

The European Left And Ours

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Bernard-Henri Lévy, on point and off

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The election of Barack Obama as president of the United States marks a dramatic victory for the progressive left in America and a resounding repudiation of George W. Bush's presidency and the Republican-controlled Congress with which he governed for six years. Obama's election also represents an historic moment for the United States.

Many have been celebrating throughout the nation, and for good reason, because America, by electing a black man to the highest office in the land, has taken another impressive stride to overcome the last, lingering legacies of slavery and Jim Crow. To be sure, it would have been better if more progressives had bothered to notice, let alone take pride in, how far their country had come when George W. Bush — white, southern, and conservative — named in his first term Colin Powell secretary of state and Condoleezza Rice national security advisor, and in his second term elevated Rice to secretary of state. But the stirring fact remains that Obama's triumph crowns a half century of steady progress in fulfilling the Declaration of Independence's grand promise of freedom and equality for all, and in realizing the Constitution's aspiration to build a more perfect union through representative government. At the same time, Obama's election reaffirms the reality, frequently denied or derided by progressive anti-American sentiment at home and abroad, that the United States is a land of golden opportunity.

But winning elections is one thing. Governing is another. One reason for apprehension about whether Obama and the congressional Democrats are prepared for the enormous power they will exercise is structural. Obama's substantial victory and the Democrat's sizeable gains in the House and Senate mean that they will govern without the benefit of the pressure to accommodate competing positions and compromise with rival principles that comes from divided government, or at least from a robust minority party with a share of responsibility for formulating public policy and making law.

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The structural temptation for Obama and his party to take their principles to an extreme is especially worrisome given the propensity for extreme positions and principles that the left of late has shown. To be sure, beginning with his breakthrough speech at the 2004 Democratic Convention and echoed in his 2008 Democratic Convention acceptance speech, and in his election night victory address in Chicago's Grant Park, Obama has frequently presented

himself as a pragmatic, post-partisan politician and, with gripping rhetoric, has summoned all Americans, red and blue, to recognize their shared values and cooperate for the common good. But there is little in his record — as community organizer, education foundation chair and board member, Illinois state senator, U.S. senator, and Democratic Party primary candidate — to match his conciliatory words.

Perhaps encouragements to moderation will come from other quarters. With President Bush's departure from the White House, Bush hatred, along with its many ugly symptoms, may subside. The constraints of office and the realities brought home by daily intelligence briefings on America's enemies may effectively counsel caution and sobriety. And the centrist Democratic candidates who decisively contributed to victory in the 2006 congressional elections and who, with election 2008, now represent a conservative bloc within the Democratic Party, may exercise a restraining influence on the Obama administration.

Unfortunately, the likelihood is small that Obama will receive encouragement from the intellectual class to reach out to the elected representatives of the 46 percent of the country who, on November 4, voted for John McCain and Sarah Palin. Dominated by left-of-center partisans, the mainstream media in Election 2008 frequently abandoned its traditional watchdog function, ignoring, deflecting, or suppressing even reasonable criticism of Obama and his running mate, Joe Biden, while pursuing and amplifying even trivial criticisms of McCain and Palin. Meanwhile, colleges and universities, also dominated by left-of-center partisans, remain bastions of intellectual conformism, stigmatizing, where they can't formally punish, speech and speakers that depart from campus orthodoxy.

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The left, though, displays other worrying signs beyond the media's failure to objectively report the news and our universities' failure to promote vigorous exploration of all sides of the moral and political challenges the nation confronts. Unfortunately, it is not rare these days for progressives to indulge in a mocking disdain for traditional religious faith and to blithely regard fellow citizens who hold opposing views about abortion, embryonic stem cell research, and same-sex marriage as ignoramuses unfit for civilized discourse. In addition, the left has shown an unwillingness to examine responsibly the tradeoffs between security and liberty the nation has made and will have to continue to make in the struggle against Islamic extremism and mega-terror. It has been all too ready to join forces with the vilifiers of Israel, as demonstrated by its enthusiasm for Stephen Walt's and John Mearsheimer's fact-challenged and poorly argued claims, according to which for decades "the Israel Lobby" has dictated American foreign policy in the Middle East while Cold War containment of the Soviet Union and maintenance of the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf, apparently, had little or no impact on America's conduct in the region. And it is disposed not merely to criticize the U.S. when the country is in the wrong, but to see the country as in the wrong grossly and

constantly, and, from Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay abroad to race relations and immigration reform at home, it exhibits a penchant for enthusiastically trumpeting the most sensational accusations against America.

