

Pierre B.H. Lévy

When Tom Bishop—who is director of New York University's Center for French Civilization and considered something of an intellectual in France—and I walked into Le Récamier, one of Paris' more expensive literary haunts, the exquisite arrangement of exotic flowers in the room's center was conspicuously moved to a position beside our table—Bernard-Henri Lévy's regular. (Every *intello à la mode* should have one; remember, Sartre pitched camp at Café de Flore.)

Enter B-H L (a household acronym in France). He lives up to his Pre-Raphaelite-icon fame, with shoulder-length black tousled hair framing dynamic leading-man features, his trademark white shirt, sleeves rolled up, unbuttoned almost to the belt. Contradicting the roman-

booklet in *Globe* magazine along with a large glossy cover photo of Lévy—is that traditional intellectuals, now that they've embraced popular culture, are on the way out. This time France, champion of intellectualism, is aghast.

**KB:** *Eloge des Intellectuels* raises several startling issues about modern-day intellectuals and their diminished role in France. Is France becoming anti-intellectual?

**Sitting pretty: Would you buy a new philosophy from this Frenchman?**



# MY DINNER WITH BERNARD-HENRI

tic notion of cigarettes and wine as indispensable to philosophical discourse, he refuses Gitanes and sticks to Badoit mineral water ("I have no vices"). It is obvious why Lévy has made "intellectual" a very sexy word.

In 1977, when the rest of France's great thinkers—those who count, anyway—were of leftist persuasion, the young tyro proclaimed Marxism dead and was catapulted into stardom overnight. Lévy became the darling of the French press . . . and since then has worked hard to keep it that way. (Judging a Dim pantyhose "Best Legs" contest may have been his most extreme media episode to date.) Not that notoriety has in any way detracted from his seriousness: He edits an influential series of books of essays and political criticism for Grasset publishers. His current controversial theory—introduced in *Eloge des Intellectuels* ("In Praise of the Intellectuals"), a book first distributed last spring as a

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

FIRST GOD WAS DEAD, THEN MARXISM WAS DEAD, AND NOW THE INTELLECTUALS THEMSELVES ARE GETTING THE AX

**B-H L:** Anti-intellectual! France is the country of intellectuals; she invented the word, and she has perhaps honored and glorified them more than any other Western country.

But it's true that today, as at other moments in our history, there's a movement—I hope it's only ephemeral, but it does exist—against intellectualism. Historically such trends have occurred during our most somber times, as during the rise of fascism in the Thirties, or under the German occupation, or again during the Algerian

BY KATHY BISHOP

war and the upsurge of racism.

Today, anti-intellectualism is associated with the return of extreme nationalism, the rise of xenophobia, and the Klaus Barbie trial.

**KB:** Is the intellectual doomed to disappear with the 20th century?

**B-H L:** It may well be that the classic figure of the French intellectual as we know it, in the lineage of Sartre, Voltaire, and Zola, is in the process of collapsing, and tomorrow it just might disappear. It could take a week or 20, 30 years, I don't know. But the way has been paved and we're already well advanced.

**KB:** You attack a group of popular stars who are spokesmen for various social issues—the late comedian Coluche, businessman Bernard Tapie, and actor Yves Montand—for having replaced the serious thinkers as the major trendsetters and spiritual mentors of France.

**B-H L:** I had the misfortune to touch upon this in two brief sentences in my book, and the whole world leaped on it as if that were the crux of my argument. It's not very important, just one more symptom of the diminishing of cultural standards.

**KB:** Yet you do describe an "Intellectual of the Third Kind," someone who, to paraphrase your book, will be less passionately ideological and much more pessimistic.

**B-H L:** And he'll return to old-fashioned values that I hold dear: goodness, justice, liberty, equality. We need to reestablish a hierarchy of values. My book looks for positive ways to conserve the meanings of these humanistic conditions, which a democratic society requires for survival.

**TB:** Humanism has become a dirty word in intellectual circles. Our bloody century has undermined any sense of the word. You dare to resurrect it. That's great. I've never stopped being a humanist; we haven't found anything better. But can one talk about it today without being attacked?

**B-H L:** Look, we must try. We must fight against all those who are opposed to this type of argument—the structuralists, the Neo-Marxists, the Lacanians in the French and American universities who are going to say, "What is this silly idealism?" But we must also take into account their criticism against humanism. You don't go ahead by going backward. And even

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