

Remembering Daniel Pearl, or West vs. West

Bernard-Henri Lévy. *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?* Hoboken: Melville House, 2003

Daniel Pearl. A name that evokes admiration for the man as well as revulsion for the circumstances surrounding the end of his life in a two-roomed concrete-block house on the outskirts of Karachi. Much like the brutally assassinated “Lion of Panjshir,” Ahmad Shah Massoud, Pearl and his last hours have become entangled threads within the larger narrative of 9/11, extending the enigma into the deepest recesses of the theater of international terrorism. Considering last year’s events in Abbottabad, Pakistani intelligence itself must now be sketched into the gruesome tableau of Pearl’s death, with the man found guilty of his death awaiting an appeal. More of him soon.

First, we remember the photograph of Pearl, supposedly taken the day before his death, staring at someone behind and slightly above the camera, from the car seat where he is photographed before a bluish sheet, holding the day’s newspaper, his partially opened mouth and wide-opened eyes suggestive of an unexpected reserve of hope. What we cannot see but know today could be obliquely reflected in his eyes: the camera, the faces of his abductors, and the low-ceilinged room that was his prison. Among the photos taken during his captivity, this one alone seems to suggest a Pearl in control of himself; all others appear staged, especially the taping of his final words. What had brought on his somewhat partial but nonetheless expectant smile?

A few months after Pearl's shocking murder, French philosopher, reportage writer, and filmmaker Bernard-Henri Lévy set out for Karachi to retrace Pearl's last days, his first step in the fourteen-month journey commencing with Pearl's end-point: the house where strangely "everything seems as it was" (20) during the days of captivity. Indeed, much had been left behind, even after forensics crews have gone. Inside the house, Lévy describes the room where Pearl was held:

And as for the room itself, it's the same cement floor blotched with wax and soot showing where candles and lanterns were placed. The same thick, cement-brick walls, a badly washed brown blood stain on one of them; a handful of hair; a transom facing the road and closed by a metal shutter that was then boarded over; a wooden door without keyhole or handle, barred with a beam slid through padlocked iron rings; construction material in a corner; fishing nets; clumps of straw mixed with mud; mattress stuffing with spider webs; old clay pots thrown in a corner under the transom; colonies of red ants; cockroaches; two discarded spoons and a plate; a candy-pink alarm clock with just one hand; crumpled cigarette packs; a cold brazier; a bed made of cords. (21)

Lévy's year-long odyssey begins in this main room and in the courtyard of the house where Pearl's body was found in a shallow grave, a body symbolically cut into ten different pieces. As with the traces in the room, the unholy gathering of incongruous items buried with Pearl brings the writer closer to the abductors' mindset, their premeditation:

Like the bodies of saints, [the body] was accompanied by meager relics: three pieces of faded green rope, anti-diarrhea pills, two car seats, a piece of the top of his track suit, three bloodstained plastic sacks used to wrap his dismembered body. What learned art of torture! How, with a knife, and before rigor mortis, does one cut a body into so many pieces? (19)

Alone in the house, Lévy, deeply moved, senses a bond of friendship with Pearl—a man he never met, "a man who was ordinary and exemplary, normal and admirable" (21). Whereas the 2007 movie of Pearl's murder concentrates on Marianne Pearl's story, where the central witness could advise, explain, or inform, Lévy attempts to reconstruct the thoughts of a man he had never known, especially Pearl's motivations and aims for his final months of investigative reporting. What makes

the book interesting to me is that while the post-9/11 world quickly polarized, embracing other masses rallied under like ideologies, Lévy allowed himself to be drawn into the singular, into Daniel Pearl's life and aspirations, as well as toward his killers.

