

## *"The New Philosophy"*

**Barbarism with a Human Face**, by Bernard-Henry Lévy, *New York: Harper and Row, 1979. xii + 210 pp. \$10.00.*

BERNARD-HENRY LÉVY is a leading member of the group of young French intellectuals known as the *Nouveaux Philosophes*, a title which he himself coined in June 1976 in an issue of the weekly *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* in which he presented a selection of texts by various members of the group. Since then these disillusioned veterans of the student revolt of 1969 and the ultra-Leftist groups which were among its legacy have received a truly remarkable amount of publicity for themselves and their views, including a cover story in *Time* magazine! The members of the group include Lévy, who,

as an editor with the Paris firm of Grasset, has been responsible for the publication of many of their books, André Glucksmann, Jean-Paul Dollé, Michel Guérin, Christian Jambet, Guy Lardreau, and, slightly apart, Jean-Marie Benoist. Each has produced widely read books, some of which, like the present work by Lévy, have become best-sellers by the crudest of commercial criteria. The intellectual reference points of the group are those of contemporary France, which is to say living Frenchmen like Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze, Garaudy, and Althusser and dead Germans from Kant to Heidegger. Politically they are linked by a deep hostility to the mainstream of the Marxist Left which, following Solzhenitsyn, they see as inevitably totalitarian and repressive.

So far, one may think, our New Philosophers are merely another generation of apostates from the god that failed. Indeed

several commentators have asked, quite pertinently, what can they tell us that is not already familiar from the work of Koestler and his contemporaries. Impatiently, such critics have pointed out that we did not have to await M. Lévy, his colleagues, friends, and protégés, to discover that

Socialists are not only dreamers, gentle and tireless utopians, projecting into the heaven of ideas the sighs and torments of the humble and humiliated; but that Stalinism is a mode of socialism, socialism's mode of being, socialism as it is embodied in reality. That the classless society is not only an optimistic and messianic fantasy, unrealizable and inaccessible like all political dreams; but that, on the contrary, it exists, it is another name for the Terror, another name for the destruction of the kulaks, the very real outcome of the unparalleled project of tearing a people from its moorings, its lineage, and its geography.

This we knew already, and, though it bears repeating, repetition in itself would scarcely justify the attention which the New Philosophers have received. Naturally in the present ideological and political climate of the world it is their total condemnation of Marxism which has attracted most attention. But is there, we must ask, something more to the *Nouvelle Philosophie*, something, perhaps, which may have been missed by journalistic commentators of Right and Left who have been so quick to applaud and condemn the works of the group? The American publication of *Barbarism with a Human Face* will give an English speaking audience the chance to judge this, for though it is certainly far from being the most original or carefully formulated fruit of the New Philosophy, it very clearly states a number of the central themes characteristic of the group as a whole.

It is tempting to say that the first thing that strikes one about Lévy's New Philosophy is that it is neither new nor a philosophy. The critique of totalitarianism

has been made before with greater logical force, while anyone who roams these pages in search of a coherent theory of knowledge, or being, or even of politics will be disappointed. Yet this would be to miss the central point that Lévy is making, a point implicit in the opening sentences of his first chapter, where he writes:

Everyone knows the perennial philosophical question: "Why is there being, being rather than nothing?" But there is a new problem which we should perhaps . . . make it our obligation to deal with: "Why is there power rather than nothing?" Why power, and how is it contrived? Are there societies without power, and does that notion even have any meaning? How is it that it is permanent, that it changes hands but does not disappear? In other words, what is it that rivets it to men's bodies and fixes it in the heaven of our mental landscape? It is meaningless to philosophize outside that domain. Philosophy would not be worth a moment's effort if it did not first take on the form and features of politics.

A little later in the book the premise of the argument is stated more clearly: ". . . mastery is the law of this world, and no proclamation, no earthquake, can ever succeed in overturning it. . . . *The Prince is another name for the world. The Master is a metaphor for reality. There is no ontology that is not a politics.*" To comprehend the seriousness and the urgency with which Lévy regards his struggle and the depth of his hostility to the organized Left (as well as of their hostility to him) we must take these words literally. Lévy's political pessimism and rejection of revolutionary practice are a mirror image of optimistic and activist Marxism and their underlying assumption is the same, that the nature of human existence in the world is to its core a function of human action, that a theory of being, ontology, is always, in the ultimate analysis, a theory of practice, politics. Where Lévy makes his break with Marxism is in making his own the

theme of Rousseau's *Emile*:

that the idea of a good *society* is an absurd dream, a contradiction in terms. . . . After two hundred years, we can recognize today the originality of his argument, what distinguishes it from both the pessimism of the right and the optimism of the left. . . . On the one hand, power is claimed to be natural and therefore eternal; on the other, it is claimed to be cultural and therefore destructible. Rousseau was the first to say neither the latter, which is a lie, nor the former, which is abject. He escapes from the alternative which leaves a choice only between original evil and promised beatitude. He says, and this is entirely different, that power is eternal and destructible at the same time, eternal as society is and destructible as society is as well. He does not claim that misery will last as long as human nature lasts but as long as that nature comes together in a social bond.

Significantly this passage comes from a chapter entitled "Bonds are Shackles." The Marxist conception of political action as a form of deliverance from political existence, defined by the existence of power relationships, is rejected by Lévy alongside the "terminological contradiction" of a potential good society to be realized through revolution. All that remains is a personal ethic and this must remain a logically unjustifiable necessity of practice: "The individual is nothing but part of the State, granted. But experience unfortunately proves that the State without the individual means naked violence and concentration camps." The myths of individual ethics are at least saving myths which Lévy mobilizes against the fatal juggernaut of progressive politics. For where power is conceived as all-intrusive, and necessarily totalitarian in its effects, every tendency toward the rationalization

of society, under whatever ideological banner, will be seen as a step toward Stalinist dictatorship. We must, Lévy argues, be anti-progressive for totalitarianism is the end of progress.

The New Philosophy, then, seems essentially a critique of power and of any philosophy or ideology that expects any good to come out of the use of power. Yet, because the New Philosophers (and Lévy is as representative as any) identify reality as an emanation of power, they end with a characteristically gnostic rejection of reality itself. It has been suggested that the rise of gnosticism in the first and second centuries A.D. resulted from the disappointment of eschatological hopes among Christians and the collapse of a more worldly messianism among the Jews after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In men such as Lévy the horrifying history of the twentieth century and, in particular, the failures of the most generous dreams to deliver anything other than the wakeful nightmare of the police state have had somewhat similar effects. As the gnostics rejected the earthly aspect of man in their search for the pure spirit imprisoned within, so Lévy condemns indiscriminately the political realm of human action. "Discredit *politics*," he writes, "stick with the *provisional*, rehabilitate *ethics*—these are the three orders, the three levels of analysis that must be separated from one another, or else we will sink into the murderous mirages of appearance." Yet realism demands that we discriminate between one use of power and another, and this is a choice between politics of different stamps rather than a condemnation of politics in the name of ethics. It would be a fruitful task to investigate how far the New Philosophy is, for all its critical insight into the genesis of the totalitarian state, no more than the latest manifestation of that gnostic despair which paralyzes our capacity for fruitful action in the world.

Reviewed by DAVID J. LEVY