These tendencies are far removed from the essence or the best of the progressive spirit, which consists in devotion to spreading the blessings of freedom and democracy to the vulnerable, the exposed, and the neglected. And certainly arrogance, ignorance, and resentment are not the necessary sources, accompaniments, or byproducts of the progressive spirit. But the progressive spirit today keeps alarmingly close company with these vices.

Compounding the problem is that Obama and the left have swept to political power in advance of serious examination of their governing assumptions and policy preferences. This is in contrast to 1992, when Democrats last removed the Republicans from the White House. Bill Clinton and Al Gore's victory over George H.W. Bush 16 years ago was prepared in no small measure by the work of the Democratic Leadership Council, established in response to Ronald Reagan's crushing 1984 defeat of Walter Mondale. The aim of the dlc, of which Clinton and Gore were founding members, was to rethink the principles of progressive politics to take account of the American taste for individual freedom, limited government, strong defense, and market solutions — and thereby to reposition the Democratic Party to appeal to an electoral majority. This time around, because of the Republican Party's stunning ability to drive voters into its opponents' camp, no such rethinking has taken place and no repositioning has been necessary.

In Chapter III of *The Prince*, Machiavelli observes that in politics as in physical health, in the beginning illness is easy to cure but hard to recognize; if untreated, it becomes, in the fullness of time, easy to recognize but hard to cure. The left's electoral success in Campaign 2008 is bound to increase the difficulty in recognizing — particularly for the left — the dangerous impulses, sentiments, and opinions it harbors, permitting them to fester and grow.

One way to get a better grasp of the malady now, when it is harder to see but easier to cure, is to turn to the European left, particularly in France, where the impulses, sentiments, and opinions roiling the progressive spirit in America can be seen in their advanced form. And to understand why those impulses, sentiments, and opinions are dangerous to freedom and democracy, one can make a good beginning by turning to *Left in Dark Times: A Stand Against the New Barbarism* (Random House, 2008), Bernard-Henri Lévy's intelligent, personal, and engrossing polemic about the decline of the European left. A more literal translation of the book's title is *The Backward Falling Corpse*.

Lévy, or bhl as he is often called in France, is himself a man of the left, indeed one of the European left's most famous men. Rich, dashing, and flamboyant; journalist, philosopher, and activist; editor, prolific author of newspaper columns and books, tv star, and filmmaker; tireless self-promoter and determined advocate of the helpless and brutalized in Bangladesh,

Bosnia, Afghanistan, Darfur, and elsewhere — Lévy, who turned 60 this year, has made a career of taking the European left to task and calling it back to its best instincts and worthiest purposes. In 1976, two years shy of his thirtieth birthday, in an issue of *Nouvelles Littéraires*, a Parisian review of literary and political ideas, he coined the term “New Philosophers” to describe a group of French thinkers, of which he was one, who had broken with Marxism, communism, and the pronounced anti-Enlightenment doctrines driving French intellectual life and, in the process, had rediscovered the liberal tradition. Much of his work over the past 30 years has been devoted to clarifying the imperatives of a left that, purged of visionary delusions and reconciled to market realities and human limitations, retains its progressive conscience and convictions and summons the courage to act on them.

Despite his labors and those of his fellow New Philosophers — including Pascal Bruckner, Maurice Clavel, Luc Ferry, Alain Finkelkraut, André Glucksman, and Alain Reanaut — “European progressivism has for the last ten or twenty years,” Lévy laments, “developed the worst possible reflexes.” Almost a parody of itself, the European left has become intolerant, parochial, selectively stirred by suffering, and contemptuous of the idea of a universal human nature.

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In stark contrast, a healthy European left, according to Lévy, would stand for liberalism, or the belief that the overarching purpose of the state is to protect the rights of all individuals equally. It would also uphold the idea of Europe, proclaiming that citizens of the countries from Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria in the east to the United Kingdom in the west, and from Norway, Sweden, and Finland in the north to Spain, Italy, and Greece in the south share a common history and political destiny that at the same time connects them to peoples around the globe. It would practice the politics of human rights, according to which citizens have a responsibility to protect the freedoms not only of fellow citizens but of those who live beyond their borders. And it would embrace the concept of a universal humanity, which undergirds the liberal tradition, provides a common ground for European unity, and is the basis for the belief in human rights. In fact, contends Lévy, these pillars of European progressivism are under assault from a left that has been hijacked by radicals, estranged from its original moral impulses, and propelled far afield of its proper political goals.

