

On Philosophy and Commitment: For a Philosophy of Action

Bernard-Henri Levy

(The French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy, who recently revisited Bangladesh after forty-three years, delivered a public lecture at ULAB on 26 April, 2014. The text here is reproduced from the transcript of the lecture, with his kind permission. M. Levy was welcomed by Dr. Kazi Anis Ahmed, Vice-Chairman of the ULAB Board of Trustees, and introduced by M. Olivier Litvine, Director of the Alliance Francaise in Dhaka.)

Thank you, Olivier, and thank you very much, sir, for your kind words of introduction. I must tell you that after my second day in Dhaka, I am, number one, absolutely exhausted; and number two, I am deeply moved by the quality of the welcome I got in this city. I was not sure that I would ever come back to Bangladesh in my lifetime. I am not so old but I am not so young either. And for me, it has been a very emotional experience. Since yesterday, I have been going from emotion to emotion, emotions evoked by places, faces, and images, photos of the Father of the Nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Former freedom fighters who met me this morning told me that I might be on the very prestigious list of the people who they think might have to come back to receive an honor from this country. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina met me this morning. It was a moving moment, meeting the daughter of Mujib, who was in Dhaka when I came the first time, who spoke of her father, the liberation war, and the building of the state. It is so extraordinary, so rare for a man—or for a woman—after 43 years to come back on his own traces, to feel that he is the same and yet completely different; that he is another man, and that he is the same man; and at every step of this pilgrimage to wonder what is the part of him that died, what is the part of him which is still alive? It is not an experience that occurs frequently. Most of you in the audience are too young to understand. You will see when you are my age. You will see that this sort of experience is really extraordinary, disturbing, and memorable.

Very few occasions—destiny or God or whoever you want—give you, and very seldom, very rarely, this possibility of making this psychic journey yourself. “*Je est un autre*”—I is another, said one of the greatest French poets. I experience during this hour in Dhaka which part of the quote is true, and which part of the quote is false—how the two mix with each other. So this is the first thing I wanted to say, I wanted to say thank you, all of you, all those whom I have met in Dhaka—especially, Kaiser Haq, my friend, and Olivier Litvine, the Director of the Alliance Française, and all the men and women I have met since yesterday. Thank you all for being a part of this great moment, this great achievement of my lifetime of having these two days in Dhaka. You have asked me to reflect on this topic: Philosophy and Commitment. Not a bad topic. It is probably what I had in mind 43 years ago when I first came to Bangladesh.

What was happening in the mind of a young Frenchman who at the end of his studies wanted to come to the end of the world—to a country which did not exist yet, though it existed as a nation, which in any case seemed already in the process of dying? What happened in the head of the young student in order to take this decision? What was in command in the brain of the young intellectual? I had not written a book yet—just a few

articles. I was really a beginner, an absolute beginner in life, in studies, in commitment, and even in philosophy. And the first act of my life as a man was just to take a plane to New Delhi, to Calcutta, and to come to Jessore, to Khulna, and to Dhaka. Why? What happened in the mind of a very young Bernard-Henri Levy?

Of course, I would do such things many times later in my life. I would not only cover but film the war in Bosnia. I would make a movie called 'Bosna' with the help of my friend Alain Ferrari, who is not here, and my friend Gilles Hertzog, who is here. I spent a month of my life trying to report, trying to bear testimony to this slaughter at the heart of Europe, which happened in Bosnia. I would do it again of course, with my friend Gilles Hertzog and my friend Marc Roussel, who is also here today, when we made a movie about Libya, "The Oath of Tobruk", three years ago. It was a very strange adventure; it is a very odd enterprise for a philosopher to comment about this terrible bloodbath himself during one year in the battlefield of Ajdabiya and the bombed city of Misrata and to make a movie out of it. While I was shooting these two films, the dice were rolling already, and my life was made out of two threads—on the one side, philosophical reflection while I shut myself off from time to time during long periods in the Ivory Tower of my books; and on the other side, from time to time, as if it were in another time, the war of Libya and forgotten wars covered for newspapers like *Le Monde*, etc.

But Bangladesh was the first time. I did not even have the idea of writing a book. The book came long after, not on the spot. When I went back to France I thought that I knew enough, I had experience enough for it; in fact I knew too much not to bear testimony to what I had seen and felt. There were a few other books about the Bangladesh war, even in French. But I thought what I saw, the reflections that came out of that, needed to be put in a book. But all this was not in my mind when I responded to the call of Andre Malraux to fight for Bangladesh, when I went to see Malraux or wrote to him. A researcher recently found the letter which I wrote to Malraux in the Malraux archive. And he also found the handwritten remarks of Malraux on my letter, saying that I should be given an appointment. I will give it to Olivier Litvine to publish in the Newsletter of the Alliance Francaise.