Moving backward from the murder through time, Lévy revisits the bits of evidence of the day before Pearl's death, more specifically, Pearl's unfathomable expression from the photograph mentioned above, holding the newspaper, unshackled. Lévy devotes a short chapter, "A Mysterious Smile," to reflections regarding Pearl the journalist in these last hours, his curiosity awakened by watching closely those he has come to observe. Whereas the earlier photographs convey the violence of the abduction—Pearl with his head on his lap, pushed down by the captor's hand and threatened by a gun, his contorted body reflecting the horror of his imprisonment—this "day before" picture shows a composed Pearl, with hair combed and no visible signs of violence beyond the stiffened fingers carefully placed to reveal the date of the paper. A paired image shows Pearl in front of the paper, now taped to the sheet behind him. Between these two pictures, Lévy imagines a stronger, more involved Pearl somewhat in control of his last hours:

He has the relaxed look of a guy who decides, finally, that the situation he's in is interesting—he has the look you put on when you want to reassure your loved ones, or when you have good reason not to worry... Pearl, when [the photos] were taken, is confident...He's looking at his executioners—but he's looking at them as if he were fascinated rather than troubled by what is happening to him. (25-27)

Like Pearl, Lévy ran a great risk as a foreigner and Jew moving through the nebulous networks of Pakistan's most hardened, militant Islamists. He admits to a false sensation of invulnerability as a journalist, and wonders if Pearl had fallen into the same trap. Or possibly, he considers that the kidnappers had offered Pearl a small token of reassurance before or during the staging of these photos. He sees Pearl the consummate journalist and friend to Islam operating in his captivity, fraternizing under conditions of duress, essaying to develop the relationship of trust a professional must establish with the other. Still, with the four-month-old Afghan war underway, western journalists such as Pearl, investigating such ruthless individuals—Gilani—as had trained the likes of shoe-bomber Richard Reid, should have understood that the boundaries between ideological militancy and cold-blooded murder had all but vanished. Or at least, that statement seems

evident to make today, ten years after 9/11, safe in our comfortable distance from those events, our mental reconstruction brought to us piecemeal from the global media. Reality fallen into the hands of professional mythologists.

Lévy's sense of friendship for Pearl, his sorrow for Pearl's widow and child, and his desire to uncover the motivation for the apparently senseless killing all converge in the book. Criticized for his vivid imaginings of Pearl's days of captivity, Lévy nonetheless poignantly balances the injustice of the captivity and murder with a portrait of the Israeli-American reporter determined to cross the front lines of what was then naively deemed a cultural clash. He also brings forward Pearl's courage through descriptions of the two desperate escape attempts, one wherein he was shot in the shins before being dragged back into the house. Throughout, one wonders at the tenacity of the author who spent more than a year carefully turning stones in Pakistan, England, Kosovo, and India for one man, while fallout from the Afghan invasion was tearing the world apart. It seems a dangerous enterprise indeed, if one only intends to write a book. In fact, his odyssey walks him through the same impasses we travel today.

First, Pearl

Lévy conjures what must have been Pearl's last minutes, his recognition of the inevitable, of what had before been inconceivable:

Silent, hands crossed behind their backs, their sinister expressions revealed by the unsteady light of the oil lamps, they show their other faces, the ones they wore when they plunged the children of Shiite families who lived near the Binor Town mosque, in Karachi, into quick lime. [Pearl] had read an article about it one day. And all at once, he knows. (34)

Lévy notes a shot given in Pearl's stomach; it is thus a drugged man whom the militants would film, reciting the grammatically uncertain phrases of his birth, his family, his ties to Judaism, Zionism, and Israel. A code is spoken to his family, using a reference only they would understand—B'neiBrak in Israel... Chaim Pearl Street" (47). Then surfaces the crux of his captors' claim: Pearl is to compare his detention to the cells of Guantanamo Bay, and to assure his fellow Americans of their lack of safety in the world as long as they support their government's policies. What follows supports the State Department's understanding of the abductors' aims, their desire for "exposure and to make a point":

We Americans cannot continue to bear the consequences of our government's actions...Such as the unconditional support given to the state of Israel...Twenty-four abuses of the veto power to justify the massacre of children...And the support for the dictatorial regimes in the Arab and Muslim world...And also the continued American military presence in Afghanistan. (37)

