

Daniel bensaïd

## Operation “Bullshit Unlimited”

*An article by Daniel Bensaïd on the response of French intellectuals to the “war on terror”.*

**1.** Only yesterday, French intellectuals overflowed with compassion. From Bosnia to Chechnya, by way of Kosovo, on every front of the new world disorder. Their silence before the imperial crusade in Afghanistan and before the criminal policy of the Sharon government in Palestine is all the more deafening. This inglorious resignation is not, alas, unrelated to the relative weakness of the anti-war mobilizations in France, compared with the demonstrations that have taken place since October 7, 2002 in most big European countries.

It seals an ideological debacle which began at the end of the 1970s with the rise in media influence of the “new philosophy”. Already, these intellectuals had begun to swallow hard, to bid farewell to the anti-colonialism of yesterday, to leap to the defence of anti-totalitarianism in the name of virtuous Western democracy. This mass conversion has not taken place on the same scale in Britain or in Italy. The test of the war in Afghanistan allows us to measure the extent of the damage and the consequences of this capitulation of critical thought, perfectly summed up by the leitmotiv of Bernard-Henri Lévy [the most high profile of the 1970s “new philosophers” – ed.]: to seek to understand, is to begin to justify. For fear of justifying, one should then not attempt to understand. From that, it follows that there is no longer anything to understand.

Why is it, asked the subtle Pascal, that a lame mind annoys us while a lame person does not? Because, he replied, a lame person knows that they are lame, while a lame mind does not.

The first shocking thing about this resignation from reason is the manner in which it resigns itself to stupefaction before an event which is unthinkable given that it is deemed to be without causes, antecedents or consequences, like a pure miracle emerging from historic nothingness. The horror of the image, repeated on a loop, tetanises the intelligence. By different paths, Claude Lanzmann [Filmmaker and editor of the magazine *Les Temps Modernes*, founded by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Lanzmann is best known outside France for a purported ‘oral history of the Holocaust’, the documentary film *Shoah* (1985). Other achievements include the film *Tsahal* (1994), a eulogy to the Israeli army – ed.] and Jean Baudrillard [social philosopher and “hyperrealist” – ed.] arrive at a similar conclusion on this point. For the first, “the radical novelty of the event” annuls all previous categories of political understanding. For the second, “the absolute event”, the “pure event” defies “not only a moral, but any form of interpretation”. Balzac, nonetheless, was aware that “the absolute event”, which was explained by theological miracle rather than secular history, did not exist in politics. There is still a before and after, causes and consequences. The fetishism of the event involves, then, a suppression of historical intelligibility, necessary to its depoliticization in favour of a hypertrophy of the symbolic.

**2.** This space from which politics has been expelled then becomes then a suitable place for abstractions, delusions or hypostases. There are no longer real interests that confront each other and effective contradictions that express

themselves, but shadows and spectres. The shadow of Democracy, singular and with a capital D, combats the spectre of Terrorism, singular and with a capital T. The distinguished economist François Rachline sums up the new century thus: “The 21<sup>st</sup> century opens with a new totalitarianism: terrorism.” Not so new as that, if one takes the trouble to reread the speeches of US leaders. Since Ronald Reagan, they have unceasingly harped on the new anti-terrorist crusade, preparing thus a replacement for a Communist “evil empire” on the verge of collapse. It was necessary to find new pretexts for the maintenance of military alliances and the resumption of the arms race. Anti-terrorism took over from anti-totalitarianism, the one and indivisible civilization remaining identified with market democracy. Yet, the scholarly studies are definite: “Terrorism and reprisals, although spectacular, are only secondary actors from the point of view of their number of victims.

The structural violence which is at the basis of a good number of war and acts of terrorism acts slowly: its victims die little by little, often as a consequence of infectious disease.” Impersonal, often invisible, this structural violence has no director nor commander, but it is no less murderous and stems from inequality and social injustice. Thus Aijaz Ahmad, author of a brilliant book on “Classes, nations, literature”, writes: “The terrorism that torments the United States is what happens when the Communist left and secular anti-colonialist nationalism have been defeated, whereas the problems created by imperialist domination are more acute than ever. Hatred takes the place of revolutionary ideologies. Privatized violence and vengeance take the place of national liberation struggles. Millenarian would-be martyrs replace organized revolu-

tionaries. Unreason grows stronger when reason is monopolized by imperialism and destroyed in its revolutionary forms”.

**3.** The world’s rulers win out twice over. They put reason on their side and cast out those who resist them into the fires of madness and myth. Wars waged in the name of Humanity with a capital H (on this point, Karl Schmitt was correct) no longer know an enemy. They draw a definitive frontier between human and inhuman. The “other” is no longer a part of humanity, but a beast expelled from the human race. It is significant that the caricatures of Milosevic (showing him with the features of a pig) played on the theme of bestialization, while the weekly newspapers speak, in the rhetoric of hunting, of the ‘tracking’ of Bin Laden. This imperial monopoly on the representation of the species is heavy with consequences: war is no longer a political conflict, but an ethical war (or a holy one) in the name of absolute Good; rights are lost in morality; without declared objective proportioned relationship between its ends and its means, war becomes infinite and unlimited. Narcissistic Western imperialism thus awards itself an inexhaustible credit of good conscience; in the manner of Bush – unblushingly saying in October 2001, “I know how good we are” – it is charged with administering the divine will on earth.

