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The black holes of BHL

by [James Bowman](#)

On the “War, Evil, and America Now” symposium at Skidmore College.

Here’s a new definition of “intellectual” for you. It’s a man (or, of course, woman) who can say something like this with a straight face: “Of course there are pragmatic considerations in every life. If you have a beloved wife who is dying, you will devote a lot of time to her, and you forget about those who are suffering far away. That is ok. But there is no metaphysical, ontological, anthropological reason that makes you more responsible for this one who is close than for these others who are far away.” That is a summary by the French intellectual superstar Bernard-Henri Lévy of the thought of his fellow (Lithuanian-) French intellectual superstar—the species really only exists in France—Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995). On this view, Levinas represents the *reductio ad absurdum* of Enlightenment thought. Taken seriously, the principle of Levinas “that fraternity precedes the commonness of a genus” would make war ethically impossible, and “BHL” (as he is known to his many fans in France) foregathered with a number of American intellectual luminaries in March of 2006 at Skidmore College to see, in effect, just how seriously this idea could be taken.

Pretty seriously as it turns out, now that an edited transcript of their lucubrations has been published in the Spring-Summer edition of *Salmagundi* as “War, Evil, and America Now.” M. Lévy is clearly the Socrates of this Symposium, and the others who are present—Jonathan Schell, Benjamin Barber, Jean Elshtain, Jackson Lears, Carolyn Forché, Michael Massing, Philip Glotzbach, and Robert Boyers—defer to him as the acknowledged celebrity in their midst. As the title suggests, they are all discussing his book, *War, Evil, and the End of History*, which was published in English in 2004, but of course they range far beyond mere philosophy—most frequently in their obsessive return to the iniquities of the American war in Iraq and of the administration that has prosecuted it. Now you’d think that a gathering of philosophers and intellectuals setting out to discuss a political subject like this might have taken some trouble to round up a diversity of views. Or at least more than one view. But apart from one or two outbursts by a somewhat shamefaced Professor Elshtain, they are all alike as peas in a pod when it comes to the questions before the conference, including the questions of the war and the Bush administration.

That gives the whole exercise a strange feel, like that of a debate in which one side has unaccountably failed to show up—or not been invited at all. Come to think of it, this is not so strange, is it? We are already thoroughly familiar with such shrill homogeneity of opinion from other intellectual gatherings sponsored by the journals of the Left. The result is also familiar. Genuine debate having been cut off, the event swiftly degenerates into hysterical and hyperbolic assertion, each speaker seeking to top the last in displaying the virulence of his own case of what Charles Krauthammer calls Bush Derangement Syndrome. Professor Lears seems to me to take the prize, but it is a close-run thing. In particular, I call the attention of political epidemiologists to the long screed

beginning on the journal's two-hundred-and-forty-sixth page with a mention of "one of the most serious constitutional crises of our history," and ending with the professor's characterization of a ritual obeisance by President Bush to one of his predecessors in office—that "overrated blowhard" Theodore Roosevelt—as tantamount to a revival of "the rhetoric of regenerative war."

Almost every article of the professor's catalogue is as absurdly overstated as these two, where it is not wrong, tendentious, or self-contradictory. In this gathering, however, not one of them is even debatable. No, I take it back. At one point, when Professor Lears refers to our elected leaders—though he also believes that they were *not* elected and cites Mark Crispin-Miller's crackpot theories to that effect—as "a gang of thugs who are interested only in power," he is gently reproved by Professor Elshain. "The situation we confront is not just about a gang taking over. It just isn't." I wonder if the first "just" there was meant to go, like the second, before rather than after the "not," or if the gang, like the thugs, is stipulated. Either way, it is a handsome concession in this context, an illustration of the only *understatement* of the conference, also made by her, which is that "often in a university setting people become so insular that they fail to realize the resonance of issues [like abortion] that seem to them easily resolved."

Alas, her lone voice crying in the wilderness that "it's important for intellectuals to acknowledge that people they disagree with can be quite capable of making nuanced moral decisions" falls on deaf ears. There is one all-too-brief moment when the superstar himself seems to float an otherwise unthinkable hypothesis: "Maybe underneath or behind Bush's war, there are some ideas. Some ideas with which you and I disagree, but ideas." But this proves to be only a passing fancy. Elsewhere, BHL does not scruple to refer to the conference's common bugbear as "criminal" and to fault the Left in America for not being serious about impeachment.

