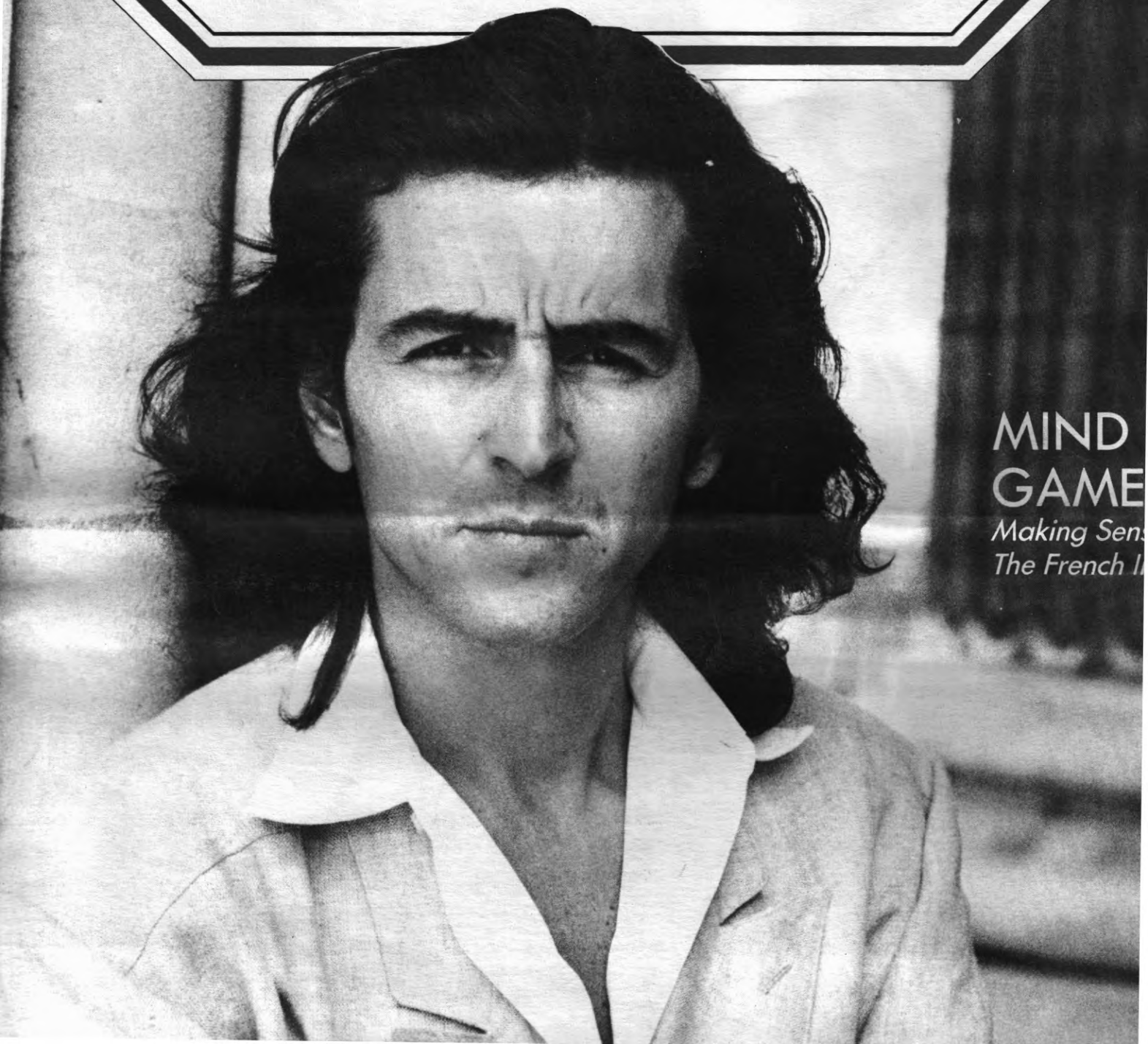


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BHL Up Close: A Pessimist Who Laughs

A conversation with French intellectual superstar Bernard-Henri Lévy
by Brett Kline and Randall Koral

In the mid-1970s, a small group of young French intellectuals — dubbed the *Nouveaux Philosophes* — created a furor in Paris, primarily by rejecting Marx and accusing authority figures in France and abroad of totalitarianism. Particularly active among this new generation of thinkers was Bernard-Henri Lévy — professor, journalist and author, who found himself defending his brand of left-leaning anti-Marxism in the press as well as in the halls of academia. While dismissed by many critics as a “pop philosopher” and a media hound, his second book, *La Barbarie à Visage Humain* (1977) became an international success.

