? It should. It is an ingredient of fascism.

What G.K. Chesterton said (somewhat) in jest -- "There is nothing the matter with Americans except their ideals. The real American is all right; it is the ideal American

who is all wrong" -- some French and other European rightists say in ferocious earnest. And they are at least correct that America is what they despise -- multiracial, cosmopolitan, voluntary (i.e. peopled by immigrants) and unified not by blood but, as the 16th president said, by dedication to a proposition.

Levy, who regards the murder of Pearl as an epoch-defining event -- a "micro World Trade Center" -- bought a tape of the decapitation from one of the vendors who sell the videos near Pakistani mosques. That is but one chilling fact from Levy's impressive immersion in the milieu that produced the English-born Muslim who organized Pearl's kidnapping.

That man, Levy reports, "was able to recite entire pages of 'Mein Kampf' by heart." Levy's book suggests that the Cold War may come to be remembered as a parenthesis in a much longer war against the remarkable resilience and insufficiently understood variousness of fascism.