

# **LEFT IN DARK TIMES**

**A Stand Against The New Barbarism**

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**Bernard-Henri Lévy**



**R A N D O M   H O U S E**

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A STAND AGAINST THE NEW BARBARISM

**BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY**

*Translated by Benjamin Moser*



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# Preface

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Can a French philosopher's reflections on his intellectual journey shed any light on American dilemmas? What can he, as he wrestles with his own political roots and convictions, possibly have to say to Americans in the midst of their national controversies and momentous decisions?

Of course, there is the portrait of Nicolas Sarkozy that opens this book, a French president who, morphing as he has from a question-able but imposing statesman to a quaint, Warholian character, may now interest only folklorists, or students of political curiosities.

And there are the subsequent pages in which I try to retrace the ideological and political history of my generation—my generation—which was the last in Europe to believe in the great Revolutionary tradition and which was also the first to deconstruct its foundations. The United States never having believed in all that talk of a new man, of history broken in two, or of the regeneration by violence of humanity's failures, I understand that this intellectual journey, my rereading of the Cambodian Revolution or the dissenting movements of the 1960s, might all seem remote.

But my true purpose in this book goes well beyond these preliminary considerations.

In advancing a "critique of neoprogressive reason," I attempt to address all those who have been led astray on both sides of the Atlantic, in both of our countries. And what I mean by this is a critique of those who, inspired by the desire to create a heaven on earth, were—and are, more than ever—led to flirtation with darkness, barbarism, and hell.

Are the values of individual freedom compatible with the idea of equality, without which, as we have known since Tocqueville, no democracy can endure? And if so, under what conditions?

Are human rights Western or universal? Does their Western birth mean that they are strictly limited to their original home—or are they natural rights that can therefore legitimately be called upon to migrate beyond their birthplace?

Have the neoconservatives ruined or corrupted the idea that democratic values are universal? Or have they simply damaged those values, weakened them, temporarily discredited them: and if so, for how long?

Does anti-Semitism have a future? If so, what will it look like? Who in the United States or Europe is most vulnerable to the new type of virus through which the most ancient of hatreds is transmitted—and perpetuated?

What about anti-Americanism? Is it coming from the Right? the Left? the gray area that separates them and where they collide? Is the term a kind of password in America and Europe to say something else—and if so, what?

Why has the concept and criticism of Empire, and even anti-imperialist activism, ended up hiding and denying today's sufferings and wars, from Bosnia to Rwanda to Darfur? Why, in other words, has anti-Americanism among the most efficient vehicles for reactionary thinking in our time?

What is Islamo-progressivism? How is it that great minds seem so reluctant, in the face of Islamic radicalism, to defend human rights, and especially women's rights? Wouldn't being a real progressive mean lending a hand to those forces in the Muslim world, those dissidents male and female, those rebels who refuse to march to the orders of something that looks a lot like a new version of fascism? Wouldn't it oppose the totalitarian Islam of a loud minority with the enlightened Islam that so many

democrats and secularists from Karachi to Algiers, from Sarajevo to Jakarta, demand?

~~How can one be both antitotalitarian and antifascist? Proud of the achievements of antiracial struggles yet intolerant of the petty chauvinisms and separatism that are their degenerate form?~~

How can we keep faith with the memory of the anticolonial movement while still dismissing the fools who, in the name of that same faith, cannot imagine the very idea that decolonized people might themselves be dabbling in forms of barbarism, casting those who are shocked by such barbarisms into the abyss of neocolonial ideology and nostalgia?

These several questions are really just parts of the same one. This single, and ultimately simple question concerns the monsters that the new laboratories of what we in Europe call Leftism and what Americans call liberalism are giving birth to.

And on the other hand, it's about what liberalism ought to do, what it should be and should become in order to rid itself of its ghosts as well as to elevate itself to the highest, most noble aspects of its heritage. Criticism that will help it rediscover its foundations. . . . Make a selection—the original meaning of the word “criticize”—in order to re-shape a discourse aware of the dangers facing it in the current desert. . . .

Many of us, here and elsewhere, in the United States as in Europe, can identify with this program. In my generation and the one that came after it, there are more and more people who have not given up any of their hopes, who haven't sworn off or changed their pantheon, who share the same veneration for the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr., or Rosa Parks—but who refuse the slightest compromise, under what-ever pretext, with bigotry and hatred.

I hope these pages can contribute to the effort to clear things up.

I hope these pages can contribute, modestly but solidly, to the re-construction of a universal movement of free spirits worthy of the name.

Neither resignation nor defeatism: it's time to fight back.

# Introduction

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It's January 23, 2007, at three in the afternoon. On the front page of *Le Monde*, my old friend André Glucksmann, who has fought alongside me for the past thirty years, has just published an article announcing his support of the UMP candidate Nicolas Sarkozy. The telephone rings. It's the candidate himself: the smooth, treacherously smooth voice can scarcely contain his joy at Glucksmann's beautiful, lyrical text.

"So you've seen *Le Monde* . . . ?"

I ought to say that Nicolas Sarkozy and I have been friendly since he was first elected mayor of Neuilly in 1983. Because of family circumstances, I happened to be registered to vote in that suburb of Paris. He had a list drawn up of voters who might be useful to him. And he found that among them was the author of *Barbarism with a Human Face*. I was invited to lunch at city hall. I immediately took to the very young, incredibly decisive kid who during our first meeting was—already!—trying to understand how a man like me could possibly disagree with him. Other lunches followed over the years. Trips to the mountains. Countless excursions through the desert. Indeed, when I look back at the already long career of the sixth president of the Fifth Republic, I'm not sure why I get the idea that it was an uninterrupted series of trips through the desert culminating in a victory parade. I gave him ammunition for a debate with Tariq Ramadan. In a conversation during the Clearstream affair, in which he was accused of financial irregularities, with his face inches from my own, his voice trembling in rage and emotion, I heard him say: "Whoever did this to me, I'll hang him myself—you understand me? personally hang him!—from a pitchfork." A final meeting, in December 2006, in Marrakesh, with Claude Lanzmann, where I tried to explain to Sarkozy (which goes to show what I know!) that you don't get to be president by spending too much time as France's top cop! In other words, there was something that, despite the genuine disagreements, unchanged by the passing years, eventually became a kind of friendship.

"You've seen *Le Monde*, ?" he says again, in that tone of scarcely concealed triumph that I know so well. "You saw your friend's article about your friend?"

"Yes," I answer. "Of course I did. It's good. It's courageous. I'm happy for you because . . ."

He interrupts me: a note of disappointment and mistrust creeps into his voice.

"Courageous? Why courageous?"

"Because he's taking a risk. People are going to beat up on him about this. So it's courageous."