I was just a young student without any project of writing a book, or of going on TV or delivering a speech. And when I replied to Malraux's reply and when I came to Bangladesh, what was at work, what was at stake in my mind? I ask this question, first of all because you have asked me, but also because what I am going to tell you goes far beyond myself, goes far beyond my case. I think this is how I will reply to your question. I will draw a picture of a generation of French intellectuals and French philosophers. At this time, the beginning of the 70s, you had a choice, if you were a young philosopher, between a few possible attitudes. The first attitude was the attitude of the famous philosopher Louis Althusser.

Althusser was my master. He taught me most of the philosophy I know. He taught me how to read a text, how to enter into a philosophical text. And the theory of Althusser was that in order to commit you have to "discommit", in order to get involved you have to retire, in order to have an effect in the world you have to take yourself out of the world. Althusser used to say, quoting Spinoza, that the concept of dog does not bark, that if you want to think about the dog, you have to abandon the real dog, the barking dog—with his body, his flesh, his wounds perhaps, his life and his death. You had to go to the world of pure idea in which the concept of dog had nothing

to do with a real dog—but had to do with the concept of cat, man, pet animal, and whatsoever. Althusser taught us what to do in order to be real committed intellectuals because he was a communist. And when I came to Bangladesh he was extremely influential. Then there was also Charles Bettelheim, the specialist in France on the Chinese revolution and all the other Asiatic political tempests. I was sent to Bettelheim by Louis Althusser. The first commandment of Althusser was to discover the thing, to discover the world in order to understand it, in order to act on it. It was not the Platonic attitude. Plato would say, forget the real world, just look at the idea. Althusser and Bettelheim would say, don't forget the real world, but in order to remember it, in order to intervene in it, you have to look somewhere else, you have to stay in the pure area of your concept. This was an attitude and it was a temptation.

You have another temptation which was very strong in my epoch—maybe still is today: these temptations are there forever. It was the temptation, I would say, of Mallarme. It was a sort of cult of purity. It was a practice of literature as completely transformed into a sort of religion—a cult of the letter (*unculte de la lettre*). And Mallarme, the post-Baudelairean and modern poet—the author of an impossible book that he never really wrote, as you know, Mallarme used to say that he knew no other real bomb—the most real bomb is the pure and perfect word. The pure rhyme in a poem is a bomb. It is stronger than a pistol shot. This was his attitude. Then a few years before I came here, there was a book published in France by a great man called Roger Stéphane who, I am sure, is not well-known here and perhaps not even in France. But he had a great effect on the intelligentsia of the time. Stéphane's book, *Portrait de l'aventurier (Portrait of the Adventurer)*, appeared with a great preface by Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre and Stéphane opposed the ordinary view of commitment to put forward what was a sort of aesthetics of commitment. They saw real history as a sort of stage for the exposure of the mind, of the ego, of the feelings of the philosopher or the writer. The adventurer according to Sartre was, for example, Lawrence of Arabia. It was Byron in Missolonghi at the time of the fight for independence of the Greeks against the Turks. Byron sincerely thought of creating a unit of the Greek Freedom Fighters in order to liberate Greece. But according to Stéphane and Sartre, what was at stake in the case of Byron was probably less the fate of Greece and the Greeks and the freedom of the Greeks than war as a big theatre in order to deploy or unravel literature, concepts, ideas, and so on. For a committed writer, that is a temptation. It still exists.

There was another temptation. A few years before I first came here I read a great book; not philosophy but literature, but in a way also philosophy. It is probably the best book about war since the *Iliad*. It's a novel by an Italian writer called Curzio Malaparte. The title of the book is *Kaputt*. Malaparte took huge personal risks; he was a great reporter. He was really committed. But when you read the novel, when you know the life of Malaparte, you discover very quickly that he was, first of all, a dandy. The temptation of Malaparte was the temptation of looking in a very cold way at war as a sort of aesthetic show—the war as a show of which Malaparte was an accurate observer. If I am sincere with myself I have to admit that I probably have a little of each of these attitudes in myself. And I was deeply disgusted by each of them too. None of them was convenient for me. I was uncomfortable with all these attitudes, which the literary or philosophical western tradition transmitted to me and to us.

There was a fifth attitude which perhaps was the worst, the most deadly—which was the attitude of those philosophers whose commitment consisted in making

revolution. This was the dream of changing the world in its death, the dream of targeting man right in his soul, the dream of breaking history into two. This was the dream of those philosophers who took off from a particular strand of Marxist philosophy. And you have some specimens of this tradition here in Bengal—Indian Bengal and here in Bangladesh. They were Naxalites and Maoists and so on. And again I very quickly understood that this attitude was not only embarrassing but that it brought along the possibility and even the inevitability of pure nightmare. I understood this in Bangladesh, interviewing one of the Naxalites—Mohammad Toha. I understood that this project consists in breaking history into two; and that one had to get rid of it too. I arrived here at the beginning of my life, at the moment of Western history, of the history of Western thought where all the available possibilities were dead ends that had to be avoided.

