

Reflections on the end of humanity

Philip Lee

Why are we indifferent to the horrors inflicted on countries and peoples in more parts of the world than we care to remember? Reviewing a recent controversial book by French writer Bernard-Henri Lévy, the following article asks why it has not been possible to call a halt to the perpetual degradation of what makes us human, of our very humanity.

Imagine a travel diary. Not the kind in which James Boswell recorded his Scottish wanderings with Samuel Johnson.¹ Nor the spiritual pilgrimage made by Patrick Leigh Fermor in 1930s Europe.² Nor yet the collection of stories from Rwanda, just one year after the genocide.³ And certainly not that genre of anecdotal, philosophical, whimsical travel writing perfected by such writers as Eric Newby, Jonathan Raban, Bill Bryson and others.

Imagine, instead, a journal from the depths of despair, noting encounters with individuals whose lives don't count: Michel Foucault would have called them infamous people, those without fama or history, the main part of whose lives is reduced to trying to survive and who will not be found listed in any of the archives in which the heroic exploits of nations are deposited (p. 105).

Imagine a journal that touches on the lives of people – many of them children – enmeshed in a hell not of their own making, one that corrupts them and, in many cases, debases what ought to make them human. Pillage, rape and murder happen daily. Imagine this and you will have some idea of the magnitude of Bernard-Henri Lévy's *Réflexions sur la Guerre, le Mal et la Fin de l'Histoire*.

The book visits five situations of conflict: Angola, after 27 years of the MPLA insurrection; Sri Lanka after two decades of fighting between the government and the Tamil Tigers; Burundi, facing its own genocide after Rwanda; Colombia, with its paramilitary groups, FARC, and narco-traffickers; and the civil war in Sudan, whose Nuba people are threatened with extermination. Lévy calls these peoples the *damnés de la guerre* (the war-damned), those who are also *condamnés* (condemned) by their political, economic and social contexts. His narrative recalls the City of Dis, those circles of violence in Dante's *Inferno*, where the perpetrators of *ingiuria* (both injury and injustice) are punished. In these cases, it is sometimes difficult to tell who is victim and who is perpetrator.

Réflexions is a journalistic narrative studded with humanitarian questions. In parallel, the author offers extended philosophical footnotes that probe moral recesses and other soon-to-be-forgotten (and unresolved) political dilemmas such as Bosnia and Afghanistan. The book is a denunciation of the banality of evil in its late 20th century incarnation.⁴ Lévy makes this reference to the legacy of the Holocaust explicit towards the end of the book, but its shadow is everywhere.

L'Homme médiatique

Who is this man? France has a long-running love-hate relationship with its political philosophers, whose writings critique society and its (lack of) action: André Malraux, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Emmanuel Lévinas, Michel Foucault, to name just a few. Lévy's own intellectual father⁵ was French philosopher Louis Althusser, who attempted to analyse ideology and to reconcile structuralism with Marxism.

Lévy comes from the same mould, but is more of a philosopher-journalist. In keeping with today's mass-mediated world, he also appears on television and makes films. His documentary *Bosna!* (1994) glorified the Bosnian resistance while indicting Western democracies' indifference to the continuing conflict. He claimed that Europe died in Sarajevo. His film was publicly perceived as a new *J'accuse*.⁶ In an effort to tell the other side of the story, Lévy recently financed a Serbian documentary directed by Goran Markovic, *Serbia: Anno Zero* (2001).

Lévy is a television guru, invited to debate public and political issues with his contemporaries. He also writes regularly for newspapers and journals and has published some twenty books on wide-ranging subjects (*Barbarity with a Human Face*; *The Last Days of Charles Baudelaire*; *French Ideology*; *The Century of Sartre*; *Piero della Francesca*). As befits any polemicist worth his salt, Lévy has been criticised for his 'conceited megalomania', for 'sucking up to the world's masters' and for 'rubbing dominant ideology up the right way'.⁷ Despite this (perhaps because of it), at the beginning of 2002 President Chirac and Prime Minister Jospin – not exactly political bedfellows – commissioned him to visit Afghanistan, where he spent one month drawing up a report on France's participation in the reconstruction of that country.

Five articles on *Les Damnés de la guerre* precede *Réflexions*. Originally published by *Le Monde* newspaper 30 May to 4 June 2001, they convey the insanity, the bitterness, the depravity and complexity that war brings to a country. And in the wake of the atrocities of 11 September 2001, the question posed in the preface has even greater resonance:

'Is it unthinkable that some, among them those excluded from meaning and historicity, might have the terrible temptation, terrorism having provided the lesson, to come and recall themselves to the minds of those who condemn them, and will condemn them again, to the role of voiceless victims of torture? Will there not be, among these damned souls that have heard us declare the ceremony of History at an end, other kamikazes who will come to tell the nations 'You ignored us while we were alive, here we are dead; you didn't want to know anything about this death while it was happening to us, we throw it at your feet, into the fire that consumes you; we were the invisible living, we shall now become visible suicides'?' (pp. 18-19).

