

Treason in the cafés

I suppose I am typical of my generation of Englishmen, in having received an education which was largely apolitical. The modern books that most impressed me during adolescence — Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Leavis's *Revaluation*, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* — seemed to me to have no political message. My teachers at school and university made no show of their political opinions, and only occasionally hinted at what they might be. By the time of graduation I had lighted on my intellectual heroes — Wagner, Eliot, Joyce, Schoenberg, Wittgenstein and Rilke — but admired them for reasons which had nothing to do with politics, thinking them to be far above such mundane concerns. It was a rude shock to find myself in Paris, surrounded by contemporaries who spent their days throwing stones at policemen, their evenings studying Althusser, and their brief moments of leisure trading paradoxes from Foucault's *Les Mots et les choses*.

I read the works which my French contemporaries took with them to the barricades, and was amazed. Those clean white paperbacks seemed to contain no arguments, no observations of reality, no history or criticism, but only words — words arranged according to a political agenda, and regardless of their sense. And always it was the same agenda. The writer was locked in combat with something called the bourgeoisie; this thing had been in power for a long time — since 1789 to be precise — and was the fount of all oppression. The writer, however, had won through the written word a path to liberation — and his message was being made available to the reader. Whether Sartre in *Saint Genet*, Foucault in the *Histoire de la folie*, Barthes in *L'Écriture degré zéro*, the writer had one thing of overriding urgency to convey: all forms, all manners, all morals and structures are merely the instruments of bourgeois dominion, and all is permitted to the one who wishes to smash them down.

This stuff was in due course to infect the English and American universities. At the time, however, it merely persuaded me to side with the French bourgeoisie, with de Gaulle as their representative, the police as their defenders and Valéry as their poet laureate. It also prompted certain questions which refused to go away. When we English speak of an "educated" person, or a "scholar", we generally mean someone who stands above the *mêlée* of political life. When the French speak of an intellectual, they mean someone who is fighting in the midst of it, but with words rather than deeds. How did this phenomenon of the intellectual arise, and how should it now be judged? Those are the questions which Bernard-Henri Lévy addresses in this book, and consideration of them is surely long overdue.

Lévy traces the story back to the Dreyfus case, and Zola's famous declaration — *J'accuse*. Not all of Zola's successors, he points out, have been on the Left. There was Charles Maurras and *Action Française*, Drieu La Rochelle and the Nazis, and a host of lesser figures who rushed to join the Resistance during the last months of the occupation. Nevertheless, the majority of those who have adopted the life of the French intellectual have consecrated that life to some political cause — usually leftist, revolutionary and offensive to the decencies of Catholic France. In the course of doing so they have produced more disgusting apologetics for tyranny than have soiled the entire history of literature — and Lévy documents with devastating effect some of the worst of them.

In my day the hero was Mao — and not a word could be uttered in 1968 against this mass murderer, whose imbecile writings were being sold by the thousand on the Boulevard St Michel, and whose prison uniform, imposed on the Chinese as a token of their enslavement, was willingly adopted by their Parisian contemporaries as a sign of "liberation" from the "structures". Sartre was particularly poisonous in encouraging this idolatry which he passed on to the Cambodian students who were to return home to participate in the ruin of their country. Later Foucault was to sing the praises of the Iranian "revolution" under Ayatollah Khomeini, while before my day the idol had been Stalin, Lenin or Trotsky.

Lévy is himself a French intellectual and was for a

time prone to the disease that he describes. He is softer on his contemporaries than I would have been, is still persuaded — as I am not — that the Republican cause in Spain was the right one, and remains wedded to the conception of "human rights" that animated the French Revolution and which is, in my view, at the root of leftist apologetics for tyranny. He seems to recognise that Sartre, at least, was engaged in open warfare not with the bourgeoisie, but with the God of Jews and Christians, whose impertinent sovereignty leaves so little room for His earthly competitors.

But Lévy does not draw the obvious conclusion. His narrative is short on explanations, and peters out in anecdote whenever they are truly required. This may be because *Adventures* is also "the book of the film", containing passages of dialogue with survivors that no doubt made more sense when part of the original television series than they do on the page. While he has done a valuable service in collating so much information, Lévy has not really looked beyond the symptoms of the "intellectual disease" to its underlying cause — perhaps because that would have required him to look more deeply into his own heart.



Lévy: searching his soul

ADVENTURES ON THE FREEDOM ROAD

By Bernard-Henri Lévy

Harvill, £20