To determine how the left has gone so calamitously astray, Lévy seeks “to retrace the ideological and political history” of his generation. Because of his multi-faceted engagement in French cultural, intellectual, and political life, the history he tells also functions, in part, as an intellectual autobiography. And although it is very much a French book about France and Europe, *Left in Dark Times* aims to shed light on the plight of progressivism on both sides of the Atlantic, because American progressives too, maintains Lévy, “inspired by the desire to create a heaven on earth, were — and are, more than ever — led to a flirtation with

darkness, barbarism, and hell.” By slaying the “monsters” bred by such flirtation, Lévy hopes to return the European left — as well as the American left he sees as headed in the same disastrous direction — to the high and noble aspects of its heritage.

Ultimately, however, Lévy misconceives that heritage, or at least misconceives the context in which it must be recovered and reconstructed. Emblematic of the misconception is his decision to begin and end his book by invoking Nietzsche. In the preface, he hopes that “these pages can contribute, modestly but solidly, to the creation of a universal movement of free spirits worthy of the name.” This alludes to the preface of *Beyond Good and Evil*, in which Nietzsche declares himself a free spirit who writes in anticipation of philosophers of the future, a new kind of philosopher who does not merely understand the world but masters it by subjecting it to his will. And in the epilogue, Lévy explains that “in order to light the lantern of a Left that is still in search of itself” — much like Nietzsche’s madman in *The Gay Science*, section 125, “who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: ‘I seek God. I seek God’” — it is necessary to “draw this cartography of darkness” that is engulfing European leftism and “describe the laboratories” in which “the concepts of liberalism, the idea of Europe, the politics of human rights, or the dream of an all-embracing concept of humanity are being methodically crushed.” This echoes the language and teaching of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in which Nietzsche argues that to overcome bad ideas one must first trace them back to their hidden, ignoble origins. Once the work of debunking has been accomplished, Lévy asserts, the left will be able to act on its “best reflexes” by embracing “a methodical atheism” whose preeminent article of faith is, “No more uncreated truths, of any kind.” Thus, like Nietzsche’s madman in *The Gay Science* and his Zarathustra, Lévy proclaims to a public that is implicated in the crime but does not yet comprehend the deed that God is dead and that mankind’s redemption from the enormous loss consists in taking full responsibility for the creation of values.

But Lévy’s invocations of him notwithstanding, Nietzsche, for all his philosophical merits, does not guide one to the heart of what ails the left, much less provide the antidote that will restore it to health — at least not in the sense that Lévy intends. Indeed, to understand what ails it, one would have to grasp the spell that Nietzsche’s “aristocratic radicalism,” as Bruce Detwiler aptly named it, continues to exercise over the left.

The immediate impetus for Lévy’s new book, the author explains in the introduction, was a telephone call he received in January 2007 from Nicolas Sarkozy, during which the conservative candidate for the French presidency asked for his public support. Lévy replied that while they were friends and he wished Sarkozy well, he couldn’t vote for him because the left was his family, he had always voted with the left, and would continue to do so. But the conversation caused Lévy disquiet and perplexity. It’s not that he doubted the depth of his own loyalty to the left. Rather, he realized that that loyalty required an explanation, since he could not deny that Sarkozy “was right when he said that, on the questions of Darfur and Chechnya, as well as several other matters that have always been close to my heart, the Left to which I had stayed faithful was behaving strangely.”

Setting out in search of clarity, Lévy recognizes that his appeal to family to explain his loyalty to the left is, in a sense, “pathetic,” as it contradicts his commitment to expose his moral and political beliefs to the stern test of reason. So he pursues the essential factors. He has to admit that the traditional split between left and right has become harder and harder to believe in. In France at least, the right used to prefer the old and traditional while the left preferred the new and modern. Later, the split was between conflicting ideas toward the reality of progress and the duty to promote it. And in the France in which he came of age, to be on the left was to believe in the possibility and desirability of revolutionary change that would wipe the slate clean and reconstitute a truly moral humanity and society. Yet today, Lévy observes, things are in flux. Even as most precincts of the right have made peace with progress, the left has begun to show reactionary signs.