His mistrust gives way to a sudden annoyance and then, quickly, to a show-offy tone which over the years he's still never quite learned to rein in—the tone I'd heard a few years before, when a number of biographies began to be written about me: he made a point of telling me that not seven but a grand total of *eleven* books were going to be published about him, and that the palm of martyrdom, the title of the most attacked man in France, the crown of the most victimized Christ in Europe, was his and his alone.

"You don't get it," he went on. "Courage has nothing to do with it. Because a lot of people from the Left are joining forces with me. Lots and lots, you'll see . . ."

"Fine," I agreed. "Not courageous, all right. Let's say daring. Taking the risk, before all these other people you're talking about, of shaking things up. It has a certain charm . . ."

He cuts me off—once again smooth and accommodating, the whole swaggering production.

“Let’s get to the point. What about you? When are you going to write your little article for me? Huh, when? Because Glucksmann is fine. But you, after all, you are my friend.”

“Oh, me . . .”

“Well?”

“You don’t need me. You already have so many people. All those polls have you elected before the fight’s even started. Isn’t there one out this morning giving you a fifty-five-percent lead?”

“The problem isn’t the polls,” he answers, even treacherous than before, and such a bad actor! “It’s not about getting elected. I mean getting elected, fine, but thanks to the people you respect and care about. So I’ll repeat the question: When are you going to join up with me? When are you going to do it for me, write a nice little article?”

“You know very well,” I said, feeling more and more uncomfortable. “We’ve talked about it a hundred times. Personal relationships are one thing. Ideas are another. And no matter how much I like and respect you, the Left is my family and . . .”

“What?” he says in a suddenly rough voice, almost angry, but an anger that could be yet another acting job. “Emmanuelli, your family? Montebourg, your family? These people who’ve spent thirty years telling you to go fuck yourself? Do you really think I’m an idiot or do you really believe what you’re saying, that these people are your family?”

“Yes, well, I’ll grant you . . . It’s true it might seem strange and those people haven’t always been easy on me. . . . But that’s just how my life is. . . . That’s life. . . . Once again, I’m still your friend. . . . Part of me wishes you every success in the world . . . but I’ve always voted for the Left and I’m voting for the Left this time too.”

“Listen . . .”

The tone becomes friendly again. Charming. But underneath the apparently acted and over-sonorous solemnity of his “Listen” (“*Écoute*”), in the way he emphasizes the *t*, sticking his tongue—I can see almost as if I was standing in front of him—through his teeth and then jerking it quickly backward like the snapping of a rubber band, in the sleazy way he lets it be understood that we’re going to talk our time, lay it all out on the table, and finally reach an agreement, you know, just to clear up something that can’t be more than an unfortunate misunderstanding: something I suspect he got from Jacques Chirac, but which doesn’t really suit him.

“Listen . . . Let me refresh your memory . . . *Dangerous Purity* . . . Does that ring a bell, *Dangerous Purity*?”

“Of course.”

“Then it’s a simple question. Was it Emmanuelli, your family, who talked about your book *Dangerous Purity* in 1994? Was it Arnaud Montebourg, your family, who went on the television back then to talk about *Dangerous Purity*?”

“No, true enough. What a memory you have! You’re the one who defended the book. And I know very well. But that doesn’t have anything to do with this. Nothing. Because . . .”

“Of course it has something to do with this! And anyway . . .”

He pretends to be catching his breath.

“And anyway, I’m sure you know a lot of other officials who spoke about Chechnya the way I did last Sunday?”

He had in fact called me ten days before, early in the morning, a few hours before he was about to give a major speech: he wanted to make sure that I would be “all ears” because he was going to say things that would make people like me feel “authorized” to vote for him.

“We’ll see,” I said. “The campaign’s just beginning. And . . .”

“And anyone else who’s said that Darfur shouldn’t be seen as a little detail of the history of the twenty-first century? ~~Anyone else, except for me, who’s said that we can’t allow the century to open with another genocide?~~”

“We’ll see, Nicolas, we’ll see. I think the biggest mistake my friend Glucksmann’s made was deciding too early on, and with so much enthusiasm, without waiting for your opponents, especially Ségolène Royal, to lay out their cards. . . .”

“Madame Royal’s cards . . . pffff . . . Let’s talk about her cards. . . . The main thing I’ve heard her do is praise Hezbollah and talk about how fine the Chinese justice system is . . .”

“That’s true. For now, that’s partly true. But you have to see the context . . . her actual words . . .”

He cuts me off again—but this time, with an impatience he takes no trouble to disguise.

“Come on. Stop quibbling. Be courageous, my dear Bernard. Be courageous, get out of bed. . . .”

“It’s three in the afternoon.”

“I know. As a manner of speaking. I mean: take your hand, give it to me, and together we’ll make a revolution, you’ll see. . . . You’re not going to work against me, at least?”

Now I hear the clannish, feudal, possibly brutal Sarkozy that his opponents have denounced, and which I never wanted to believe in: a man with a warrior vision of politics, who hystericizes relations, believes that those who aren’t with him are against him, who doesn’t care about ideas, who thinks that interpersonal relations and friendship are the only things that matter. . . .

I also note another old trait that time has not cured him of, and which makes him the prototype of the “Sartrean subject” that a few years before, in another book, I had tried to sketch: say everything, hold nothing back; a person who would blurt out everything, really everything, that pops into his head—Does it occur to him to go back to the Place Beauvau, to the Interior Ministry, in order to avoid the low blows of his fake friends, who are in the pocket of Dominique de Villepin?—Well then, he’ll say “I’m going back to the Place Beauvau, to the Interior Ministry, in order to avoid the low blows of my fake friends, who are in the pocket of Dominique de Villepin”! If it occurs to him that the place of an intellectual is by his side, in the great revolutionary army he is raising to change France at long last, then he comes right out and says it, unafraid of being rejected, devoid of false embarrassment or modesty; “Sartrean subject” indeed, because he’s the only being I know who is quite as “stripped of his inner conscience.”

I mutter a few banalities about the role of writers, who aren’t there to throw their arms around politicians but to ask questions, criticize, oppose. I tell him to give my best to Cécilia. Wish him good luck in the tough battle ahead. At which point the future president of France hangs up and leaves me, I must say, highly perplexed—caught between two feelings, both very troubling, because, on that day at least, both are equally indisputable.

The first was that I wouldn’t join him and that I’d vote for the Left once again.

But the second was that, unfortunately, he 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 which I had stayed faithful was behaving strangely.

At that point, this book began.

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PART ONE

**WHAT'S LEFT  
OF THE LEFT**

## And Upon This Ruin . . .

**W**hy didn't I vote for Sarkozy?

Why was I so profoundly convinced, then, that it was literally impossible for me to vote for this man?

First of all, some of the reasons concerned things I knew about him, things that many voters would soon discover.

A kind of feverishness that seemed incompatible with the job.

An indifference to ideas, a cynicism, that has led to incredibly brutal flip-flops on certain important matters (Russia, for example).