**4.** It is not, then, surprising to hear Berlusconi take up in his own way the theme of the clash of civilizations. Nor is it astonishing to find it taken up, albeit in a more sophisticated manner, by one of the servile intellects of *Les Temps Modernes*. For Robert Redeker [a philosophy teacher and a member of the editorial board of the aforementioned journal], the 113 signatories of an appeal against the imperial war seek to “blur the divide which has occurred” as a result of the critique of totalitar-

ianism, between the intellectual and the militant: “Islam is today the faith of the oppressed as Communism was yesterday, and contemporary Islamophilia justifies itself by the same cast of mind that justified Sovietophilia yesterday”. We, who have never been Sovietophiles but anti-Stalinist and internationalists, have no reason to be either Islamophiles or Islamophobes, inasmuch as we know Islam to be as plural as Christianity or Judaism.

The logic of Bush (whoever is not with me is my enemy!) is a poor logic of the excluded middle: whoever opposes the empire flirts with Islamic fundamentalism! Carried away by his fervour, Redeker continues: “No ideology is any more retrograde than Islam in relation to capitalism, of which the Twin Towers in their majestic beauty were the symbol”. He adds that “the Muslim religion is a barbarizing regression.” Aesthetics are here harmonized with a politics that sees the Twin Towers as “new towers of Babel”, symbols of the “crossbreeding of othernesses” (sic)! To the terrorist quest of the absolute, Redeker opposes a modest “logic of the preferable” reconciling himself at low cost with the dominant order. The mother of all capitulations, this logic, which is none other than that of the lesser evil, is often only the shortest road to the worst.

**5.** For distinguished service to intellectual cretinism during wartime, Monique Canto-Sperber, a specialist in moral philosophy (!) merits a special mention. When a builder puts up a crooked wall, they risk dismissal for a professional misdemeanour. A director of research at the CNRS [France’s prestigious National Centre for Scientific Research – ed.] is not exposed to the same penalties. Happily for her. While the sleuths of the FBI try in vain to disentangle the skein of the terrorist networks and their financial circuits, she reveals on

page one of *Le Monde*, three days before the beginning of the bombing of Afghanistan, that she has traced the trail of Bin Laden back to Trotsky and Saint-Just. She has indeed discovered that, in a 1938 pamphlet entitled “*Their Morals and Ours*”, Trotsky had furnished the ‘justification of terrorism’ in the name of the “absolute character of the end pursued and of indifference to the means”. In fact, Trotsky said exactly the opposite: “The end which justifies the means raises immediately the question: and what justifies the end?” For the end “also needs justification”.

**6.** This demand also returns like a boomerang on the cheerleaders of the imperial crusade. What exactly is their end? Bin Laden, who was only yesterday their means in the struggle against Communism, the Taliban, oil, the new world order, the eradication of a terrorism that they have themselves armed? Do all these noble ethical ends justify the most ignoble military means, carpet-bombing with fragmentation bombs, the “daisy cutter bomb”, uranium enriched weapons and the terrorist weapon par excellence (to the extent that it erodes any distinction between combatant and civilians) represented by nuclear weapons. Carried away by lyrical enthusiasm for the crusade of the Good, Alain Minc, only recently intoxicated by the blessings of commodity globalization, asks: “Would it have been necessary, in the name of respect for the civilian population, that the British not bomb Dresden or the Americans Hiroshima, allowing the Second World War to continue?” Who wishes the end, wishes the means! Nobody could ever demonstrate that Hiroshima was the only possible way of ending the war, while it is certain that this bomb would inaugurate a new era in the escalation of state terrorism. Undoubtedly, if religious fundamentalisms exist, there exists

henceforth a fundamentalism of the market and Alain Minc is its mullah.

**7.** Those who oppose the imperial Holy Alliance and its Afghan crusade can only be motivated by the characteristic pathology of the left intellectual: anti-Americanism combined with an underhand anti-Semitism camouflaged as anti-Zionism. On this point, there is a distressed chorus of disapproval, from Jacques Julliard [a journalist – ed.] to Alain Finkielkraut [a philosopher – ed.] The first complains that “since the glorious episode of the Dreyfus affair, French intellectuals have systematically chosen the camp of the enemies of liberty”. So supporting the Algerian liberation struggle or the movement against the war in Vietnam, is placing oneself in the camp of the enemies of liberty? Anti-Americanism, for Julliard, has become a safe investment for the intellectual left after the collapse of Marxism. If you want examples of French anti-Americanism, it is necessary rather to look for them in the French nationalist tradition, in its Gaullist and Stalinist variants.

