

Intellectuals with great causes, such as Sartre, Malraux, Althusser and Zola, were dead and pretty well unreplaceable. Besides, by putting their ideas into action, many of the supposed great intellectuals had made grave errors of political judgment.

Worse still, Lévy believed that "the new, more democratic era was witnessing the wholesale demise of the intellectual", that the thinkers of the Nineties had become enfeebled, displaying caution and pragmatism in place of a message.

But then, the war in Bosnia changed all that. Lévy says he has witnessed a renewal of energy and conviction among French intellectuals who have attempted to intervene in the situation. Particularly himself.

Indeed, Lévy's views on Bosnia are considered so important by the French media that his declarations often make the front page. His weekly column in *Le Point* magazine has a devoted if irritated following, and he is one of television's favourite talking heads. His campaigning cinema documentary *Bosna!* was the toast of Cannes last year, and brought the Bosnian cause to a wider audience.

Thus it is not surprising that Lévy credits himself, and a cadre of intellectual fellow travellers, as having played an essential role in bringing about the cease-fire and the meeting between presidents Clinton and Chirac in November. There is no suggestion that the muscle of the American Air Force, or the characteristic determination of Chirac, may have had some pull on the Serbs.

"No," says Lévy, "the intellectuals have won. We were right to support the Bosnians, who have a just cause. Intellectuals in France have taken up their classic prophetic position once again. And for the first time, rather than blindly supporting a great cause, there has been a marriage of conviction and responsibility. There is a certain pragmatism, a willingness to see reality."

Lesson number two: Academics give credit. Intellectuals take it.

That said, Lévy's *Bosna!* was a worthwhile project, heart-wrenching and horrifying — something that no one else seemed to have the time, inclination or money to make. The film, co-directed by Alain Ferreri, was partly financed by French television, and partly by Lévy's father, who made his fortune in timber. "I hope *Bosna!* contributed to protest and knowledge in France and Europe," says Lévy. Certainly, without the constant campaigning by Lévy and his like in newspaper columns, French people would have found it easier to ignore Bosnia.

Lévy's film-making foray into Bosnia was more successful than his political one. Last year he revived the dormant intellectual tradition of taking action with his

"Europe begins at Sarajevo" movement of prominent intellectuals during the European elections. They stood as MEPs, with the aim of flushing out the main parties' positions on Bosnia, but as soon as they showed signs of succeeding in the polls, Lévy pulled out. The reality of daily life in Strasbourg was too horrifying to contemplate. "Sensationalist and demagogic," complained the French press at the time of his advance and retreat. "I regret that now," says Lévy. "We should have stayed with it."

Jean Cocteau once said that France was a country in which most writers were failed politicians and most politicians failed writers. How does Lévy feel about that? "I'm not a politician, I have no desire to sacrifice my life to politics, but there is for me an unformulated longing for involvement. When I made *Bosna!* it was not just political — it was a work of art as well."

Lévy leans forward to make his point, and

I am rewarded with a full view of what has been described as "the finest décolletage in all Paris". It is extremely hard to concentrate on matters at hand. Instead of asking Lévy the question uppermost in my mind — whether he waxes (since his chest has been described by previous correspondents as hairy) — I instead ask him to define the difference between the French intellectual and the British academic. "In France, academics are professionals, conformists," says Lévy with disdain. "But intellectuals here, particularly those in my book, are exotic, bizarre, strange. Perhaps it is a French speciality. Your George Orwell, Isaiah Berlin — they're something else: they're more pragmatic, they don't want to guide humanity and they're not obsessed by the idea of purity which has plagued the French intellectual."

The problem with French intellectuals in this century, according to Lévy, is that many of them considered themselves to be the successors to priests, particularly as the roles of church and state separated. French people, too, seem to have a need and respect for the intellectual that the British reserve only for footballers.

Lévy dates the French love affair with the intellectual to 1898, when the writer Emile Zola wrote *J'Accuse* and gathered support from other intellectuals during the Dreyfus Affair. For the first time, Lévy suggests,

"intellectual" was used as a noun rather than an adjective, and it became a title of distinction. Nowadays, France refers to its favourite brains by the nickname *les intellos*, rather than *les intellectuels*. In headlines and conversation, Lévy is cosily referred to by his initials, BHL.

Lesson number three: Academics have titles. Intellectuals have brand-names.

Moving along swiftly from Zola, Lévy's complaint is that most of the great French intellectuals of this century placed passion above wisdom and lacked unbiased judgment. "Brown or red, fascist or communist, they were obsessed with perfection and purity — that is the origin of all the follies of the 20th century. They all wanted to make a clean break with history, start anew, changing man so as to bring out the deepest aspects of his nature."

Changing man often involves returning to the ideologically unscarred young, from the Red Guards to the Hitler Youth, and



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Lévy suggests that an obsession with youth is a sign of totalitarianism, but also warns that youth movements themselves carry within them seeds of danger. He condemns intellectuals such as Sartre who tended to worship youth above age.

Lévy lists the errors of some of the misguided intellectuals who indulged in this search for purity. The novelist and journalist Pierre Drieu la Rochelle became a convert to fascism, spoke glowingly of the Nuremberg rally of 1935, and collaborated with the Nazis during the occupation. Later, the communist Louis Aragon suggested that France would be improved if it had Russia's secret police. Sartre is condemned for providing tacit support for the terrorist bombing of the Israeli team at the Munich Olympics in 1972. Finally, and weirdly, as the philosopher Michel Foucault was dying of Aids, he ▶

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The strong anti-Lévy camp is led by a "Belgian satirist" who has taken to throwing custard pies at the philosopher (above right); Lévy with his third wife, model and actress Arielle Dombasle, who he married in 1993