An ability to live in denial, which we would see during his grotesque and devastating reception of Colonel Gadhafi in Paris.

The pragmatism—a better word is opportunism—we saw soon after his victory, when, like a kid so loose in a candy store and told: “Here you go! It's all yours! It's free! Take what you want!,” he literally took it all, working his way through every bin, snatching up all the most desirable items. The icon Kouchner. The wise Védrine. The knights of Mitterrand's Holy Grail, whom, when Sarkozy was young minister, he confessed to admiring. Totems of the Left. Literary and show business legends. Who's the patron saint of the Socialists? Blum? Then bring me Blum! The Christ of the Communists? Guy Môquet? Then bring him to me—not, of course, Guy Môquet himself, the seventeen-year-old Resistance hero killed by the Nazis, but his last, beautiful, heartbreaking letter to his parents! And the queen of today's victims? Who wears the dark crown of contemporary suffering and martyrdom? Ingrid Betancourt, you say? Then go fetch them right away, the Betancourt family, and bring them to my palace!

I didn't deny that all this could have its good sides. Nor that, precisely because of his appetites, Nicolas Sarkozy might have some surprises up his sleeve. All I knew was that he had a strange and worrying way of operating. I also knew that he had an almost deformed memory. People usually have a memory. It can be complex, contradictory, paradoxical. But it's their own. It is, in large part, the foundation of their identity. Sarkozy, however, is a hijacker of other people's memories. He lays claim to everyone's memory, which finally means he has no memory of his own. Our first memory-free president. The first of our presidents to wish all ideas well, because he really is indifferent to them. And that is why, if one man in France today incarnates—or claims to incarnate—that famous “post-ideological age” in which I cannot bring myself to believe, then it is Nicolas Sarkozy, sixth president of the Fifth Republic.

None of that subtracts, I repeat, from the charm of his character. Nor, once again, from my personal liking of him. But that was the first group of reasons that prevented me from supporting him.

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A SECOND GROUP WAS more essential.

Because it had to do with my very being, with my fundamental political identity—something in me bolted at the double idea: first, of rushing to the rescue of someone who I guessed was going to win anyway (Ah! The defectors already rushing in! All the flatterers, the followers, of whom you could say, as of Juvenal’s courtesan, that no cheese can make them retch!); and second, equally, of not voting, as I have for my entire life, for what is known as the Left.

A reflexive vote?

Mechanical?

Had my thinking really become so Pavlovian that, as I’d just said to him, the Left was my family and you don’t betray your family?

There was probably some of that.

And that’s exactly what I say when, a few days later, questioned by a French weekly embarking on its umpteenth report on the “rightward drift” of French intellectuals,<sup>1</sup> I remarked that “I belong to the Left out of orientation and almost genetically; the Left is my family and you can’t change families the way you change shirts.”

Except that, put that way, this argument is frankly pathetic—and even goes against some of my most basic convictions.

I’m not crazy about the word *family*, first of all.

I don’t like the ugly mafia whiff it acquires when applied to politics.

I hate the idea that goes with it, that you always have to choose the “family” in the event of conflict—over, for example, the truth: ah! the holy horror of “families” one finds in all the writers I admire . . . the even greater horror, Louis Aragon thunders, in his *Defense of the Infinite*, of those “chosen families, spiritual families and therefore political families . . . the family one subjects oneself to out of free will—he explains as one who knows—the family of the spirit and the heart! It’s “as if you had chosen your own tomb” . . . as if you’d renounced any “morality,” any “human greatness.” . . . Nothing but tuberculosis spreads quicker through families than this kind of lie . . . and when the lie has won the day, when the family of spirit is irremediably corrupted, when the party of the heart no longer fulfills the hopes we’ve invested in it, doesn’t the right thing to do become to betray it exactly as much as Aragon, again—it has betrayed itself?

And I know better than anyone that everything in the movement of the world and of ideas has been broken down, cracked, and sometimes nullified the famous split between Left and Right that has structured French politics for a century—a split that has become harder and harder to believe in.

Let’s go over it again.

The words “Right” and “Left” have long been used to denote the most recent form of the struggle between the old and the modern: though it no longer makes much sense to say, with a straight face, that the Right is condemned to be the “old” and that the Left necessarily represents the “modern,” it’s been a while since, to borrow a phrase from Roland Barthes, I’ve been “indifferent about being modern.”

“Right” and “Left” have been seen as two opposing attitudes toward this old belief, no longer exactly in “modernity,” but in Progress, which was the catechism of former centuries: here again, the criteria have shifted; the main issues have been overturned by an increasingly conservative Left and Right that no longer flinches at the sacred word of progress; and for the author of *Barbarism with*

*Human Face*—for one who stepped into the public debate more than thirty years ago by denouncing and deconstructing the “reactionary idea of Progress”—that’s not really the question either.

We’ve believed, or wanted to believe, that the Left stood out for the distance it put between itself and powerful interests in general, and moneyed interests in particular—while the Right was in bed with them; that the Left was free whereas the Right was bought and paid for; that the Left was for the average people while the cruel Right was dedicated, under a more or less transparent disguise, to inhumane and awful “class politics” which were “making the poor poorer”! As if the Right was completely undemocratic. . . . As if this new age of democracy, under the reign of Opinion, wasn’t precisely the age that made disguises impossible, that tore off masks . . . As if, in this age of all-powerful visibility and transparency at every level, any political force could crudely, clearly, cynically present itself as being on “the side” of money and power and in so doing abandon the people and its votes to the other side . . . As if, with the joint triumph of the desire for vengeance, truth, and purity (these three forms always leading to the worst, of what Nietzsche called the will to power), anyone could present a platform that was not, from top to bottom, from Right to Left, an appeal to what Nietzsche, again, called the greatest number . . . As if the structure and regime of the Benthamite Panopticon had been overturned ages ago: no longer slaves under the master’s eye but the master himself, every master under the intractable eye of a people who holds all the cards . . . Or as if, in the new planetary celebritocracy that has taken the place of oligarchy, the rules of the game had not changed entirely: the celebrities under the eye of the people, of its implacable demands and desires, beginning with the desire to cut off the heads of the powerful or, in any case, to appear to—the rule applies to Europe, but almost even more to the United States, as we saw during the misadventures of Bill Clinton, the personal attacks against Hillary, then Obama, and, in general, by the rise of the “political junkie.”

There was, finally, the question of the revolution. Since the French Revolution, the word “revolution,” the pure signifier, was, in France at least, the most serious political dividing line. The Left wanted it; the Right feared it. The Left, even and especially if they hated its provisional guise, kept alive the dream of society in a happier incarnation and thought that this was exactly what made one a Leftist—the Right was made up of those people whose political outlook meant methodical putting down each and every revolution. That time, too, is past. And, for reasons I’ll come back to, we have entered a period in which, as Michel Foucault once told me,<sup>2</sup> the question “Is the revolution possible?” has given way to a more troubling and much more radical question: “Is the revolution desirable?” And now, especially, the answer has become “No,” a clear “No,” not desirable at all, or, in any case, only for very few people. Who in the contemporary political landscape still openly dreams of wiping the slate clean? of a radical new beginning? of history split in two? of society as a blank page upon which the poem of the New Man will be inscribed? Europe has ended up aligning itself, on this matter, with realism, pragmatism, and, finally, American humility—and that is excellent news.

