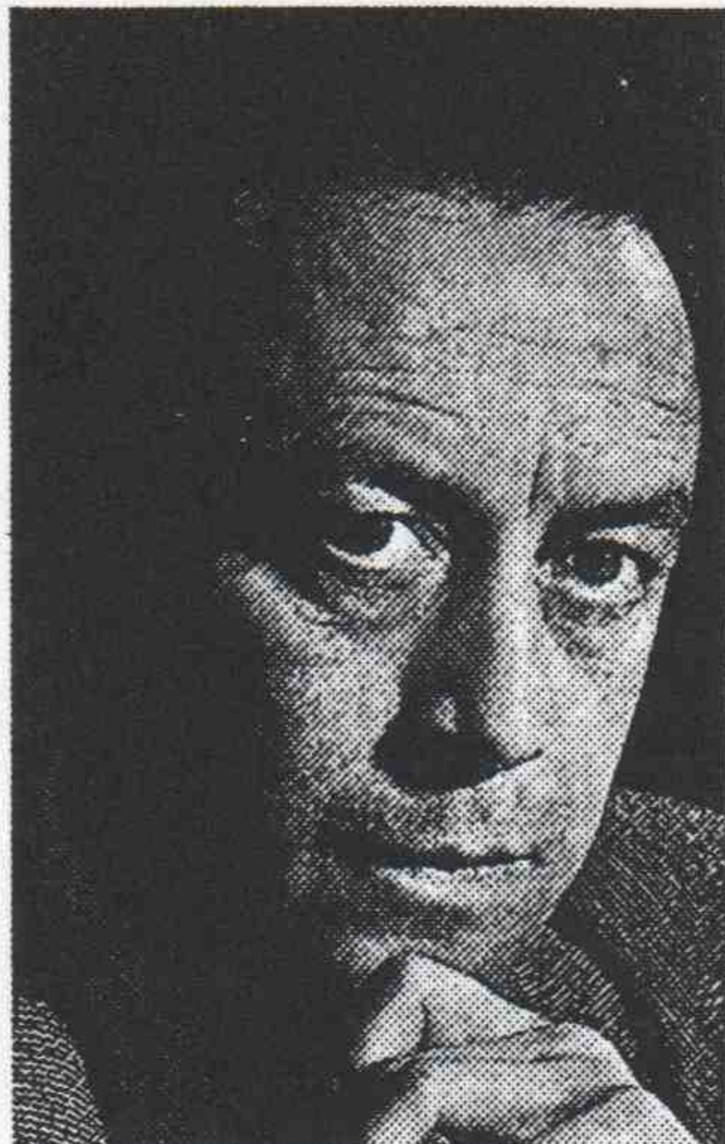
Richard Kearney on politics and the place of the intellectual

IRISH TIMES 25/11/95

Treason of the clerks

Adventures on the Freedom Road: The French Intellectual in the 20th Century
by Bernard-Henri Lévy,
trans. Richard Veasey
Harvill
415pp, £20 in UK



Albert Camus: *rebel*

Jean-Paul Sartre: *prophet*

Simone de Beauvoir: *accuser*

FRANCE is one of the few countries where the word "intellectual" is still a term of honour rather than abuse. But Bernard-Henri Lévy is determined to change that.

Lévy sets out to show how the great ideas of the turn of the century gradually turned to ashes over one hundred years of disillusionment, which saw the failure of the popular front, the collaboration with the Nazi occupation, the collapse of revolutionary utopianism after 1968, the end of communism, the demise of the prophets — Sartre, de Beauvoir, Barthes, Lacan, Althusser . . . It is a long litany of seduction and betrayal.

Lévy tells a good story — even if not always accurately. The narrative begins at the end of the last century with the Dreyfus affair. This event saw legions of writers, artists and thinkers entering the public arena in defence of a common case. It was the first time the word "intellectual" was used as a noun rather than an adjective. Zola, not Voltaire, inaugurated the notion of the *écrivain engagé*. Passionate outrage became the badge of literary honour. Commitment to a great cause, rather than the private pursuit of imagination, became the priority of the writer — so Lévy's theory goes.