When I came here I thought against these five temptations. And it is sometimes useful to ask yourself, to wonder what you were reacting against when you did what you did, what you tried to avoid, or to escape when you embraced a certain choice. Then what did I do and how did all these negativities, all these refusals turn out in myself? But it will soon appear that what happened in me happened broadly in the whole philosophical moment of the time.

Two things appeared to me, not clearly, but in a confused way at the beginning. Sometimes again, you know things which you don't really know. You are moved by motives of which you are not aware. Nevertheless, they move you. First of all, I remembered, I recalled the real philosophical tradition which was like a vivid fountain, which my generation had in a big mistake set aside, the tradition of the German philosopher Husserl. German philosophy is embodied by two great names—Heidegger and Husserl. Derrida, Althusser, Michel Foucault, all of them took the Heideggerian path. And probably a little voice in me wondered, what about Husserl? What does Husserl mean? It meant a sort of oxymoron, an apparent paradox, a living paradox. The pure thought, the logical, quasi mathematical conception of thought is married with, combined with, concerned with what a great Husserlian has called the big anger of things, the encounter with things, with real things, the idea that the man does not go to the things, but the things go to the man, come to his face like a savage beast. There is a savagery of things, of the events which come at your throat. And the idea, at the same time, that the climax of thought is the quasi mathematical development of ideas. These two contradictory positions were in Husserl. And the first thing I wondered about was probably: what about really returning to Husserl.

Number two, I remembered that I was a Jew. But I was not educated as a Jew. I am not a religious Jew at all. I am not a believer. I am not a worshipper. But I rediscovered, even if I did not know clearly, the conception of history which comes from the books of Jewish thought, in particular, Emanuel Levinas. The deepest idea of this tradition was that history was an interminable process, that history was a chaos with hope, but with no end, that a man in history may be inhabited by a desire to change history—constant desire, will, determination, knowing that this will to change will never have an end. This will to change the world without the idea that you could remove the evil, or that you could reach the dead end of history. And then there probably took shape in my mind the idea that there was a possible commitment, which was at the same time pessimistic and optimistic, which was at the same time with no illusion like the idea of paradise on earth, ideal government and so on, but nevertheless involved trying, and

trying with hope, though this hope was not the hope of creating a perfect society and so on. This took place in my ideas and my works—a concept of commitment which grew from book to book after that, but which probably has its roots in my experiences here in Bangladesh.

I understood so many things in Bangladesh. I understood, for example, how the horror of the war, the tragedy of war might be not the deaths, but the wounded casualties. The tragedy is the wound. I understood how the intellectuals could be the target of a fascist regime. I understood how the women were in the frontline facing the barbarity and the fascism of Pakistan. I got this idea of commitment which is a process, an endless process which has to be pursued even if you know it to be endless. For me, this idea is the exact opposite, the best reply to what was so bad, so false, so disgusting in Mallarme, Althusser, Malaparte and *“L’aventurier”* and the revolutionary temptation of the West, *“la tentation de l’occident”*, to quote Malraux. So this is the idea of commitment that became a part of the philosophy which has led me all my life. Now the last words before I give the floor to the audience. I cannot finish without telling you also that I am not only moved by this return to Bangladesh but I will go back tomorrow with some fresh committed ideas.

When I go somewhere, I cannot but nourish some new commitments and some concrete projects. I’ve had one or two feelings since I have been here. These feelings spring, more or less, from the fact that Bangladesh, thanks to its tradition, thanks to the Mukti Bahini, thanks to the Father of the Nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, had achieved independence in such a short time. Bangladesh had achieved it in such a short time that I would like to impress upon the young people of the country an awareness of how rare it is. There is no other example in modern history—or very few—of a state built out of nothing in two years by Mujibur Rahman, out of ground zero. So this battle was won. But my feeling is that there are a few more battles which remain, a few wounds which are still open in this country, which I love so much, with all my heart, with the heart of my youth, and with my heart of today. There is a battle of the memory. I am so struck by the fact that Bangladesh had to receive the shock of a genocide. There are not so many genocides in the 20th century. But nobody knows exactly how many fell victim to the Pakistani barbarity from March ’71 to December ’71. Was it one million, two millions, three millions? Nobody knows. In my opinion, such a situation is unbearable for the young generation. This was the case for the French people, for the Jews after the Holocaust, for the Armenian, a case for Rwanda. Genocide, the deaths which are not numbered, not named, is an unbearable situation. It is very difficult to build up a country, to pursue adventures, if you have such a big hole in the memory. I know there is a big memorial in Dhaka. But it is probably not enough. That is why I proposed this morning to the Prime Minister that the international community should support a really deep investigation in the hearts of all the districts of Bangladesh, covering all the families of this country. I appeal to them to witness, in order to know, name by name if possible, face by face if possible, what this genocide was precisely. Death without a face, death without a name, death without a number—this is the worst. And the international community has a duty to help this country to get out of this situation. And I think that I have a few ideas in order to help the international community to take cognizance of their own duty.