Anyway, that’s all behind us now. All those benchmarks, all those parameters, have finally come crashing down. As have references to that “socialism” of which I wrote, thirty years ago, at the end of *Barbarism with a Human Face*, that I dreamed that in a dictionary of the year 2000 we could finally read the definition: “Socialism, n., cultural genre, born in Paris in 1848, died in Paris in 1968.” March ’68 is far off. And now 2000 as well. And even if the dictionary doesn’t exist, even if so many socialists keep clinging to their socialism as an old actor clings to a repertory role, the most clear-sighted among them know that nothing good can come for the Left without breaking with much of their history, and even with their name.

Yet despite all this—despite that weighty tendency that Nicolas Sarkozy would exhibit by inviting, as he’d told me, leftist personalities to join him once he was elected, not only in the government, but

in a whole range of commissions and positions of power and influence; despite the fact that, contrary to every expectation, the personalities thus invited would all, or almost all, answer his call, despite a stampede unprecedented in the history of the Republic, which is hard to attribute either to opportunism, impatience, to the desire to serve no matter what, or even to an epidemic, which fits so well with the current mood of political skepticism and unbelief—despite all that, I believed—and still do—that there are still reasons to remain on the Left.

Why, then?

What's left of the Left?, as Nick Cohen would say.<sup>3</sup>

What am I thinking, clinging to a political identity which everything seems to indicate is being reshuffled and is even wasting away? Why am I turning my back on a man who nevertheless has real merits—first, of being a real living creature in a political universe so often populated by “the living dead” (Tolstoy) or by ghosts; second, of having the ambition, which is after all worthy, to get rid of this bubble, this microclimate, this state of psycho-political exception in which France has lived for decades and which was suffocating the country; third, to have weakened the National Front by embracing it and thereby accomplished something—we can agree on this—that so many men and women, including this author, have considered urgently necessary for the last twenty years; fourth, and finally, to plan (and, in the first months of his reign, he mostly kept the promise) to break with the leprosy that was, under all the Gaullist and Socialist governments for the last fifty years, France's “Arab Policy,” and to move closer to the United States and Israel—all things I can only, once again, be thrilled to see?

I'll skip the hackneyed answers.

I'll skip—once again—the too-easy “defense of the oppressed.”

I'll skip—I think it was the novelist Françoise Sagan who came up with the notion—the idea that “In the case of any given injustice, the man, or woman, of the Right will say it's inevitable; the man or woman of the Left will say that it's intolerable.”

I'll skip the so-often-rebutted notion: “Only people on the Right wonder if there is a difference between Right and Left, and what it is.”

I'll even skip—since it seems so obvious to me—the decisive role of what we once called “the social question”: the scandal of extreme poverty . . . and the even greater scandal that is our consent to this misery . . . and the fact that, one day, I am sure, this consent will seem as mysterious and as odious as the consent of the Athenian democrats to slavery. . . .

RATHER, IN RETROSPECT, I realize that I was thinking about three certainties on that day.

To be “on the Left”—or, as an American would say, “liberal” or “progressive”—means three main things to me.

## Primal Scenes

The first is fidelity to a certain number of images.

Yes, images.

They vary with each person.

They vary even more for people of different nationalities.

In my case, that day, a rush of images flashed through my mind almost as soon as I hung up the phone.

Of Léon Blum with his fist raised, July 14, 1936, facing his working-class people with his over-elegant suit, his glasses, and his dignified moustache, with the look of a successful man betraying his class, an attitude that long seemed to me one of the good definitions of the word *aristocracy*.

André Malraux, in the same period, at Garches, I think, during another rally—his jacket is too well-tailored; his right hand seems to be praying; his left hand, in his pocket, makes him look extremely insolent; the presence of Communist apparatchiks Thorez and Duclos sitting aghast in the second row behind the magnificent dandy, only adds to his insolence—this image, though I'm not sure why, moves me more than the more famous snapshots of him posing in front of the flying coffins of the España squadron.

Malraux, once again: 1945; the first poster of his film about that same war in Spain; a stylized fighter in the foreground, machine gun in hand, the other hand reaching for a yellow and red sun that he seems to be trying to stop, like Joshua, but which is hurrying on; a plane above his head, as in a child's drawing; and the column of fighters lined up behind him, who look like they're about to attack the sky itself.

My own father in the same war, a young Republican volunteer in a shabby uniform, with an old gun during a mild spring, under an intense and dramatic sky, an avalanche of light on a rocky, thorned landscape, and, in his eyes, under his cap, a pride, a haughtiness, maybe even including a bit of irony which never left him and which a part of me has always liked to think was acquired there, among those troops.

My father once more, in the other war, the next one, the one for which the Spanish Civil War was just a dress rehearsal: anti-Nazi, not anti-German; Free French, an oxymoron in those dark days; those days in which being both Free and French was a furtive, clandestine notion—yet one that was greater than France itself: in those days I can't properly speak of images: just that bundle of documents dated July 19, 1944, and signed by General Diego Brosset, commander of the First Motorized Infantry Division, that "citation" of the soldier André Lévy, leading the charge at Monte Cassino: "an ambulance runner ready, day and night, no matter what the mission; who evacuated the wounded beneath mortar fire with a total disregard for danger and returned again and again to gather up the wounded under violent enemy fire."

Me myself, about twenty years old, in Bangladesh, my mind in the past, regretting having been born so late, feeling that I'd been born into the wrong time and in the wrong country: was I worthy of m

illustrious ancestors? I was finished with the liberal moment; sick of the whole comedy: it may not have been the best time in my life, but I still wanted to change things a bit: this was surely not the struggle of the century, not the salt of the earth, but it was an oppressed people crying out, and just like the elderly Malraux I had to choose its side.

Me again in Portugal, in the summer of 1974, in boiling but glorious temperatures, the light slowly combusting in the evening on Marquês de Pombal Square, where a fervent but calm crowd, resolute but peaceful, was burying the evil spirits of Salazarism.