Daniel Pearl's time of captivity can only spark speculation, based on the testimony of those tried for the murder, as even the photographs and films conceal as they reveal. Indeed, the brutal and botched putting to death is filmed—and refilmed, as one of the kidnappers, Fazal Karim, admitted in court. “We had a problem with the camera. We noticed at the last minute that the cassette had jammed. We had to start all over again. We were halfway done and the head was almost completely severed. We had to put the knife back into the cut and redo the whole scene” (26). And this affirmed in a three-month long trial that underwent “three changes of judges, threats of terrorist attacks, numerous suspensions, adjournments, diverse pressures and blackmail” (79). Worse, the author pursues traces, stories told—even published—that are later disclaimed; Lévy begins to doubt that he did, one day, pass Pearl four years before while on a diplomatic mission in South Sudan. He remembers the shop where he quite possibly saw him, and that the American was trying on a panama hat. Still, he questions what he thinks he saw. As he begins to distrust his own intuitions, knowledge, he moves to reconsider what can be “known.”

For example, the murderers' motivations surface patently when reviewing the crime, and we see how well they understood their prey: inveigling Pearl into believing he would be put into contact with Reid's guru Gilani, making him wait six different times for a promised interview, then finally luring him out of a safe, public place for the seventh. Calculated, deliberate. The strategy fooled Pearl who, as Lévy points out, had written a handbook on security issues for the *Wall Street Journal's* reporters—ironically, “kidnapping” was left out (65). The assassins' true intentions, the extremes to which they were willing to go, were far from Pearl's mind. They swiftly moved from their first aim to a second: once their demands were rejected, the assassins staged a gruesome, symbolic scene of torture to voice their threat to the world.

Omar Sheikh

The lure was English-born and educated Omar Sheikh of Pakistani descent, who admitted to abducting Pearl in order to negotiate the release of the former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan (79). Spiritual hero—prophet even—for many, as Lévy points out in his chapter “In the Eye of the Assassin,” the imprisoned Sheikh received letters from admirers across the country; a man Sheikh didn’t even know admitted to the crime in order to protect him. The author followed Sheikh’s life from the hospital where he was born to his comfortable family home outside of London. Exemplary, appreciated, intelligent: the London School of Economics student had left none indifferent, most having a positive recollection of him. However, upon his return from Kosovo in September 1993, where he participated in a charity drive for the besieged Muslim community, the quiet, polite Omar suggested to a friend that he should leave LSE to support a cause: “Kidnappings. Kidnap people and exchange them for actions by the international community in favor of Bosnia. That’s what I propose” (114-115). Lévy’s research becomes arduous here, when Sheikh turns down his path of international terrorism, his traces more difficult to follow. Strangely, Pervez Musharraf’s *In the Line of Fire* asserts that Sheikh was an MI6 agent during this time, that he became a double agent. Whatever his initial direction after Bosnia, his 1994 kidnapping of western tourists, three British and one American, cost him six years in an Indian prison, though he would not purge the full sentence due to demands for his release made of India by the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen hijackers of Indian Airlines flight 814 in 1999. It is a free Omar Sheikh who then returns to Pakistan, marries, and has a child, but one as well who allegedly participates in wiring \$100,000 into the 9/11 hijacking effort.

The facts are there. And as always, they’re stubborn. This enemy of the West is a product of the West. This fervent jihadist was formed in the school of enlightenment and progress. This raging Islamist who will shout out at his trial that he kidnapped Daniel Pearl because he couldn’t stand anymore to see the heads of Arab prisoners forcibly shaved in Guantanamo, this radical who will go berserk at the very idea of being judged not according to the *sharia* but British law, is a product of the very best English education. This character is both foreign and familiar to us. Here is the radical and banal nature of evil described by Hannah Arendt, which concerns us because it has the unsettling strangeness of mirrors... Is terrorism the bastard child of a demonic couple: Islam and Europe? (101)

Sheikh's descent thereafter continues into what can only be considered an underworld of terroristic enterprises with his ties to the many Islamist-jihadist groups operating in Pakistan, his seventeen aliases (201), but most useful of all, his ability to don the "perfect Englishman" façade that will earn him Pearl's trust. His highly contrasted personality as described by the four 1994 captives leaves a chill:

"I saw the animal...I spent eight days, ten, fifteen, thirty-two in his company...this is what I know of him...this is the impression I had..." They tell of a paradoxical individual, at once totally unstable and intellectually coherent, who played chess and read *Mein Kampf*; hated Jews and skinheads, recited constantly from the Koran yet did not seem particularly pious, and who announced apologetically that unless his demands were met, he would decapitate them. (84)

With Sheikh's solidly secular English upbringing, his effortless excellence in his academics, and his friendly ties to Jews and Muslims alike in England, Lévy wonders in characteristically French chiasmic fashion, "Is this a monstrosity of an ordinary human, or the humanity of an extraordinary monster?" (85). The lure. The hand offered from the West to the West. Trust me. I'm like you. I'll lead you to the people you want most to meet. They will treat you well. They are like me. (I have no regard for what happens to you.)