The problem was not, of course, the justness of the cause (Dreyfus was manifestly innocent). It was the abuse of the role of the "public intellectual" witnessed in subsequent generations. Lévy's list is as long as it is scathing. The main headings include: the surrealists' advocation of nihilism in response to the first World War; the fascination of certain writers like Drieu La Rochelle and Brasillach with *l'Action Française*, Vichy and fascism; and, finally, the gullible championing of communist regimes such as those in China and the USSR by French Marxists, existentialists and structuralists.

Communism was the grandest of the grand illusions. Talented writers such as Aragon, Breton and Eluard fell under the Stalinist spell and remained entranced for longer than was conscionable. Several knew the horrors but excused them in the name of a secular utopia. "In spite of the terrible errors and crimes," as Romain Rolland put it, "I look to the child, the new-born babe; they are the hope of the future". At the height of the show trials, Aragon was in Moscow pretending nothing was amiss. And when Kravchenko had the effrontery to flee the Stalinist paradise and denounce the Gulag he was derided as a "fascist" by Aragon's newspaper. Moreover, when Camus published *The Rebel* in 1952, challenging not only historical messianism in general but Marxism in particular, he was condemned as a liberal lackey by his close friends, Sartre and de Beauvoir.

The disillusionment with Communism became irreversible after the Hungarian uprising and the famous report on Stalin's crimes in 1956. So what did the French intellectuals do? According to Lévy, they found a new messianic cause for their "will to purity", in tandem with the collapse of French colonialism in Algeria and Indochina — "third-worldism".

Despite its good intentions, this new ideology led to its own errors of judgment. Sartre defended the terrorist massacre of the Israeli athletes in the Olympic Village in Munich. Foucault hailed Khomeini's Iranian revolution as "the most modern expression of revolt". Certain disciples of Althusser applauded the purification campaigns of the Khmer Rouge.

Lévy concedes that once confronted with the terrors which followed such upheavals, the intellectuals began to doubt their own mania for ideological purity. And as the revolutionary stars waned, one by one, culminating in the moment in June 1989 when a young man stood alone and defiant in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square, French intellectuals began to rediscover ideas which they had hitherto considered outdated — democracy, morality, the Rights of Man. Having traversed the dark night of the century, a more sober democratic era emerged at last, testifying to the "demise of the intellectual".

Lévy's narrative is impassioned but not impartial. He selects his materials to suit his story. Which means, in effect, he tells but half the story. Lévy highlights the incidents which compromised French intellectuals but is slow to acknowledge their many feats of courage. Apart from Camus, we hear nothing of those countless French intellectuals who consistently resisted the ideological lure, such as René Char, Vidal Naquet, Emmanuel Levinas or Paul Ricoeur, who never betrayed democracy, who never deemed the morality of human rights redundant, who never fell for the megalomaniac temptation of Grand Illusions.

Nor do we hear anything, in this story, of the ideological errors of *non-French* intellectuals: the ultranationalism of German romantic thinkers from Fichte to Heidegger; the litany of compromises made by many Soviet intellectuals under Stalin; the fascination of countless English-speaking writers — Pound, Eliot, Yeats, Lewis — for fascist ideologies; and so on. Lévy's obsession with the evils of *French* intellectuals is, in fact, a subtle form of cultural racism.

Besides, Lévy's thesis is not new. Since Edmund Burke's critique of the French Revolution, attacks on the political consequences of Gallic ideologies have been commonplace. Our own time, indeed, has seen a rash of such writings, from John Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses* to Paul Johnson's *The Intellectuals*. Lévy's narrative, though intriguingly crafted, is little more than a footnote from the besieged Bastille itself.

The final irony must be, however, that the same "new philosopher" who penned these four hundred pages denouncing the political role of French intellectuals, is now celebrated in Paris as a leading campaigner for Bosnia. *Plus ça change . . .*

☐ *Richard Kearney is a philosopher and critic*