In pursuit of what truly animates the left, Lévy officially refuses the easy definition of itself that the left is always eager to proffer — that, in contrast to the right, it defends the oppressed, fights injustice, and is scandalized by extreme poverty. Nevertheless, his animated reflections — an illuminating and sometimes undisciplined blend of journalism, history, memoir, and philosophy — suggest, consistent with the easy explanation, that a superior orientation of the heart, call it compassion for all who suffer, really is the left’s defining feature.

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Certainly his initial efforts to capture the essence of the progressive spirit suggest the centrality of compassion. To be a man of the European left, Lévy argues, is, to begin with, to hold certain images dear, to cherish a set of great events, and to possess specific reflexes. The images that Lévy vividly describes — aristocrats Léon Blum and André Malraux in the 1930s addressing rallies for workers, his own soldier-father fighting in the Spanish Civil War and World War II, himself in Portugal in 1974 joining the crowd in Marques de Pômbal Square “burying the evil spirits of Salazarism” — are not meant to be exclusive or exhaustive but exemplary: To belong to the left is to have inscribed in one’s mind indelible images of brave men and women standing firm against the varieties of injustice.

The events — the French capitulation to the Nazis that goes under the name Vichy, the Algerian War, May 1968, the Dreyfus Affair — serve as a litmus test. A man of the European left, particularly of the French left, Lévy maintains, cannot be other than appalled by France’s World War II collaboration with fascism; ashamed of France’s brutal efforts in the 1950s and 1960s to maintain control of Algeria; exhilarated by France’s young men and women’s repudiation in May 1968 of authoritarianism in politics and culture; and, looming over all, still scandalized by the turn-of-the-century Dreyfus Affair, in which the wrongly accused Jew was sacrificed to the interests of the state, tradition, and religious prejudice.

And then there are the reflexes, determining the images and events that get enshrined in the memory of men and women of the left: acting to spread greater freedom and greater equality in such a way that the advance of one does not involve a diminution of the other; seeing not providence but politics as the means for dealing with society's inevitable injustices; defending the solitary person facing the threatening crowd; perceiving the fascist and totalitarian threats in their many guises and energetically opposing them; and owning up to the historical injustices that have been perpetrated in the name of one's culture, one's nation, and even one's universal principles.

What prevents those who consider themselves, and are considered by others, as on the left today from honoring these images, events, and reflexes? The totalitarian temptation, argues Lévy, is no longer the problem. But it was for a long time. Thirty years ago, the European left was still inclined to justify Stalin and other communist dictators on the theory that it is necessary to break a few eggs to make an omelet, or to criticize communist leaders for breaking too few eggs and not taking their revolutionary principle far enough. But today hardly anyone on the left denies communism's crimes or believes that justice requires total revolution. The left's moral and political delusions could not withstand Aleksander Solzhenitsyn's courageous chronicling of Soviet communism's crimes in *The Gulag Archipelago*, the publication of which in 1973 in the West, was "an event," reports Lévy, "that shook our generation to the core." In 1975, the Cambodian Revolution delivered a devastating blow not merely to Marxism or communism "but to the very idea of Revolution." By demonstrating the horrifying lengths to which it was necessary to go to radically remake man and society — regulating the family and love, rewriting language, and uprooting millions to rearrange the relation between cities and the countryside — Pol Pot and his minions exposed for all who had eyes to see the cruelty and contempt for ordinary human beings contained in the revolutionary idea.

The New Philosophers contributed in the 1970s and 1980s by reclaiming liberal and Enlightenment ideas, and, with refurbished intellectual equipment, criticizing the totalitarian temptation embedded in the left's philosophical inheritance from Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, and Sartre. Against the idea that the aim of politics is to actualize the Absolute or the Good, the New Philosophers taught that misery, disorder, and tragedy were inseparable from the human condition and that the dramatically more modest quest to "make the world a bit more livable for the greatest number of people" represented a plenty ambitious political agenda. In opposition to the belief that history had an inexorable logic and that those on the wrong side of it must be mowed down or swept away, the New Philosophers denied that history had a necessary or knowable direction and contended that individual rights could not be set aside for the sake of progress but rather that progress consisted in respecting individual rights in the here and now. Contrary to the hallucinatory claims made on behalf of the dialectic, which the left invoked to justify all manner of death and destruction as part of the necessary clash of contraries that would ultimately yield peace and mutual understanding, the New Philosophers taught respect for the testimony of the senses, stuck close to the lived reality of

flesh and blood people, and refused to invest war and revolution with metaphysical meaning and redemptive power. And, finally, rejecting the left's conviction that only sickness — and not evil — exists, the New Philosophers recognized that to see only sickness in men and never weakness and wickedness in human nature was to provide totalitarian license to wield the power of the state to purge the contagious and cure the rest.