Through the years, the *Nouveaux Philosophes* movement has reverted to its original components. Fewer articles by or about these young intellectual lions, no more angry colloquiums at the Sorbonne — in short, no more big deal. The *Nouveaux Philosophes* are currently discussed with the same nostalgia as, say, *les événements de May '68*.

Lévy, now 35, sequesters himself in a small, bare-walled office at Editions Grasset on the Left Bank, where he is busy writing his first novel. B.H.L. is as pessimistic as ever about the state of the world, but is optimistic about the future of French philosophy, and predicts a major upsurge in French literature.

PASSION: Are you as pessimistic now as when you wrote *La Barbarie in 1977*?

BHL: Yes, now more than ever. I think it was Camus who said we only have two choices in these modern times: to be an optimist who cries or a pessimist who laughs. I am a pessimist who laughs. I laugh a lot. But I am very pessimistic about the political situation of the planet. The sole reason for human beings to keep on is the simple fact that they exist.

Do you think that philosophers or writers should speak or write to change politics or alter the world?

No, I don't think they have to. Great writers by their work alone, do change the world. If you take the example of the great novelists, as politically inactive as they were, I think they changed their world because the universes they sketched and the characters they created function for generations as new ladders of evaluation of existence. The force in a novel by Stendhal, by Malraux, of Proust is that people no longer measure their existences, their values, the noble and ignoble, the good and the evil, in the same way after reading the books. That is a way of changing the world.

We have learned all of these things less from reading a treatise on morality than from several classic or modern novels which have irreversibly marked our thinking. I think that writers, by nature of the fact that they write,

are people who disturb the order of the world. **How do you perceive current French politics?**

Listen, the story with current French politics is obvious. My position is clear. I voted for François Mitterrand and soon afterwards took up a position of opposition, of extreme vigilance, even of great vehemence. My opposition was based especially on one point. I said, I thought, that on certain political and ideological matters the Socialist government of today is putting on the boots of the old French right-wing, the most traditional and the most pestilent. I wrote that we have the most outdated, archaic regime and the most profoundly Petainist in a very long time. Aside from that, there are some Socialists for whom I have the greatest esteem...

I am a “floating voter”. All intellectuals should be floating voters, by principle, by definition and by vocation. They are well-informed people with the power and the necessity to judge blow by blow, to take positions quickly...

While I am ready to take up a position on Chad and Israel and Afghanistan, I feel we must retreat from our automatic alignments and fixed positions on French politics. And I have not only said it in the press but told it directly to the President of the Republic.

And what about Max Gallo?

I would say to Max Gallo that he was right, that he left wrote a magnificent article in

Le Monde. He wrote that the Left won the elections because it had lost all its influence. The Left won the day that it died. He explained how, contrary to the Front Populaire in 1936 when all the intellectuals were behind it, today the intellectuals are silent.

So is the role of the intellectuals more to criticize or to support the government?

The role of the intellectuals is, fundamentally, to constantly criticize. An intellectual is not responsible for the politics, nor is he there to applaud. An intellectual is not on the side of the people either. I believe that an intellectual is on the side of Truth, of Justice, of the Good. In any case, that which supposes to be Truth, Justice and Goodness. But he is not on



the side of the people. Or, if he is, he would have to be on the side of the German people when they supported Hitler, or the Soviet masses today who accept Andropov's government, or the French people when they denounced the Resistance. No, an intellectual does not have to be on the side of the people. So I have never placed myself at the service of the people, only at the service of the truth.

Intellectuals are often criticized for being elitist and for having nothing to do with the everyday world...