Portugal once again, the next summer; young captains courageous; Otelo de Carvalho as a baroque Shakespearean actor; life bursting out everywhere; uprisings without anger or sad passion; the end of the market of hatred; barracks and monasteries transformed into winter palaces; basins emptied and their fountains, in the deserted and respectfully preserved castles; girls with champagne-colored necks and joyous shoulders; endless nights; stars for every night; the spinning suns of my dreams of a true and great life; a hundred flowers with the thousand colors of a memory come to life; incense and dizziness; lights without fires; lost orientations; a unique, unbalanced geography; Paris, for example, reduced to the status of a distant province of a fifth empire whose capital was here; Dominique Desnoes, the adept of Céline, elevated to the rank of a great red conspirator giving Malaparte's *Technique of the Coup d'État* to one person and Trotsky's *Military Writings* to another, and, yet another day, running through the newspaper kiosks of the city, especially around all the barracks, and buying up all the copies of *Libération*, which was, with Jean Daniel's *Le Nouvel Observateur*, the favorite paper of the young captains and which published, that morning, an exposé about his own extremist past on the other side; we still didn't know how to resuscitate bodies, said Malraux, whom he didn't like, but we were starting to figure out how to resuscitate dreams.

Still later, in Italy. And, in Italy, the university amphitheatres filled to overflowing, overheated wherever I came, at the invitation of the Lotta Continua collectives, to preach against terrorism—which meant trying to explain to these rudderless young people, on the edge, that the temptation of armed struggle was, at this point in time, a fascist temptation. Bologna, Milan. Shouts. Raised fists. Terrible, exalted condemnations. Embittered fervor. "Lévy we'll shoot you in the head," graffiti in pink letters which, in the sun, looked like tears of blood, on the façade of the University of Rome. These free agents who were said to come to the Aula Magna with .38s under their coats. The day I had to fight my way in and out of the room. The devil in their faces. Naked nihilism. The mystery of the girls, crazed virgins, full of charms and hatred, bitter, budding murderesses. Red Italy? Black Italy? The two, of course. Black because red. Fascist because terrorist. The scowl of leftism. Its dead soul. Its dark shadow. Why do you think, you fools, that I got involved in the Battisti case, the repentant terrorist who had been in France for twenty years, with the formal consent of Mitterrand, and who was odiously arrested by Sarkozy's France?

Or again in Mexico. The first Mexico: Artaud; Tarahumaras; Chiapas in the days before Subcomandante Marcos; ragged, nameless despair; the unidentified century; the Left without rhetoric; the evil of globalization, but the real one, the real deal, the one which correctly acknowledges that there are many worlds and that misery is deeper in some than in others.

The second Mexico: ten years later; another time; on a speaking tour with my New Philosophers friends, including André Glucksmann; Octavio Paz leading the way, with his old Indian head and the look in his eyes like a thoughtful beast; the armada of communism refusing to back down; violence once again; the bomb threats in Guadalajara; the time I had to calm the ruckus by coming up with a Soviet who, throughout the whole evening, allotted speaking times, with an implacable equity, five minutes here, five minutes there, between the people in the room and the orators who had confiscated

knowledge; where was it, the real Left—was it these half-baked demons who whipped themselves into a fury if anyone dared attack Castro? Or was it us, simply trying, according to the principles that internationalism which was the best of progressivism, to let the voices of the Eastern European dissidents be heard by people who couldn't get Chile and the overthrow of Allende out of their minds

Or, of course, Bosnia. No longer images, here, but a film. No longer snapshots but a long, slow dance. It's no longer something from a past that refuses to move on, but a burning present, with colors and smells mingling, and which, twelve years later, I have never managed to mourn properly. The baying of terrorized men. The grating cry in the distance signaling a dead body. The tarlike texture of coffee left in abandoned bunkers. The image of Samir, on our way down a bombed-out Grondj Hill, throwing himself on top of me and probably saving my life. The image of Zlatko Dizdarevic, in one of those endless conversations that helped us pass the time when the guns were thundering too loudly and we didn't want to show how scared we were: "The Left," he said, his laughter bursting out like that of an annoyed giant, "the Left, I'll tell you, means just saying no to hell." Or again, the image of the group of intellectuals, atheists in the catacombs, who did not want to leave their city and talked about Sartre while the snipers were targeting them. Images . . . Images . . . All images piled up in my memory, blending into one another, blurring: so close, so close, and yet I'm surprised, sometimes at night, like a thief in my own haunted house, to have to go back to my notes to nail one of these images down.

Or, finally, in the United States. That American Left of which it's popular to say, even in America, that it doesn't exist, that it's a contradiction in terms, etc.—and which nevertheless gave me (I can't help it) some of the most enduring images in my little Olympus: the battle for civil rights . . . Rosa Parks . . . Dr. King . . . the marches against the Vietnam War and the young people who back then were an example of insurrection for the whole world . . . Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, *political* idols of my youth . . . that wind of rebellion and freedom that blew there first and that didn't arrive in Europe until much later, its strength much weakened . . .

SO THAT'S where we are.

I'm speaking of myself, of course. But what I'm saying applies to everyone—including here, in the United States, where, for example, the little international club of Bosnia's friends had its very special members: Susan Sontag, Christopher Hitchens, John Burns. I hope the ones I forget can forgive me. Because all of us have memories that are dear to us. All of us are what we are because of the dead who live on in us, and the living that enlarge us. And for each of us, for each new political adventure, it is the images, solid as flesh, specific even when they blend with others, that make us what we are, that stay with us, that follow us.

Could it be that when people get involved in politics, they're trying to keep their youth alive, and that, once they're involved, they tend to join families?

And does my insistence on sticking with a Left that has done everything to empty itself of its substance mean I'm clinging to yesterday rather than today, to nostalgia rather than to the future, to a time gone by rather than to the present day—the old story of the mature man who watches the burial of the young man he once was and who wears himself out, one last time, trying to resemble him?

Yes, maybe.

But not only.

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I don't think that's all there is to it.

Since, as strange as it may seem when one looks back over the creaky ruin it has become, the Left, too, was once young.

As unimaginable as it may seem to one who considers “that great backward falling corpse which the worms have already started to chew” (Sartre, in his 1960 preface to Paul Nizan’s *Aden, Arabie*),<sup>1</sup> the Left has always been both very old and very young. And that’s how it is today, and how part of it remains: as old as those ruins we must demolish, like those apartment blocks in the *banlieues*; as young as hope, when it is something bigger than our own lives. And it is this youth, this not-yet-dead part of itself, this idealism that it still bears, whatever one says about it, whatever it says about itself, that I am thinking of when—looking back over these scenes, and others as well, many others—I say they belong to “the” Left: these images that come and go in my intimate existence, that touch a very distant chord, that give us our truths.

But that’s not enough, of course.

And if I’d only been thinking about that, if I merely had that gallery of snapshots in mind, if my attachment was only to a novel from another age, if I was only keeping faith with those Spaniards, those Maquisards, that magnificent father, those Portuguese, those rebellious, insubordinate Americans, then I’m sure the future president would have brought up at least two objections, if our conversation had gone on any longer.