Why did a veteran reporter allow himself to be lured from the restaurant to the house on the outskirts of Karachi? How could he have fallen so easily into the trap laid through an interview in a hotel, a few emails, and finally phone calls? Regarding the claim that Pearl served as a go-between for American intelligence, Lévy expresses his certainty that Pearl would never have "cross[ed] that yellow line between those who love truth and the agents or even militants of any given cause" (66). A conversation with Pearl's father seems to confirm this for Lévy:

"You couldn't hope that he would take sides for the Jews, or for the Palestinians—the Jews are right because...the Palestinians have a point because...The role of the journalist, he would say, isn't to give out prizes for virtue. The journalist's role is to ascertain the facts, period." (69)

Israel, Judaism were important for Pearl, yet he was able to sideline his convictions for his work. Lévy concludes that Pearl died "a journalist's death—dead not only because of what he was [i.e. an American Jew], but because of what he was looking

for, and perhaps finding, and planning to write about,” and that Pearl knew of the complicity, the “relationship between al-Qaida and the ISI” (398). In a final chapter, Lévy speculates on the startling possibilities of Pearl’s knowledge of nuclear weapon exchanges with al-Qaida, but also the author underlines the journalist’s more general quest for a “gentle Islam”; Lévy wonders,

Who will prevail: the heirs of this ancient commerce of men and cultures that stretches from Avicenne to Mahfouz by way of the sages of Cordoba—or the madmen of the Peshawar camps who call for jihad and, belly strapped with explosives, aspire to die as martyrs? (454)

We remember Pearl’s expectant smile in captivity, the enigmatic smile of a man observing those he most wanted to understand. Unlike Pearl, Omar Sheikh had made of his violent convictions his work. As did his accomplices, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed most likely being one, if we believe his 2007 confession. Omar Sheikh’s convictions were shared as well, suggests Lévy, by the Pakistani population, police, and government investigators at the ISI. When Lévy returns to Karachi after the one-year anniversary of 9/11 to find that an al-Qaida cell was openly operating in a residential part of the city, with neighbors and corner shops well aware of its presence, he concludes that the Pakistani officials had no intention of standing in the terrorists’ way, just as the real estate agent who invited him in for tea as he was studying the area describes:

“Were we surprised? Oh, not at all, it wasn’t a surprise to anyone. We saw them coming and going, and the lights on day and night. Everyone, starting with the police, knew that Arabs—well in any case, people who did not speak Urdu—lived here in the neighborhood. There are embassy employees, and students of the *madrasas*. Why should we be suspicious of people who come to study here, friends, who do not make any trouble? How can you expect good Muslims to refuse hospitality to other good, God-fearing Muslims who do no wrong? So this place, like so many others, was known. We saw them going out to do errands every morning. Even the television came to see them two months ago, and the police were aware of it.” (183)

Indeed, Al-Jazeera had already interviewed the members of the cell several weeks before, a cell which the day before the raid counted Khalid Sheikh Mohammed

among them. Effectively, Bin Laden's open-air Abbottabad compound hardly seems surprising in this light either. It seems rather *status quo*.

More than a decade later, we wonder what lessons have been learned, and at what cost. I applaud Lévy's courage in descending into the darkest organs of the beast in order not only to find the singular—what was Pearl doing? Who was Omar Sheikh?—but also to study the nature of the more resistant and more broadly operative ties that separate even as they bind East and West.

Other recent works of interest by Bernard-Henri Lévy:

War, Evil and End of History. Hoboken: Melville House Publishing, 2004.

Left in Dark Times: A Stand against the New Barbarism. New York: Random House, 2008.



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