Les damnés covers an enormous amount of ground, both geographically and philosophically. It often highlights what the reporting of newspapers and television journalism (with commendable exceptions) neglects to mention. And it asks the questions that should be asked by politicians, if only they had the moral courage and were less concerned with the trappings of power. Here is a glimpse of Burundi:

'I ended up asking a taxi to take me south and the driver said yes, of course, the roads are good in Burundi, but only on one condition, on which he stood firm: that we did the trip one Saturday and, for example, that very day. Why a Saturday? Because the 'genocidal assailants', those FNL Hutus whose abominable crimes the whole country never ceased replaying – the priest who was made to eat his genitals before being crucified? the babies buried alive? the children impaled, doused with petrol and burned in their school, by the headmaster himself? – they were also first-rate Christians, usually Adventists, who don't smoke, don't drink, enter villages singing hymns at the top of their voices and consider Saturday sacred, to be devoted to prayer, on which above all one must not shed blood?' (pp. 85-86).

In the Western press these kinds of things are often reported with racist overtones: 'What can one expect of Africans?' Lévy offers the examples in sheer bewilderment that human beings of any colour or creed can act in such bestial ways against other human beings. It matters not that the country is Bosnia, Chechnya, Cambodia, Iran, Lebanon, Palestine, Vietnam, or anywhere else. Why do people descend to such levels of inhumanity? What are the political, social, cultural and religious failures that allow genocide to happen? How can the 'international community' – a term that persistently negates every meaning of 'community' and 'international' – avert its eyes at crucial moments in world history?

Treatise on humanity

The greater part of the book is devoted to the author's reflections on war, evil and the end of history. It has become unfashionable to read Jean-Paul Sartre, whose concept of existentialism as political and social activism has been superseded by post-modern nihilism. In one of his books, Sartre wrote that 'the subjective conscience places the reflective conscience as its object; in the act of reflecting, I pass judgements on the reflective conscience, I am ashamed of it, I am proud of it, I want it, I reject it, etc.'⁸ It is this moral weighing in the balance that Lévy strives for,

weighing himself, weighing governments, weighing the 'international community?', and never have their failings been more manifest.

The *Réflexions* offer a treatise on humanity. Fifty-eight of them range from Aesthetics of war; Philosophy of a ruined town; Memories of Bosnia and other places; What is courage?; The angel of History; Foucault and Iran; The names of Sobibor; I remember commander Massoud; Seeing men die of hunger; The Shoah in the heart and in the mind; etc. Interspersed are autobiographical fragments that make connections, recall earlier conversations, meetings, influences. Some are literary, some philosophical, most are political. All the while Lévy probes his own conscience and, by proxy, the conscience of France (which has its own shadows ' Vichy, Madagascar, Indochina, Algeria) and the conscience of all those governments that have instigated or colluded in political, economic and cultural warfare.

Lévy even comments on the extraordinary Durban Conference held in September 2001 on racism and intolerance. He wondered if participants would 'speak of the anti-Tutsi racism of the Hutus? Of the threat of genocide clouding a devastated Burundi? Of the millions of dead in the Angolan war? Of the fanaticism of the Tamil Tigers? Of Rwanda? Of Southern Sudan? Will any question be asked, since one of the Conference themes is the struggle against slavery, about the thousands of Dinka slaves in Southern Sudan, kidnapped by the militia of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army in the pay of Khartoum? Will they use the occasion and the powerful echo chamber it constitutes to call to mind the caravans of women and children travelling like beasts over hundreds of kilometres to be sold to Arab families from the North ' domestic servants, beasts of burden, sex slaves branded by hot irons like animals?? (pp. 401-402).

In short, would they seize the opportunity to break the silence and remind the world of those forgotten wars that constitute the major problem of the 21st century? Lévy believes that it is on our ability, or not, to confront this crucial problem that we shall one day be judged. And, of course, the answer was no. It was only a question of Israel. 'There is only one racist state in the world, and that state is Israel and that it is neither urgent nor useful to lift the leaden lid that weighs on those lands of desolation and crime that are Angola, Burundi, Sri Lanka, Colombia and Sudan? (p. 402).

Many people support both the right of the State of Israel and the right of the State of Palestine to co-exist. They wish to see both countries live peacefully in this immensely troubled region. Those same people have great difficulty understanding how Israel is allowed to occupy and lay siege to Palestine in a constant war of atrocity and retaliation when sanctions and ' in the case of Iraq ' far worse are inflicted on other countries in breach of UN Resolutions. Lévy is wrong to suggest that there is a distinction between the Israel/Palestine conflict and 'forgotten wars? elsewhere. Political and journalistic imperatives apart, the misery of war in any guise is inhuman.