Despite the lessons learned by the left over the past 30 years about the history of communism and the philosophy that underwrites the quest for revolutionary transformation, Lévy finds himself compelled to concede that Sarkozy was correct on the large point: The European left is decrepit. And its decrepitude accounts for its infidelity to the images, events, and reflexes that have long defined it.

But this decrepitude is of a novel sort: The left, argues Lévy, not only shows signs of reaction, it has in many quarters become right wing. By this he means something more than that the left has embraced its opponent's principles, since he does not regard conservatives as co-equal partners in sustaining and extending freedom and democracy, or even as worthy rivals. Rather, the right, for Lévy, represents an inherently defective sensibility. After all the historical and philosophical work is said and done, when all the fancy words and fine formulations have been put before the public, when all the gnashing of teeth and beating of breasts about how the left must rid itself of toxic ideas and judgments has been performed, Lévy still adheres to the left's official and invidious distinction between itself and the right. For he makes clear that the left's decrepitude, its having adopted the orientation of the right, means above all that the left has lost its compassion. Alas, in holding that to be of the left is to have a good heart and to be of the right is to have a heart of stone, Lévy gives expression to that atrophy of the progressive imagination that he seeks to overcome.

His failure to break free of the left's cherished self-image, however, does not prevent Lévy from performing an instructive "critique of neoprogressive reason" that brings to light the morally and intellectually corrupt opinions harbored by the European left today and the spirit of resentment that nourishes them. First, according to Lévy, the European left is reflexively anti-liberal, reducing the liberal tradition to the unfettered free market while overlooking the tradition's core teaching about individual rights, consent as the ground of legitimate government, and the enforcement of contracts as an indispensable precondition to peace, prosperity, and justice.

Second, the European left nourishes an anti-European sentiment, doubting or openly rejecting the project of unifying Europe politically. It does this under the spell of identity politics, a politics that does not simply observe and respect the distinctions among peoples — national, cultural, and ethnic — but which amplifies them until they drown out the shared interests and transnational, transcultural, and transethnic moral and political principles that should unify the diverse peoples of Europe.

Third, it exudes anti-Americanism. Its “principled detestation of America” is born out of envy of America’s global leadership and dictates condemnation of any action or undertaking that serves American national interests regardless of the extent to which liberty and democracy are also served.

Fourth, it is anti-empire and anti-colonial with a vengeance. Whereas these ideas once stood for opposition to the developed world’s exploitation of the developing world, for today’s European left, they amount to little more than another way to express anti-Americanism, or always seeing in foreign interventions, from Darfur to Iraq, America’s implacable ambition to enlarge and tighten its stranglehold on world politics.

The left, says Lévy, shows signs of reaction, and in many quarters has become right wing, by which he means heartless.

Fifth, it pioneers a new form of anti-Semitism. To be sure, the new form cannot be entirely severed from the old forms: Christian (the Jews killed Jesus), enlightened (the Jews are responsible for the sins of Christianity), nationalist (the cosmopolitan Jews don’t fit in and can’t be trusted), social and economic (the Jews are bankers and merchants who exploit workers and suck the blood of the poor), and racist (the Jews are a degenerate breed who corrupt the purity of other races). In contrast, argues Lévy, the European left vilifies Jews for monopolizing the limited stores of human compassion by constantly invoking the Holocaust; for exaggerating the suffering and death Jews suffered at the hands of the Nazis; and for using Jewish compassion-mongering to justify Israel, which, according to the neoprogressive anti-Semites, is a fascist and racist state. Indeed, if the testimony of the those progressives gathered at the World Conference against Racism held in 2001 in Durban, South Africa, under the auspices of the United Nations is to be credited, Israel is the worst state on the face of the earth.