The most interesting idea thrown open to the consideration of the colloquium by its cynosure is that of the "black hole," which grows out of his idiosyncratic and idiotic notion of the "end of history." I use the term idiotic advisedly, both in the ancient Greek and the modern American sense. For he uses it not in the Hegelian sense that Francis Fukuyama does, "as a sort of accomplishment" but as an abdication of political responsibility. To him, the world's most intractable problems amount to "a sort of zero degree of history, where a large portion of the world is written out of history." In other words, the end of history is the end of *meaning* in history, and the blackness of the "black holes" of Bosnia, Iraq, Darfur, or Rwanda or any of the other "trouble spots" across the globe becomes more intellectual than moral. BHL wants to lead our sympathies in the direction of the victims of these black holes, but the sufferings he is calling attention to are really his own: he just doesn't understand them or the political violence which has created them. However black the holes may be to the Bosnians, Iraqis, Darfurians, or Rwandans, they are much more blackly incomprehensible to the understandings of these enlightened liberals who find their sufferings "meaningless."

This seems to me to be a remarkable abdication of the intellectual's duty—if intellectuals can be said to have any duties—to think and to understand. The concept of the black hole is even applicable retrospectively, as when Benjamin Barber says that World War I "was a war with almost no narrative that makes very much sense. Talk about a war about nothing but theft and violence and you're in World War I." The fact that the people who actually fought and died and suffered in the First World War did not think it was a "war about nothing but theft and violence" means nothing to him—any more than the fact that the sufferers of Bosnia etc. didn't suffer from his own lack of understanding of why they were being murdered does to M. Lévy. That brainiacs like these experience such sufferings as meaningless is enough to cancel out and make irrelevant any meaning the violence may have had—as a few not-very-strenuous inquiries would have informed him *it did* have—to the participants on either side. If the intellectuals don't understand it, then it must not be understandable. It is an utterly anti-intellectual—and, not coincidentally, solipsistic—point of view.

But the concept of the black hole is really part of a larger attempt on the part of BHL and his NBFS to

explain to themselves, more than to anyone else, how they can be (as they claim to be) anti-dictator, anti-terrorist, anti-Islamicist, even anti-“Islamofascist,” while still hating “neocons,” whom they see as being not much if at all better—not in spite of but *because* they are the only ones doing anything about these things. For these eggheads, the problem of terrorism must remain an epistemological no-go area lest they find themselves allied with the hated Bushites and neocons. Obviously, the ability to close your eyes completely to the reasoning behind the Bush administration’s intervention in Iraq—or to dismiss it as a mere disguise for such discreditable motives as “oil”—is very useful if you want to go on to characterize it as “a gang of thugs who are interested only in power.” But you need this deliberate blindness because the thugs stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the immorality, or at least the moral meaninglessness, of their own actions.

There is a wonderful circularity about all this which is masked by the saving obscurity of the black hole, and M. Lévy has high hopes of selling his product even to ordinary Americans whom he praises as “perhaps the most guilty people I know” because they all feel guilty about what he thinks—and, presumably, what they also think—they did to the Indians.

There is today a debate in France about whether there were some positive aspects to colonialism. Half of France still believes in that idea, which is frankly disgusting. In America the very different tendency to guilt is a kind of victory, I think, which was really achieved not only with the civil rights movement of the 1960s, but with the victory of the political correctness movement.

This is the first time I have heard political correctness described, admiringly, as a “movement.”

Of course there are probably as many Americans who refuse to feel guilty about the Indians as there are Frenchmen who refuse to feel guilty about the empire. BHL just never meets any, because all his American friends take care that no dissenting voices shall be heard in their debates. But this is what gives rise to a comical sort of intellectual populism in the Frenchman and his American admirers as they hurl their brickbats at those they think of as intellectuals in the Bush White House. “So maybe it’s worth asking if we want intellectuals, even so called good intellectuals, to be engaged, when what we’re likely often to get is engagement by guys like the neo-conservatives who have brought us all the very bad ideas guiding Bush and his comrades.”

What it all comes down to, shorn of the vitriol and the hyperbole and the foolishness, is some version of the sterile moral utopianism of Emmanuel Levinas. Thus, in the words of Jonathan Schell: “What we need is a conception of humanitarian obligation, and an implementation of it, and instruments for implementing it, that are not imperial in character.” In other words, what we need is a square circle. And if we don’t get it, we’re not only going to brand as criminals those who don’t give it to us, and who stick to the only version of “black hole” humanitarianism with any chance of success; we’re also going to take refuge ourselves in a magnificently stylish, celebrity-approved nescience that will certify our moral purity—and our political irrelevance. This is mere childishness.

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