Lévy concludes by imagining 'a world in a rush, chaotic, already half broken up by spoken and unspoken wars, declared and unnamed, in which entire peoples would be denied, ignored, thrown back into the night of non-History, under the combined pressure of the peoples of yesterday and tomorrow, from North and South, from the wealthy planet and from its mimetic adversaries; and the same question, then, with which I end these 'Reflections? as I began them: What as yet unseen, therefore tragic, forms will their despair take?? (pp. 405-406).

This is the crux of the matter. The world's conflicts are not singularities, one-off events with simple causes and effects. Rwanda was not just an ethnic conflict between Tutsi and Hutu; Angola was not just a post-colonial fight between the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola and Unità; Colombia is not just a struggle between government and local drug cartels. The situations in which these countries are mired are the culmination of decades, centuries, of political, economic, cultural and religious oppression, exploitation and cynical duplicity. Vassals of Western global hegemony, they are suffering the bitter consequences of other people's power struggles that have enslaved, impoverished, and maimed their own people physically and spiritually. This is what Lévy is at pains to bring to our attention.

Too little, too late

What of all the good that is being done? What of attempts to broker peace? Of development aid plans? Of the World Bank? The International Monetary Fund? The many global trade agreements? International humanitarian aid? Much of this comes 'after the fact' and is too little, too late. In any case it is aimed at repairing damage already done. When it comes to preventive measures, or radical structural change that might alleviate the social and economic pressures that lead to conflict, such as debt repayment, precious little is being done.

In real terms, how is it possible to 'rebuild' or 'rehabilitate' a nation? How to repair the shattered lives and minds of millions, especially children who may have known nothing but war, as is the case in Angola, Guatemala, Sierra Leone? How to continue to believe in a United Nations that turned a blind eye to the atrocities committed in Central America, that failed to act over Rwanda, that ignores Israel's blatant disregard of some 27 Resolutions which by now might have brought peace to the Middle East? A UN that has become 'marginalised, or reduced to a debating chamber that has to genuflect to Washington's decisions.'

There are many non-governmental organisations and many individuals working ceaselessly to draw the world's attention to the evil and misery inflicted on people by governments, global financial and trade organisations, armaments and drugs dealers of all kinds. There are also courageous journalists writing for newspapers and making television documentaries. There are photojournalists risking their lives to reveal 'often in unbearably beautiful pictures' the consequences of actions supposedly done in the name of ordinary, decent citizens. Why, then, are we so indifferent? Why has it not been possible to call a halt to this perpetual degradation of what makes us human, of our very humanity?

Maybe what the world needs is an International Court of Crimes of Indifference. Except that we all know what would happen. The Court would be established by international agreement and every nation would express its intention to sign up. The USA would demand immunity from prosecution for its citizens on the grounds that they might face politically motivated charges, and then the wheeling and dealing would begin, with Washington's vassals (Ramonet) ever obedient to the will of their master. And if the Court were finally to become reality, it would still take years to bring anyone to trial and any verdict would lack 'teeth'.

Humanity no longer deserves the name of humanity unless it begins to address the issues raised in *Réflexions sur la Guerre, le Mal et la Fin de l'Histoire*.

Réflexions sur la Guerre, le Mal et la Fin de l'Histoire, précédé de *Les Damnés de la guerre*, by Bernard-Henri Lévy, is published by Bernard Grasset, Paris, 2001. ISBN 2-246-62021-X

Notes

1 *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, by James Boswell, first published in London in 1785.

2 *A Time Of Gifts*, by Patrick Leigh Fermor. London: John Murray, 1977.

3 *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families*, by Philip Gourevitch. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998; London: Picador, 1999.

4 The expression is as evocative and apt as when Hannah Arendt first used it in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963).

5 Acknowledged, not for the first time, in 'Fabriquer une comédie humaine', by Josyane Savigneau. *Le Monde*, 26 October 2001.

6 Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media*, p. 150. London: British Film Institute, 2001.

7 Michel Collon, *Poker menteur: Les grandes puissances, la Yougoslavie et les prochaines guerres*. Brussels: Éditions EPOI, 1998.

8 ??la conscience réflexive pose la conscience réfléchie comme son objet : je porte, dans l'acte de réflexion des jugements sur la conscience réfléchie, j'en ai honte, j'en suis fier, je la veux, je la refuse, etc.? L'Être et le Néant, p. 19. Paris: Gallimard, 1946.

9 ?Vassalité?, by Ignacio Ramonet, in *Le Monde diplomatique*, October 2002.

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