And, sixth, even as the European left routinely attacks liberalism, disavows the idea of Europe, denounces America, morbidly fixates on empire and colonialism in part to further the repudiation of America, and breeds a new kind of anti-Semitism, it is open to and accommodating of Islamic extremism. It treats what Lévy prefers to call “Fascislamism” — which scorns individual freedom; declared religious war on the West; and has conducted murderous attacks on civilians in, among other places, the United States in 2001, in waves in Israel throughout 2001 and 2002, in Bali in 2002, in Iraq at high levels of intensity from 2004 to 2006, in Madrid in 2004, and in London 2005 — “with the indulgence that the [progressive] tradition demands for the humble and the ill-fated.”

Ultimately, argues Lévy, the European left lost its way because of “the unprecedented crisis” of “the Universal.” This is another aspect of the moral, political, and philosophical loss of bearings, aspects of which Leo Strauss diagnosed almost 60 years ago in *Natural Right and History*, Alasdair MacIntyre analyzed almost 30 years ago in *After Virtue*, and Charles Taylor explored almost 20 years ago in *Sources of the Self*. Although Lévy appears unaware of it —

without evidence he puts Strauss in the camp of Nazi political theorist Carl Schmitt and says nothing of MacIntyre or Taylor — all three argued that the breakdown of the belief that reason could identify universal features of human nature had destabilized morals and politics. In response, all three sought resources in the history of philosophy and religion to rebuild our capacity to make universal claims.

Meanwhile, at least on the left, according to Lévy, the disintegration of belief in a shared human nature and in universal moral and political principles tends to be celebrated as liberation. Indeed, among intellectuals in Paris, Berlin, and London — and among not a few in Cambridge, Mass., New Haven, and Princeton — it remains popular to decry the history of European colonization as “a product of the Enlightenment and the colonizers’ desire to spread their universalist, humanist message overseas.” To be sure, acknowledges Lévy, “Europe committed violence against non-European societies.” But universalism, he argues, certainly the universalism of the liberal tradition, of the Enlightenment, and even, he suggests, of Christianity, is anti-colonial and anti-imperialist in spirit and in practice:

A failure of the Universal, of the impossibility or the refusal to envisage the profound unity of the human race, leads to imperialist or colonial massacres; a reinforcement of the Universal, a reinforcement of the idea that all people issue from the same source, are children of the same father, and therefore belong to the same brotherhood, makes us resist them.

Moreover, contrary to arguments favored by the left, Lévy adamantly insists that neither the origin of individual rights in the West nor their absence or less developed condition in non-Western nations and civilizations undermines their universal claims. And he’s right: The laws of physics don’t hold true only in Europe and America. Of course morals and politics present difficulties that physics does not. Determining the requirements of individual rights across nations and cultures requires skillful translation and refined judgment. But taking the easy way out — and oblivious to the damage done to the ideas that sustain solidarity with those who suffer — many on the left prefer to reject the very validity of universal claims.

One would have thought that Lévy would therefore conclude with an exhortation to the left to undertake fresh studies of the liberal, Enlightenment, and even religious foundations of universal claims about our human rights and human responsibilities. Instead, siding with Nietzsche and Heidegger, he declares in the epilogue that only a thoroughgoing atheism can save the left now. Only such atheism, he asserts, can furnish a viable foundation for the reestablishment of the Universal. Yet, in a book overflowing with arguments of all shapes and sizes, Lévy provides only a profession of faith in atheism’s truth and progressive potential. Like Nietzsche, he affirms that because God is dead, all values can at last be seen as created values, but whereas Nietzsche believed that the practical and profound meaning of God’s death could be understood by at best a few, Lévy hopes that God’s death rigorously understood can galvanize the progressive spirit. To overcome the “disorder of the world, its

injustices, its misery,” he preaches, “we have to make an antiwager that we can win not by betting on the existence but on the nonexistence of God” because “that’s the price of democracy.” The alternative “is the devil and his legions of murderous angels.”

Put differently, Lévy envisages a choice between a “melancholy Left” and a “lyrical Left.” The lyrical left — the left against which he directs his polemic — has for a generation played it safe, grown slack, and become too enthralled with its visions of perfection to undertake constructive action on behalf of the afflicted and oppressed. In contrast, the melancholy left — the left which barely exists today but toward which his polemic points — will be humble, truthful, capable of resisting the worst seductions, and, in its devotion to correcting injustice and alleviating misery, disposed to see power as a necessary burden.

