



Lévy is just lucky he is a man, because if he were a woman intellectual he could not combine a low cleavage with maintaining his high reputation

◀ announced his deep admiration for the Ayatollah Khomeini.

The only intellectuals who get Lévy's approval — other than himself — are André Malraux, who fought with the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, and Albert Camus in the wartime resistance. As for the rest: "The intellectual whose fate was linked to that of ideologies that are now defunct has not emerged unscathed." Still, says Lévy, many of these intellectuals may have been crazy and misguided, but sometimes great errors produce great books.

Has Lévy — the sensible, professional intellectual — produced great books? Fortunately, it is a question he can answer with a completely straight face. "That will be decided after I am dead."

He pauses grandly. "But this is an important book for me. It's the book in which I've said the most about who I am. It's a way of saying which thinkers are my ancestors or friends. It's my intellectual and spiritual genealogy." Lévy says he wrote *Adventures on the Freedom Road* to mark his coming of age — he is 47, and would probably like the media to take note of that. He still bears the heavy burden of being described as a former *enfant terrible*, referring to his days on the barricades in 1968 (as a student of that great French oxymoron, the Ecole Normale Supérieure), as well as his stand as a *nouveau philosophe*. Although he continues to shout and stir, *adulte terrible* does not have the same ring.

Still, it is the slightly ridiculous aspects of Lévy — his self-proclamation, his grandeur, his rebel bourgeois stance and the stylish way he delivers his opinions, as much as the opinions themselves — which make him an intellectual, not a scholar. Lévy and his cohorts leaven and broaden French life by their presence, tweaking serious public discussion on to a higher plane.

What if Lévy had remained cloistered, dedicating himself to his philosophical writings instead of scampering from medium to medium like a Renaissance man? Would he have written greater books? "No, nothing would have changed, because when I write, I once again become obscure, uncertain, a beginner, hostile to outsiders and what they represent." On a typical day when he is working, he says, he gets up at 5am and works through until 2am, seeing no one. At the moment, he is writing a diary for publication about his campaigns in Bosnia and Paris. "Normally, I would not see journalists. This is a bad time for me, but it is easier if they are charming, intelligent women," he says, smiling cheerily.

In his book, he talks about wanting to write an open letter to his enemies, settling scores with people, including "my worst enemy, namely myself: not the real me or the one who writes my books. The character I have in mind is that other version of myself who has been turned into a puppet by the media, who is unbearable, sometimes obnoxious."

But surely that is because he has courted the media? "Oh, no. It is the media that courts me. But there is also intrinsic

pleasure for me in these antics involving the media," confesses Lévy, who is sussed enough to wear cotton shirts on television, and Christian Dior Monsieur silk ones elsewhere.

Lévy is just lucky he is a man, because if he were a woman intellectual he could not combine a low cleavage with maintaining his high reputation. There is a strong anti-Lévy camp, led by a man who describes himself as a "Belgian satirist" who has thrown custard pies twice at the philosopher, once at the Cannes film festival. Lévy was more inclined to punch than to laugh; humour is not his strong point. He has also been caricatured by the media as the "Philosopher Prince", "One-third Rambo, two-thirds Rimbaud", but he does provide good material, torn as he is between a genuine passion for worthwhile causes and a genuine desire for self-publicity.

Being a philosopher, Lévy has had some philosophical thoughts on the subject,

figure of Alexander Solzhenitsyn." Although—sadly for the British, Lévy has not updated his book to note such changes of heart, he has published a paper in France criticising his former hero for becoming, in this order, positivist, ideological, a Slavophile, a Russian nationalist and anti-democratic. It is not easy staying in the mercurial Lévy's intellectual top ten.

Perhaps the climate, at least in the West, is no longer conducive to being a proper intellectual. If Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* is to be believed, capitalist democracy will soon be the world norm. And under steady democracy, although writers and literature thrive, intellectuals become dull, flaccid, self-important little people. "It is a tautology that intellectuals need despotism to flourish," says Lévy.