People are very misinformed about intellectuals. If one does not hear anything from them, it is because they are working. But listen, one of the best shared passions of fascism is anti-intellectualism, first and foremost. It is true that intellectuals dispute amongst themselves, that they are often overwhelmed by vain and derisive passions, and that they often pass their time at playing games. Nevertheless, the generalization that intellectuals are by definition full of shit, that they talk garbage, that they don't deal with real problems and that they are not in contact with the concrete part of life, this will always be a fascist theory. Every fascist and totalitarian regime has always begun with this

theory, that the intelligentsia was some kind of parasite on the social body and that they should be driven away. And the worst form of anti-intellectualism is that of the intellectuals themselves. When an intellectual becomes anti-intellectual, tyranny is not far behind. And there are intellectuals today who have placed themselves at the service of the regenerated socialist government.

You say that the political outlook is bleak, without much hope. What is going to happen on the philosophical level?

On the philosophical level, I am very optimistic. I think that French philosophy is doing very well. Contrary to the usual assessment, there have never been so many great thinkers and ideas as in the present. And I am not talking about Raymond Aron. Raymond Aron is a scandal. Raymond Aron is a non-thinker. No, Raymond Aron is an esteemed person, of course. Someone I like very much. Someone who has often been right. Someone whose articles have often been enlightening. But all that does not an *œuvre* make. All that does not a thinker make. Raymond Aron is a brilliant journalist and professor, but the fact that the best journalist and professor in France is given the title “Intellectual Number 1” is a very disturbing phenomenon. It is a sign of regression. But putting all that aside, if you take other people, some of whom I don't like, people as varied as Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Derrida... France is full of brilliant philosophers who work relentlessly to produce systems of thought of great strength.

Can one still speak of intellectuals as an entity as one spoke of the New Philosophers?

We must be careful when speaking about people as a group. In a general fashion I believe one cannot speak of cheese sellers, spice merchants, journalists, philosophers and new philosophers as a group. I do not feel myself to be a member of any collective body. If philosophy is a collective, I am not a philosopher. If France is a collective, I do not feel French. If to be Jewish is to be a member of a community, the famous Jewish community, then I don't feel Jewish. I cut across all these identities, that is, I feel singular.

What are your feelings about the future of French literature?

I'm optimistic about the future of French literature. I think that we will witness a fantastic revival of literary production in France in coming years. About the renewal of literature, there is someone that I salute. This someone is Philippe Sollers. One of the merits of his book *Femmes* is that it will be historically the point where the bars that contained French literary production, which confronted us with

pitiful writers like Michel Tournier and Patrick Modiano, were smashed.

Does good literature have to come from the Left?

I think that there is a vein of right-wing literature that is still alive with a few people who don't lack talent. I would go as far as to say that I prefer Jean D'Ormesson or Jean Marie Rouart to many of our lousy writers of the Left...

What do you think of the New Right movement of a few years ago?

The New Right? I believe that it was a creation — wanted, organized and orchestrated — by the left-wing media. Max Gallo is right. The Left was dead, exhausted, like an old boxer that had knocked out all his adversaries and suddenly was faced with no more adversaries. The Left was a sort of Rocky Graziano clubbed by a century of successive battles. So it resuscitated a corpse, the New Right, with hormone injections. It was really a business of waking the dead.

How has your life changed since the Nouveaux Philosophes are no longer big news in France?

I feel that when I speak or when I write, I am front page news. The last book I published was a collection of essays of no great importance. It was at the top of the news in the papers, radio and television. For right or wrong. So, my life has not changed from this point of view. These days I am voluntarily silent, as that happens to me each time I prepare a book.

My life has changed, but it is not a question of *Nouveaux Philosophes* or not. It is simply that for years now each time I prepare a book, I keep quiet. I observe a silence necessary for my writing. I can't write and speak at the same time. I can't write and hear myself at the same time. An intellectual can not live in this state of permanent insomnia of the mind that participation in constant political debate imposes.

So, to fight that, do you go out a lot?

I go out very little. I'm the type who doesn't go out a lot.

When you do go out, where do you go?

It happens that I dine with friends, rarely, usually in the same Parisian restaurants. The same two or three. I am a man of ritual. I dine at the Recamier nearby, or in two or three brasseries, such as the Balzar or Bofinger, and I dine at the Twickenham, which is my second home.

What about the *Closerie des Lilas*?

I go there very little. One meets too many undesirables there. It is perhaps interesting for a journalist. You go there when you are looking for information. I am saturated with information. I prefer to stand off to the side. ■