A left that was melancholy in Lévy’s sense would indeed represent a huge political gain. More is the wonder and more is the pity that at the end of the day he seeks to anchor this new, pragmatic, and melancholy left in an old, metaphysical, and highly lyrical appeal to the limitless freedom that is man’s reward and responsibility for courageously facing up to the death of God. After all, what could be more radically aristocratic or less hospitable to progressive hopes than a vision of politics in which each was encouraged to view himself as completely and absolutely sovereign?

Three misunderstandings, typical of the progressive spirit, prevent Lévy from moving beyond his searing description of the left’s maladies to the elaboration of effective correctives. The first of these concerns conservatism. For Lévy, conservatism means altar and throne, reaction and bigotry, heartlessness and vulgarity. True, conservative thinking in France has not undergone a renaissance of the sort initiated in the 1950s in the United States by, among others, William F. Buckley Jr., Russell Kirk, Leo Strauss, and Friedrich Hayek. But Lévy, whose earlier book *American Vertigo* is an account of democracy in America based on his 2005 tour of the U.S., should appreciate that conservatism in America today means — not everywhere and always but significantly and for many thoughtful spokesmen — preserving the institutional, material, and moral preconditions of a free society. And a student of philosophy and of politics should not, as Lévy is quick to do, consign Edmund Burke, crucial strands of whose *Reflections on the Revolution in France* defend liberty against excesses still characteristic of the left’s ambitions for moral and political transformation, to the antiliberal and anti-Enlightenment tradition. Lévy’s failure to enter sympathetically into the conservative spirit is a failure of observation, imagination, and education. It reflects a larger failure of the progressive spirit, which often appears bent on seeing in conservatives only enemies to defeat, fools to patronize, or victims to rescue.

Lévy’s second misunderstanding is of atheism. Like Christopher Hitchens, Lévy believes science and reason vouch for God’s death and that atheism has essentially progressive moral and political implications. Both views are mistaken. Science and reason can show that what believers claim to know is actually based on faith, but, at least in the case of biblical religion, science and reason are powerless to prove that what believers hold on faith — that

a mysterious God created the world and fashioned humanity in His image — is false, inconsistent with the truths of science. Moreover, a truly methodical atheism, as Nietzsche vividly showed, far from nourishing progressive hopes, implies that nothing is true, permits everything, and authorizes a ruthless quest to enlarge one's freedom by extending one's mastery over all things. In fact, the promulgation of the dogmatic atheism that Lévy champions is likely to exacerbate the maladies on the left that he has thrown into sharp relief.

Lévy's misunderstandings of conservatism and atheism are rooted in a third, a misunderstanding of the modern liberal tradition. While he rightly repudiates the reduction of liberalism to the untrammelled free market, he wrongly identifies unlimited individual freedom as the tradition's bedrock teaching. That's why, like Foucault and lesser postmodernists, he thinks that Nietzsche captures the essence of the liberal spirit. But, as Nietzsche well knew, the compassion to which Lévy is devoted and the freedom to create all values that he cherishes do not hang together. One does not have to agree with Nietzsche's harsh judgment that concern for those who suffer is slave morality, the revenge of the weak and sick against the strong and bold. But one ought to appreciate that proclaiming that morality is the product of human will and artifice, and encouraging individuals to break free of its shackles and fashion their own values is at least as likely to generate decadence and brutality, or pride and presumption, as it is compassion and mercy. Such an appreciation would lead progressive thinkers away from Nietzsche and back to the liberal tradition, which limits freedom by equality and equality by freedom, and, at its wisest moments, grounds both in human dignity.

The American left is not the European left, but the symptoms Lévy diagnoses on his side of the Atlantic are visible on ours, and cutting-edge American progressives do sometimes display in their full-blown form the pathologies of which he writes. And unlike in France, Germany, and Italy, where, since the outset of Operation Iraqi Freedom, conservatives have won elections and currently lead governments, in America progressives will soon control both the executive branch and the legislative branch and, in a few years, could, through appointments, dominate the federal judiciary as well. These are not circumstances well-calculated to keep in check the excesses to which the left is inclined.

Obama's leadership, specifically his promise to govern as president of all the people and not just of his progressive constituency, will be sorely tested. To meet the challenge, he will have to grasp the respectable moral intentions out of which conservatism arises; the perils of secularism and the promises of faith; and the real heart of the liberal tradition. Or, a tad less abstractly, he will have to recognize, and govern based on the recognition, that securing liberty and equality in America is the joint work of those who, by virtue of temperament and training, focus on preserving our precious heritage and those who, by virtue of temperament and training, focus on improving it.

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