First objection. Those images belong to everyone. Nobody has a monopoly on being haunted or inspired by them. These bright specters are like the dybbuks of Jewish folklore who jump from one soul to the next, their very liberty refuting the silly, predictable notion that we own our own ghosts. Remember Romain Gary’s novel *The Dance of Genghis Cohn*, in which the dybbuk of a no-name Jew invaded the mind of a former Nazi and drove him mad. But Nicolas Sarkozy . . . This man, a right-winger, to be sure, but not the devil and not a Nazi . . . It’s true enough that nobody can forbid anyone to be haunted by the image of André Malraux in Spain, of Léon Gambetta in his balloon, or of Jean Jaurès pleading for the love of country and world. Nobody can forbid a candidate from carrying with him the last words of Guy Môquet, that seventeen-year-old Communist Resistant gunned down by the Nazis at a moment when—October 1941—his party was barely emerging from its class collaboration with the uniformed proletarians of the Wehrmacht. And nobody can regret that the first decision of the candidate-cum-president was to have these words read out, at the beginning of every school year, in every class in France, by teachers who, before him, would clearly never have dreamed of doing so. We can have different gods and still worship the same saints. And worshipping saints, being illuminated by a quick flash of images, is not enough to make an identity.

Second objection. Alongside these images are others. And when I see my friends gloating, when I hear these temple guardians exhorting their flocks to unbreakable fidelity, telling the story of the family without a single stain, illustrated from one end to the other like an illuminated book of hours, I can’t help thinking about other pictures, less flattering, less glorious, less bursting with power and life, but, alas, no less real, and which show the other side. Guy Mollet, cigarette in his mouth, jaw drooping a bit like the old Jean-Marie Le Pen. François Mitterrand, the other one, the first one, from the governments of the 1950s, who was pacifying the Algerian *djebels* with flamethrowers, his hair black and thick but his mouth limp, his eyes strangely more dead than in photographs taken twenty or thirty years later, his flat and boneless face, as if his cynicism was a kind of inner leprosy that had eaten away his features. Blum himself, in those newsreels where he’s gasping for breath, with

broken voice, his hand jerking around in front of his lips as if it were trying to chase off the words that are coming out of his mouth, or trying to push far away from himself the blood-drenched words already echoing back—Blum, yes, explaining that the Spanish Popular Front is going to die, that my father’s comrades-in-arms were going to die like rats in the streets of Barcelona and that the French Popular Front wasn’t going to lift a finger to save them. Those American Democrats who rallied to support Bush in 2000, as they had to Nixon thirty years before, and rallying more generally to the worst racial ideas of the clans of the Old South—what claim do those people still have to be called Democrats? And then the image of dishonor itself, which was the long involvement of the Left, the European Left with Stalinism, which haunts me too—because it was the Left once again that accepted the worst crimes of the most Mafioso Communism, whose prattle stifled the cries from the Russian, Cuban, and Chinese gulags, which in France, before the National Front, created the detestable concept of a “threshold of intolerance,” wading through the blood of innocents, sticking its nose right into the manure, allowing itself to reflect all the infamies that a human face can reflect, while still claiming to be the Left—what a disaster!

In other words, images aren’t enough.

If we’re going to compare images, I’d have to agree that there are as many images in my head that shame the Left as there are that do it proud.

And if all I had were these images, the magic lantern we all have at the back of our minds to project our beloved shadows, then I wouldn’t be able to choose a side—weren’t they, or some similar to them, the reason a third Lévy—my friend Benny Lévy, an ex-revolutionary convert to a well-informed and even orthodox Judaism—the reason he said to me, in one of our last conversations: “I’ve never been on the Left; I’ve been a Maoist; I’ve been as revolutionary as anyone else; but on the Left, a leftist related to all those ghosts you’ve mentioned, a relative of all those wretches who always liked to imagine themselves belonging to the family of murderers, no thank you, I’d have done a lot of things in my life but that, never, never . . . !”

But anyway. Those are my images. They made me who I am and will never leave me. And no matter what anyone says, they are what first come to mind when I say that I am loyal to the Left.

## My Primal Scenes

Then there are the events.

Yes, I said to myself on that afternoon, as I was turning over in my head the future president's half affectionate, half-threatening words: being on the Left means something more than those moving images, which can be misleading and even false: it means a certain number of "great" events, "historic" events, as the saying goes, which serve as great, very great, markers of our identity.

These events are rare.

They are exceptional, in the literal sense of the word.

Each of them pierces our very being, bursts through our ordinary days, interrupts our well-ordered existence.

It's wrong, moreover, to say "historic"; you can say "historic events," but that isn't it: it would be better to say "nonhistoric"—and still better to describe such events as "ahistoric" or even "antihistoric," since they so upend the laws of normal history that history, reasserting itself, resists and opposes them.

A characteristic of these events that we'll therefore call "historic" or "ahistoric," the quality that according to Heidegger, distinguishes them from events that he rightly calls "natural," is that we can never say, "That's it; it's over; it's run its course; its meaning is settled; we now know how it went and what it meant"—and that is why they are such great markers of our identities.

So what are these events, precisely?

What events do we have in mind when, as I do, we stubbornly cling to this big corpse that the Left already was in the days of Sartre and Nizan, and of which the least we can say is that it hasn't been resuscitated since?

Here, too, it all depends on your personal history.

If you're German, for example, and consider yourself an heir of the "traitor" and "antifascist" Willy Brandt.

Or if you're Italian and you recall Amadeo Bordiga, or the writers Leonardo Sciascia, Pier Paolo Pasolini, or Alberto Moravia.

Or Spanish, inspired by the antifascist Civil War of 1936.

Or, once again, American, shaped by the teachings of Eugene V. Debs, Norman Thomas, Michael Harrington, Irving Howe—and haunted, still, by the memory of Rosa Parks, of Martin Luther King, of peaceful marches, by the struggles and protests against the Vietnam War, by the memory of the democratic movement in Chile and the man who dug its grave, Kissinger; or by the election of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

For a Frenchman—the situation I am most familiar with, of course, and for which I take myself as an example, though everyone can fill in his or her own examples—for a Frenchman these events are common knowledge.

Maybe it's no longer, as it was in the nineteenth century, the French Revolution—although . . . it

not so clear, after all, that the debate on the French Revolution has lasted long enough. . . . In a country where, two centuries later, the question of whether to call the Vendée massacres a genocide is still current, we can't take for granted that we're completely at peace with that supreme event. . . . And the truth is that, even today, I have to admit that Mao Zedong was at least partly right when he famously quipped, apropos of the "lessons" he drew from the "revolution of 1789": "It's still too early to say." It might not be 1848 either, nor the separation of church and state, nor the Commune—gigantic events, to be sure, outside the normal flow of history, to a certain extent untimely, because they cannot be reduced to their contexts or conditions, these moments that broke with previous history, the interruptions in time that were also long-standing concentrations, themselves once red lines that people fought about, which tore apart and oriented generations of men and women—though . . . are we entirely sure that those questions, too, are dead and buried? Could we swear that the repercussions of those shocks cannot still be felt in the discussions about, for example, the critical situation of our *banlieues*?