Number two, I had yesterday night a conversation with two great intellectuals of this country, two young intellectuals who are of the age that was mine when I first

came to Bangladesh. They were so melancholic. They asked me: at the end of the day what is our place in this world? What is our big card in modern international politics? What should be our foreign policy? Why should we stand and accept that even our supposed allies, even those who helped us to liberate our country consider us as a sort of appendage to the subcontinent and so on. Look at Pakistan, a rogue state, the house of the devil in so many respects—the country where you can kidnap and decapitate an American journalist. But they continue to be helped, to be supported, and to be fueled with money by their American brothers. We wonder why the sweetness of Bangladesh, why the innocence of Bangladesh, why the martyrdom of Bangladesh could give us less of a claim before the international community than the barbarity of Pakistan. I spoke of that with your prime minister today. I thought that if you try to think in these terms, it is clear each country has its own card in this game. Each country has a card. There are bad cards, nasty dirty cards. Pakistan has a dirty card, the fact that it has nuclear weapons. From time to time they use it when they want their allies to freak out: they leak the idea that the weapons are not so well controlled. Then America freaks out. They come up with big help or the delivery of F-16s. That is the card of Pakistan—let's be realistic, let's be cynical, let's see the card or the map of the world in the cold way in which Malaparte saw war.

What is the card of Bangladesh in this game? My feeling is that Bangladesh has a huge card in its hand; it can help Bangladesh to take its place in the comity of nations if Bangladesh uses it properly. This card is precisely the lesson of Mujibur Rahman. This is precisely the spirit of the Mukti Bahini (Freedom Fighters). It is the spirit of tolerance which blows in this area. The West is obsessed, as you know, and so is the world in general, with radical Islam. It is reasonable to have this obsession. Radical Islam is considered as the big threat all over the world, by the West and also, by the way, by the Muslim societies. Radical Islam is a threat for Muslim societies much more than for Europe and for America. And the world is in search, in desperate search of the antidote to this radical Islam. The world is desperately seeking for an Islam faithful to its values, with worshippers deeply involved in their faith but also at the same time accepting the beautiful faces that can be admired, accepting the rule of law and so on. The world is seeking for this liberal or secular Islam. And how could one not think in this connection of the first constitution of Sheikh Mujib based on four pillars—nationalism, secularism, democracy, and socialism? There are people of all origins, of all confessions—Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians—in this country. And how could one not think that there is a real chance for Bangladesh which could take a stand strongly, firmly on its history and its values, to be faithful to the best of its heritage, and therefore to be the champion of this liberal and secular Islam, whereby this state could make a momentous contribution to civilization in the 21st century. Bangladesh can be tomorrow, the champion, the leading country, the spirit of a New International; you had the Communist Internationals—First, Second, Third, Fourth. You can have an International of the secular Islam for which Bangladesh is completely equipped, armed by its heroism, by its past history to take the leadership. These thoughts occurred to me yesterday in the house of Mujibur Rahman where I saw so many photos of him with leaders of what used to be called the Non-aligned Movement. He was with Tito; he was with Nasser; he was with Anwar Sadat.

Today there is a new non-alignment which consists in refusing all the forms of obscurantism, all the forms of fundamentalism. There are a lot of countries who

demand, who are ready for that. I told of Bosnia-Herzegovina before. Both Bosnia and Bangladesh are ready for this endorsement of the anti-obscurantist position. Bangladesh is in a very natural way, by its own DNA, the champion of this new non-alignment. What I am telling you now I told it this morning to your prime minister. I will tell this the following days in my country France and beyond France to those who shape the international game. I will speak of Bangladesh in these terms. I will tell them, first of all, the responsibility of my country to encourage the true spirit of this country, which is thought of nowadays in connection with the terrible drama of Rana Plaza. I went to Rana Plaza this morning and I saw the traces of the disaster, the nightmare, the hell that the victims went through, and the tragedy of the unburied corpses. In the genocide of '71, you had millions of nameless victims. Today by a sort of terrible twist of destiny, you have eight corpses which are unburied. So this country Bangladesh is frequently mentioned as the sweat factory of the world, the capital of cheap textiles, the place that is the Hall of Shame of the big companies of Europe who come and take part of their profit. Bangladesh is much more than that. There is the spirit of Bangladesh, the philosophy of Bangladesh. There are the special values of Bangladesh, which I will convey to those in my country when I return. This will be my way to continue to be faithful to my idea of commitment which I invented for myself in '71 and '72 when I first came to this country. Thank you very much.

