

a great nobility in political causes. It contrasts with the empiricism, pragmatism and intellectual modesty of the Anglo-Saxon world, where there's a caution when it comes to the universal. In England, politics is not a noble calling. It's a normal social activity – perhaps it's better like this."

In February 2002, his diplomatic role was made official when President Jacques Chirac and Lionel Jospin, his socialist prime minister, agreed – itself a rare enough event – to appoint him their special envoy in Afghanistan with a brief to advise them on the role French culture could play in a future aid programme. The idea of France sending a philosopher to a war zone was greeted with amusement internationally. At a time when the US was deploying combat aircraft, missiles and special forces to eradicate Taliban forces sheltering al Qaeda terrorists, Lévy's arrival in Kabul captured the essence of the deep and longstanding differences in the way the world is viewed in Washington and in Paris.

But on Paris's Left Bank, where Lévy and Dombasle maintain one of their sumptuous residences, his recommendations were received in deadly earnest. *Le Monde*, the pre-eminent newspaper of the French establishment, devoted more than 3,000 words to extracts from the 100-page report, which Lévy submitted in April 2002. Its somewhat surreal proposals included training Afghan army officers at Saint-Cyr, the French military academy; the creation of an "Afghan Ecole Nationale d'Administration" to imbue the civil service with Cartesian rationality ("We did it in Algeria, why not in Kabul?"); the establishment of a French cultural centre in Kabul; and the formation of a crack team of "hussars to spread the values of 1789" through the Afghan towns and villages.

Lévy, of course, does not receive only respectful attention, even in France. He is regular fodder for the satirists of *Les Guignols*, an irreverent television programme in which personalities are portrayed as grotesque puppets. When the BHL puppet speaks it is pounded into silence by cream pies. This is a reference to the fact that Lévy has been *entarté* by Noel Godin, the Belgian pie-thrower, on a record half a dozen occasions. Godin says the type of person who will admit to feeling ecstatic at the discovery of a new shade of grey is a constant provocation. The reaction of his victims, who range from Jean-Luc

Godard to Bill Gates, is revealing. Lévy, it seems, does not see the funny side. At one flapping, the apostle of tolerance delivered a flawless uppercut. Footage of Lévy shouting at Godin, "Get up, or I'll kick your head in," was repeatedly broadcast on French television. The Belgian has promised to end hostilities only when Lévy and Dombasle sing the Maurice Chevalier ditty, "Avez-Vous Vu le Nouveau Chapeau de Zozo?", in a public duet.

More importantly, Lévy's place in the pantheon of French thinkers is far from assured. His dilettantism riled professional academics early in his career. The *New York Review of Books* set the tone for much subsequent criticism in 1980 when it slated his third book, *Le Testament de Dieu*. "Little can be said about Lévy's position precisely because so little of it is ever argued," wrote Professor Thomas Sheehan, Stanford's Heidegger specialist. "He makes his points by rhetorical tropes, wide-ranging historical references ('Consider the Middle Ages,' he advises, or the span of history 'from Epictetus to Malraux'), or by citations from books that he evidently hasn't read or has poorly digested (a reference to a work by Stalin in the Russian, which Lévy does not read, a reference to all of Clement of Alexandria's mammoth *Protrepticus*, which he has not studied, and so on)."

A quarter of a century on, received academic opinion seems to have changed surprisingly little. Will the BHL oeuvre speak across the ages? "I would think not," says Professor Gary Gutting, author of *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*. "The emerging consensus is that the work of Lévy and the other *nouveaux philosophes* is mostly journalistic and does not engage with the big philosophical issues. He wrote a great biography of Sartre, he's a very smart guy and, as a celebrity type, makes a great story, but he's not a great philosopher."

Lévy's latest book, *Qui a Tué Daniel Pearl?*, which comes out in the US next month, pushes the philosophy to one side altogether. He was in the office of Afghan president Hamid Karzai when he heard of Pearl's death and decided to write about the journalist he never met. He felt that Pearl's murder was a seminal moment, "one of three events, along with the assassination of Masoud and September 11th, that ushered in the 21st century", whose defining feature will be the battle with Islamic fundamentalism.

It seems clear that Lévy also saw himself reflected in Pearl, whom he calls his "posthumous friend" and to whom he attributes many of his own characteristics: "A Jew of the left, a progressive... a friend of the uncounted, the universal orphan, the disinherited", as well a firm believer in the possibility of a moderate Islam.

Lévy was fast. The 530-page book (400 pages in English) took a little over a year to write, and it is to his credit that it bears few traces of being a rush job, even if, like many French books, it suffers from a lack of an index and poor copy-editing. On one page, early on in the book, for example, Richard Reid, the shoe bomber on the Paris-Miami flight, is called Charles Reid, while Anthony Giddens, the director of the London School of Economics, is rechristened Christopher.

Otherwise, it's a copper-bottomed investigation, a well-deserved hit that has sold nearly 200,000 copies in France. Lévy travelled to Los Angeles to talk to Pearl's family about his final, videotaped words; to London and Bosnia on the trail of the plot's LSE-educated mastermind, Omar Sheikh; to Dubai, on the terrorist's money trail; to the Karachi hovel where he was murdered nine days after his kidnapping.

He approached the subject "as a writer, philosopher and journalist" and has ended up producing what he called a "*romanquête*", a cross between a *roman* (novel) and an *enquête* (investigation). As far as this type of non-fiction novel goes, it is on a par with *Oswald's Tale*, Norman Mailer's attempt to unravel the assassination of