But anyway . . . When I speak of events that still separate ideological and political families, when I try to think of the specific events that, on that day, consciously or not, I had in my memory and which kept me from being able to say yes to the future president, I'm really thinking of just four events that, along with those images, have made me who I am.

THE FIRST IS VICHY, that sinister nightmare from which France has clearly had trouble waking. Should we forget it? Should we—first question—forget Vichy's crimes and write them off in the name of passing time? And should we—second question—just say that those were tough times for France, that the intrigues in the headquarters of Pétain's regime in Vichy were sheer pandemonium—to borrow a term from Mitterrand's last phase—and put it all into perspective, contextualize them, and, at the end of the day, justify them? The question was already being asked the day after the regime fell. And on that same day, voices could be heard saying that yes, you had to understand, excuse, let off the hook, let the dead bury the dead and keep Frenchmen from attacking and hating one another: France was a smoking ruin, France was a sewer, and it's a clever person indeed who knows whom to trust in a gutter. France had been defeated, France was no longer itself during those terrible years, during that parenthesis, and, as André Mornet, prosecutor in the Pétain case, said, we had to "erase them from our history." . . . I think the opposite. I think that the crimes for which Vichy took the initiative (and we know that many of them were on its own initiative) can never be excused. I think that the only way to free ourselves is not by forgetting them but by keeping them alive in our memory (I don't think we should give an inch on the "duty of remembrance" described by Primo Levi, theorized in the eighties and so often denounced today). And above all, I think (this is the biggest dividing line) that if these crimes are inexcusable and if we have to keep their memory alive, then Vichy was not just another name for good old French conservatism, or for a slightly muscular authoritarianism, or for a nationalist distraction—but that it was, in the strict sense of the word, fascism.

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THE SECOND IS the Algerian War. France is still emerging from the painful debate which the party of the former and the future president had taken the initiative to begin, and which centered around a law ordering future school curricula to recognize “the positive role of the French presence overseas, and especially in North Africa.” Enough repentance! this right wing was saying. Enough beating our breasts over a few crimes we may have committed here or there! We built schools and hospitals, we built kilometer after kilometer of highways and railroads, we brought those backward peoples the miracle of the Enlightenment, coveted by the whole world: doesn’t that justify taking a few liberties with the law? The crimes, especially, of the Front de Libération Nationale, its leaders’ cynicism, the disaster of the one-party socialism built on the ruins of the French endeavor and resulting in such a huge amount of pain and death: doesn’t that put our own mistakes into perspective, and excuse them? Well, I don’t think so. I don’t like the idea that my neighbor’s crimes excuse my own. I don’t, once again, think that this is a debate on which compromise is possible. Algeria, an adventure which began with the horrors of “smoking people out” with suffocation and fire, with racially determined roundups and other mass crimes committed by Bugeaud’s hellish legions; which continued with the Indigénat Code, the daily humiliations of the so-called native populations, and then the Sétif massacre which was the real cause, nine years later, of the actual war; and which concluded, fifteen years later, at the Villa Susini or elsewhere, with the cries of the people tortured by Generals Aussaresses and Massu . . . I refuse to call that adventure a work of civilization. Here again, what I favor is not dwelling on the crime but creating a constructed, well-informed, organized memory of it. I call the Left those who believe that colonialism, the submission of one people to another people’s law, a collective servitude that is always written with the red ink of the blood of individuals, is perhaps not the only crime in the history of humanity, to say the least; and obviously not one that excuses other crimes committed in the same places by anti-colonial liberation movements—but who believe that it is still a crime; a great crime; and an inexcusable one at that.

MAY 1968. I am not a fervent veteran of May ’68. I was one of those people who, the day after, emphasized that the notion that “the beach was beneath the paving-stones” could be naïve, naturalistic and utopian. And far be it from me to join those who, forty years on, try to summon the “spirit of May.” But there are two major ways to see that event. There is the France that cannot quite get over it and vomits up all that history—cultivating, meanwhile, the nostalgia for an ordered society with natural and agreed-upon authorities, it supposedly over-turned: May ’68 as a black hole sucking up everything that was most solid in the patriarchal, reactionary, archaic France of the Gaullist and pre-Gaullist age. And there is the France that, for the same reasons, sees it as a happy moment: new rights; new freedoms, novel power, for women to do what they wanted with their bodies, and to choose whether they would be mothers; modernity; perhaps the true moment when modernity entered our country; joy; poetry; yes, a real moment of poetry, but in acts; passions communicated; impatience shared; “inflamed disorders” (Antonin Artaud, *Héliogabale*); a nocturnal journey through cruelty and madness; throwing dice against the sky; letting them crash to earth; watching, between earth and sky

a wave of insubordination that we'd capture and channel through our heads; the cops will never again go through our souls, our hearts, and our bodies; art against culture; life against survival; all those lives, cracked, intimidated, or just faded into premature old age, which awoke for the springtime. A world that doesn't change its foundations but its tastes; the taste not for getting but for giving; ah, how dumb is the idea of a sensual, predatory May '68, inventor of consumer egoism, when it was exactly the opposite, a true moment, in fact, of giving and of giving back! And not to mention (I'll come back to this, since it's obviously the essential point) the moment of the final struggle with "doddering Moscow," of the break with all those old European Communist parties tossed into the dustbin of what we were starting to call red fascism—without even mentioning the birth, at that moment, of the Left and the masses', antitotalitarianism, which had been seeking its expression for the previous fifty years . . .

AND FINALLY, LONG before all this, at the turn of the previous century, "the Affair," the real one, the only one: one that was, François Mauriac would say, the inaugural scene of "an ongoing civil war."

Contemporary French history begins here. Dreyfus's innocence was clearly established. But the extraordinary thing was that a whole faction of the political classes, along with important sectors of public opinion, acted as if innocence didn't matter, and that asserting it could only weaken the Army, the State, Order, and thus the country, even further. The Right, therefore, grouped together those whose highest values were Tradition, Authority, Nation, the Social Body and, along with these values, hatred of intellectuals, democracy, Parliament. The Left included—besides the opposite of all those values—all those who defended one man's rights, and thus the Rights of Man, and everything that went along with them: freedom; truth; the critical mind-set; secular government; "when the *raison d'État* loses its way, bring reason back to the state"; when the individual with no collective importance is threatened with being ground under by the collective, take, instinctually, the side of the individual. Read *Notre jeunesse* by Charles Péguy. Bernard Lazare's *J'accuse*, which stood as a model for Zola's. Thirty years later, Léon Blum's *Souvenirs sur l'affaire*. *The Jewish State* by Theodor Herzl whose experience covering Dreyfus's trial led him to spark the national liberation movement that eventually led to the creation of Israel. And read what that other intellectual wrote, Charles Maurras, founder of the Action Française, who places race and nation above any truth; and who could only utter half a century later, when a verdict was handed down condemning him for collaboration with the Nazis, his famous phrase: "This is Dreyfus's revenge." Mauriac was right. It's all there. It all begins there. And France, a century later, returns there: every time one side starts to prefer injustice to disorder; every time the other side stands up against the injustice—no matter how minor, or apparently harmless, or costly to repair. That is the fourth event.