Marxist intellectuals worthy of the name think in terms of political categories. They do not combat ‘the Americans’ as people, but US imperialism; in the same way that they fight European imperialism and their own colonial wars. If there is no “anti-Americanism”, there is on the other hand a servile and zealous ‘Americanism’, exemplified by Jean-Marie Colombani [editor of *Le Monde* – ed.] headlining on page one of *Le Monde*: “We are all Americans!” It is not astonishing if this imbecilic Americanism should generate an ‘anti-Americanism’ which would be the anti-imperialism of imbeciles.

**8.** As to Finkielkraut – this is becoming a habit – he would not miss such a good chance to accuse the perpetrators of the attacks of

hating the West not because of what it does wrong but because of its best features: “the civilization of men by women and the link with Israel”. You have to rub your eyes. As if the rights won by women were a present from the West and not the fruit of their own struggles! And as if the Zionist state, founded on confessional discrimination and military occupation, was the crown of civilization (which, moreover, would say a lot about the civilization in question)! Unlike anti-Semitism, which is a racialization of politics in the epoch of imperialism, anti-Zionism is a political position, considering that a Jewish state, based on confessional legitimacy, will lead the Jews of Israel straight to a new disaster. Whereas they were supposed to find security there, it is already the place in the world where Jews feel most threatened. And Sharon’s headlong flight towards escalation on the pretext of security, far from calming this anguish, only aggravates it. The amalgam between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism ends up, paradoxically, in feeding a real anti-Semitism by accrediting the idea that a good Jew is necessarily a Zionist.

**9.** Grafting the events of September 11 with his own campaign against modern art, Jean Clair [an art critic -ed.] adds a cultural dimension to the controversy. The surrealists, through their systematic denigration of Western values, become in his view the spiritual fathers of Bin Laden: “The French intelligentsia went very early and very far in the prefiguration of what happened on September 11”. Breton, Bin Laden, Mullah Omar, the same struggle? This evokes irresistibly the crusade against decadent art.

**10.** The luxuriance of foolish quotations on the war almost led us to overlook the inevitable sermon by Alain Touraine [director of the School of Advanced Studies in the Social

Sciences in Paris – ed.], as sociologist of armed action. Here there is a problem of (binary) logic: “One cannot condemn the attack of September 11 without supporting the American action in Afghanistan”. There is then, only one possible and imaginable action. A single (and military) meaning of history, in sum? In other words, if I don’t like Jerusalem artichokes, I must adore turnips. No “third way”, except for Blair and Schröder of course. One does not expect Touraine to be so flatly determinist. His learned sociology of action involves then a distinction between the question of terrorism and that of world poverty: the war comes first, UN intervention will follow – later – to deal with humanitarian needs.

**11.** An “unlimited justice” and a “war without end” calls forth an equally unlimited stupidity. Many of the authors of the Black Book of Communism have united their efforts in the circumstances to launch, in *Le Monde*, an appeal: “This war is ours! We believe that faced with difficulties today and perhaps with defeats tomorrow [beware of the court martial for defeatism, fainthearts!] it is necessary to develop in France as in other countries a movement of support to the soldiers who defend our liberties and our security.” Why not a support committee chaired by General Aussaresses, with Bigeard as general secretary [Aussaresses and Bigeard are prominent military figures who have been implicated in war crimes carried out during the war in Algeria].

### Post-Scriptum

**1.** While Claude Lanzmann bemoans the inability of those who oppose the imperial war to “face the radical novelty of the event” one is on the contrary struck by the tragic repetition afflicting the servile intellects of the Grand Coalition. Each intervention is for them a remake.

The day before yesterday, Saddam was Hitler Yesterday, it was Milosevic. Today, it's Bin Laden. Hitler serves thus as ahistoric pretext for any action of the international police force, present and future. What is revealed is precisely an inability to grasp the singularity of the event and the novelty of the situation.

**2.** Imagine the chorus of humanitarian indignation if, a half century from now, the Kosovar or Afghan refugees were still confined in the refugee camps? Yet this is the fate of the Palestinian refugees expelled from their land in 1948. More than 37 years ago the territories of the West Bank and Gaza were qualified as "occupied" by UN resolutions. There is, then, in these territories, an army of occupation and a legitimate resistance – in the eyes of international law – to this occupation. Yet the French intellectuals, so often ready to flare up for Bosnia or Chechnya, remain quiet. They are even disposed, if reasons of Empire oblige it, to join up in an alliance where they are

shoulder to shoulder with the butcher of Chechnya and the perpetrators of massacre of Tien An-Men. The salvation of the West is well worth this traffic in ethical indulgences. So much the worst if humanitarian sensibility becomes paralyzed on one side and if the children of Bethlehem or Ramallah weigh less in the scales of "infinite justice" than the victims of the World Trade Center.

April 2002

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Published by *International Viewpoint*, number 343, September 2002.