There are new adversaries with energy comparable to communism, like nationalism, populism and fundamentalism. "It may not be the end of history as Fukuyama

while covering himself with "this is a subjective book". I list a few — Simone de Beauvoir, Gertrude Stein (who at least lived in Paris), Marguerite Duras. Lévy picks up on the word Duras. "She is an intellectual, true, but the problem for Duras is I don't esteem her, neither for her literature nor her politics."

If the semiologist Roland Barthes gets a mention, what about Luce Irigaray, who has done a feminist deconstruction of the language? Lévy looks nauseated. "The problem with this woman is, frankly, I have never heard of her."

Women are discussed in Lévy's book as muses for the great men who live with them. He suggests that women preferred to achieve immortality by becoming the object of a man's myth or writings, rather than be the author themselves of some minor work. Ernest Hemingway, he notes, changed women for every novel.

Lesson number five: Academics have wives. Intellectuals have muses.

Sartre once said that he became a writer to compensate for his ugliness and to seduce pretty girls. Lévy, although undoubtedly handsome, is still in the business of seducing pretty girls too. "In my life, women are, and have been, essential, of course." Pictures of his third and present wife, Arielle Dombasle, adorn his bookshelves, featuring a cleavage similar to his own. Dombasle is an enormous, Jerry Hall-like entity of 37, with ravishing looks and long blonde hair. Photographs of her wedding to Lévy in 1993 were all over *Paris Match*. She has been in a number of average films, including *Pauline à la Plage*, and is regularly interviewed in magazines such as *Elle* about her beauty routine. She still takes her teddy bear to bed.

Does Lévy have to sacrifice his private life for his public one? "Sacrifice?" he says indignantly. "I don't like the word, I don't like the act. Arielle is the heart of my life. She is more important to me than the books that I write, the films that I make, the plays I create."

Good to know that when it comes to the crunch, an intellectual will lay down his work for his muse. This willingness to throw all intellectual worth away fits in nicely with the theories of the aforementioned Barthes, who deserves the last word. This final lesson on the subject of the intellectual comes, oddly enough, from a magazine interview Lévy did with Barthes in the late Seventies.

BHL: Intellectuals used to think of themselves as "the salt of the earth".

Barthes: I would be more inclined to describe them as the "waste products" of society. That's to say they are of no use unless they are rehabilitated... fundamentally, waste products have no use and, in a certain sense, neither do intellectuals.

BHL: So, in your view, the intellectual is totally useless?

Barthes: "Useless but dangerous. Every strong regime wants to get him to fall into line. The danger he represents is symbolic. He's like a disease which has to have an eye kept on it." ●



Lévy during the making of his campaigning cinema documentary *Bosnal*

beginning with Marcel Proust's essay *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. Proust wrote that he had two selves: his social self who dined or was seen around town, and his deep, profound self, who suffered for his work. "Nowadays, there is a third self, a third ego — the image of yourself in the media. So I am three — Bernard... Henri... Lévy." The holy intellectual trinity.

He says that today's intellectuals "must live with both feet in our century" and feel the obligations of the world, part of which is the right to free speech, nowadays conducted mostly within the media. Naturally, Lévy is unstinting with his time when his opinion is required by the French people.

Lesson number four: Academics give talks. Intellectuals have chat shows.

The most shocking example of the intellectual succumbing to the talk-show format is Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who, along with the grumpy Mrs Solzhenitsyn, presented a weekly slot on Russian television. Fortunately for his credibility, the show has been pulled. For poor Lévy, this is yet another fallen idol, since he entitled one of his chapters: "The towering and exemplary

has suggested, but the return of history which may cause intellectuals to go through a metamorphosis which will restore their status."

Lévy always sees the worldwide political picture. Local injustices pass him by. For instance, he considers the feminist movement to be part of the uprisings of 1968, when, he says, "women had a simple and cheery demand to make", that of equal rights. The fact that Betty Friedan struck the first blow for feminism back in 1963 is of no importance to him.

But then Lévy sees women in what might kindly be called the traditional French manner. In his conversations in the book with Giroud he said: "I am personally convinced that there is no female eroticism without at least a touch of masochism." When he answers his portable phone in the middle of the interview, he alludes to the *belle demoiselle* from *The Times* to his caller. He is warm to me, cold to the male photographer.

So were there no female intellectuals in this last century in France? From his book, one would think not. "Who?" says Lévy,