IT'S TRUE THAT NONE of these events can completely justify the clear division of Right and Left.

We know, for example, that the pro-Dreyfus forces recruited on the Right as well, and that significant portion of the Left (Jules Guesde, but also Jean Jaurès) took their time in getting involved in what sounded to them like yet another internal quarrel of the bourgeoisie: Ah, that hatred of the “Jewish plutocracy” in the Left of the day! Its distaste at having to take the side of a representative of what the socialist Édouard Drumont called “Jewish France”; and the hideous remark of the founder of *L’Humanité*, Jean Jaurès, who, returning from a trip to Algeria in 1895, grumbled about a kind of socialism that expressed itself in the “slightly restrictive” form of anti-Semitism!<sup>1</sup>

We know that some figures involved in France’s May ’68 weren’t exactly on the Left: there was my friend Benny Lévy, head of the Parisian Maoists at the beginning of the seventies; but there was also Maurice Clavel, a herald, if that’s what he was, of what he called “the rebellion of life” and which everyone knew, was an admirer of Maurras and a fervent Christian and who—he certainly said it often enough!—knew of only one revolution, the one that began two thousand years before on the day of the Pentecost, under the aegis of a certain Jesus of Nazareth; and there was *Combat*, the *Combat* Philippe Tesson, who would soon send me to cover Bangladesh, for a paper that, during those days of general strikes and riots, was being sold only in the streets of the Latin Quarter. Who, today remembers *Combat*? Who remembers the marvelous, unique echo chamber it was for the student uprising of those weeks? And who, among those who do remember it, also remembers that a few years earlier the same paper had also opened its columns to writers who favored a French Algeria?

We also know that the colonial question divided the Left as much as the Right, then and now.

And things are almost worse when it comes to Vichy. There were so many socialists, neo-socialists, syndicalists, anarchists, Left pacifists, and sometimes Communists, who, as if they wanted to unleash complete confusion, took part in its crimes. . . . The constant *question* of Vichy, which, forty years later, reserved such new and strange surprises for us: a left-wing president, François Mitterrand, telling us that “in his soul and his conscience” he knew that neither “the Republic” nor “France” had “anything to do with that”; a right-wing president, Jacques Chirac, who, on July 16, 1995, at the Vélodrome d’Hiv in Paris, finally called the infamous crime by its name by mentioning the “enduring debt” of France that “did not keep its word” and “committed an irreparable crime.”<sup>2</sup>

I understand very well, in other words, that none of these events is enough to separate the left wing from the right. I am aware that these events themselves—along with their memory—are split by the same dividing line that they purport to draw.

And part of me says that it might not be one situation or another that draws the line, which clearly notes where it goes, and which sees whether it can be drawn through ourselves.

But another part of me resists, and refuses, the erasure of old landmarks—so much so that, over the course of the following weeks, something else would become more and more obvious to me: the validation, by Nicolas Sarkozy himself, to an extent that I could never have imagined, of the idea that these “great” events are what will continue to draw the lines in the future.

WE’RE NOT THERE YET—but still . . .

I’ll skip over Sarkozy’s Dreyfusism, even though his various initiatives, like the “selective immigration” policy, the creation of the Ministry of Immigration and National Identity—even the

communitarian bent we started to note in the candidate's declarations about, for example, the Islam in France—are not exactly heading toward the defense of universal values that is, according to Julien Benda's *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, the essence of Dreyfusism.

But I am thinking of Sarkozy's strange declarations, strange and strangely pervasive,<sup>3</sup> which effectively state that France "didn't invent the Final Solution" (which, put this way, is obviously not wrong); that it didn't "give in to the totalitarian temptation" (which, on the other hand, is wrong, and means nothing more and nothing less than exculpating those French policemen who, on the morning of July 17, 1942, went to arrest the Jews in their neighborhoods, taking care "not to forget the little ones"); and that it "did not commit crimes against humanity or genocide" (wrong again, since arresting and deporting French citizens whose only mistake was having been born Jewish meets, and of itself, the definition of genocide as defined not only in the Penal Code but also in the Nuremberg trials). It doesn't matter what the future president does. It doesn't matter how often he heaps praise on the martyrs of the Plateau des Glières or on the young Guy Môquet, shot by the Nazis. It doesn't matter that, on July 21, 2007, he went with Simone Veil to pay his respects at the Holocaust Memorial and that he and his prime minister make unambiguous statements. The fact remains, and will always remain, that he campaigned on those words. The fact remains, and will always remain, that by doing so, he helped negate the work of one or two generations who struggled to preserve the memory.

As for colonial affairs, I'm thinking of his attitude, from campaign stop to campaign stop,<sup>4</sup> dwelling on the theme of "French pride" and promising "never to linger in the demagoguery of repentance"; in claiming that our country "also owes its greatness" to the men and women who were both "witnesses to and actors in" this "civilizing mission unprecedented in our history," meaning the colonial mission; and by constantly repeating that if France has a moral debt it's toward the French Algerians and the Algerian soldiers in the French army who were "cowardly abandoned." There, once more, our opinions diverged. There, once again, I found myself unable to vote for someone who felt no debt toward the three to four hundred thousand Algerians killed in a war that, for many long years, did not dare speak its name.

Finally, I'm thinking of President Sarkozy's embrace, like no other politician's before him, of the fearful, oversensitive, and wounded France that sees the source of all its troubles in May '68—I'm thinking of those crowds at his campaign rallies practically swooning at the very idea that someone finally dared to say out loud what they'd been thinking to themselves for the last forty years. . . .<sup>5</sup> How could men or women of the Left allow themselves, once again, to vote for a man who, throughout his entire campaign, insisted that he saw May '68 as the beginning of our contemporary "cynicism"; the secret inspiration of the "delinquents and the rioters"; the origin of the "crazy cult of money"; of the reign "of short-term profit and rudderless financial capitalism"? How could one support a president outrageous enough to say, at one of his final rallies,<sup>6</sup> that he only had two days left, not a single day more, to "liquidate once and for all" the values and the legacy of the very event that had, among all its other merits, illuminated the connection, the axis, between the two fascisms, brown and red? "Liquidate": a strange choice of words. "Finish off" that moment of real clear-eyed thinking, right when they were sowing confusion everywhere, what a strange idea . . . This platform didn't amuse me. It sent a chill down my spine.

But once again, my own personal case hardly matters.

The main thing is that these gestures and words made it hard to believe that the old debate was over. The main thing is the very fact that Sarkozy thought he had to give three revisionist readings

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