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77



events



music



movie times



dining guide



astrology



open houses



hot jobs

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- > HOME
- > CONTACT US
- > COVER
- > NEWS
- > OPINION
- > A&E
- > A&L
- > CALENDAR
- > MUSIC
- > DINING
- > FILM
- > EVENTS
- > ASTROLOGY
- > CLASSIFIEDS
- > PLACE AD
- > VISITING SC
- > MEDIA KIT
- > BEST OF 2005
- > ARCHIVES



An Outsider's Insight

Probing Bernard-Henri Lévy's 'American Vertigo'

by Heather A. Paul

French writer Bernard-Henri Lévy had his work cut out for him when he started his year-long meandering journey into America.

A road trip, a 19th century guidebook and a dizzying American identity crisis was his to define and explore. Lévy's leader?—Alexis de Tocqueville, who wandered America in search of democracy in 1831. Lévy's goals? He wanted to discover the roots of anti-Americanism and anti-Europeanism in both Europe and America. However, the main purpose of his journey is the question Lévy explores most fully in his new book, "American Vertigo." Like Tocqueville, Lévy hoped to

finish his journey with a new understanding about the current condition of democracy in America.

The book begins in a manner that befits its title: The introduction is an American Vertigo. I was sentenced—hanged from ropey compound-complex sentences, dangling from the gallows Lévy built for his intended audience alongside parenthetical ramblings and semicolons. Worse of all, I was suspended before a laughing crowd of men with moustachios in berets donning Tocqueville, Sartre, Nietzsche and Foucault like gaudy accessories. Lévy's own description of the road in America can best describe what it was like to read the first few mind-strangling pages: "It's an exercise in pace and patience" (15).

The arrogant tone in the introduction also leads me to question how anyone who traveled only in America for one year could feel prepared to comment so extensively on American democracy. Lévy acknowledges that Americans know their "own country much better than any foreign observer," which is why, he said, even though this book was written for the "American public," he addresses it with "modesty." Even though outsiders can provide excellent insight, Lévy realizes that his diagnosis of an American identity crisis marked by what he calls "American vertigo" is an observation based on his year of experience traveling in America. Readers themselves can decide if these observations are valid.

These were my initial impressions, but I decided to travel further into "American Vertigo" regardless. In the end, I was glad I dazedly climbed from paragraph to paragraph to explore the other side of the first mountain. Once I escaped the vast jungle of the introduction and made my way toward the first chapter, I discovered a drastic change in tone and attitude. Suddenly, the text takes on the feel of a Kerouacian road novel. I found romantic visions of the landscape juxtaposed with tragically philosophical observations about the coexistence of poverty and wealth on the American road. The text itself includes artistic quotations from Kerouac's "On the Road," but I could ignore the persistent names dropped along the page like signal flares once the language sat back, relaxed. And I enjoyed the ride. I was curious to find out where

Lévy and the road would take me.

The first portion of the book, "Le Voyage en Amérique" is dedicated to the cities and suburbs Lévy visited throughout his journey. When The Atlantic Monthly contacted him to ask him to take on the project of traveling in America in the footsteps of Alexis de Tocqueville, Lévy decided to, as he says in the introduction, "repeat some of the stages of his journey" whenever it was possible. Like Tocqueville, he visited prisons in major cities, and sought answers about American democracy. However, as Lévy traveled "mythic roads and forgotten roads; Route 101 from the Oregon border to the Mexican frontier ... Route 66, or what's left of it" and "west of the Grand Canyon, where the phantoms of 'The Grapes of Wrath' still hover," the questions he asks and attempts to answer about the American identity and the condition of American democracy, are, according to Lévy, all his own.

The second half of the book, "Reflections," addresses these questions about America. When I ask Lévy to describe the American identity based on his experience, he says that the American identity is markedly different from a European identity, because Americans base their patriotism on a "common text," instead of the "common ground," the attachment to the land typical of European patriotism. Lévy uses a European philosopher to explain America's common textualism. "In Europe, we have Habermas," he says, a German philosopher who claims, according to Lévy, that Constitutional Patriotism is the best kind of patriotism, because "it is not based on ground, race, or blood." However, Lévy's "Postscript" comments extensively on "the question of race" in America: "The question of these selfsame poor people who are also black people, about whom democratic America is discovering, again, with shame, that their neglect is not unrelated to the color of their skin." This quotation appears in the section of the postscript dedicated to Hurricane Katrina. Looking at race in America, we have to wonder if America truly possesses a patriotism based solely on a text. Do we experience the Constitutional Patriotism praised by Habermas, or is our patriotism still "based on ground, race, or blood?" These are the kind of analyses that appear in the "Reflections" portion of Lévy's book, and although I

wonder if I like these observations because they nod to my own sensibilities, it was interesting to read about America's dizzying paradoxes from a relative newcomer on American soil.

Lévy's explanation of the American Vertigo provides further examples of the ideological dichotomies he finds in his travels. For example, is America one nation or many nations in one? Is there one shared culture or are there hundreds? Lévy says that the vertigo exists because of America's identity crisis, and, like all community crises, "generates a sort of vertigo." The identity crisis is marked not only by ideological differences, but the crisis also appears in the coexistence of poverty and wealth in this country. Lévy describes America as "antisocial," because in America "you'd better not be poor." He saw poor neighborhoods in L.A., Boston and New York City, and described the poverty evident on the sidewalks of the wealthy as one example of this dualism. "Antisocial America" does not adequately manage its poverty, but at the same time, there is, Lévy says, "a lot of philanthropy and charity," which is another example of American dualism. For an example, Lévy cites "a chain of stores donating by itself alone [to victims of Katrina] as much as the entire country donated a year ago to the victims of the tsunami in Asia."

First impressions may leave a lasting imprint, but like my own expectations for "American Vertigo," Lévy says that his expectations for America were "destroyed." In America, he says, there is "a surprise at every single stage." For example, before Lévy came to America, he thought America was "depoliticized," and that there were no "public debates or quarrels" about "the war on values" or "the vision of the world." After a year in America though, Lévy observes that America's "debates and political oppositions are much stronger than anyone in Europe believed." He finds an America deeply divided between "the red and the blue," those who support the idea of manifest destiny and those who don't, "the intelligentsia and the anti-intelligentsia, and the Democrats and the Republicans." He was surprised to find that America is "a very ideological country," which is not "how it is presented in Europe." And as I traveled further into "American Vertigo," I was

surprised at some of my discoveries. Despite my initial reservations about the unwieldy sentences and relentless namedropping, I enjoyed the relaxed and romantic language I found in later chapters. And although I still question whether any scholar who travels in America for one year can diagnose an American identity crisis, I find that Lévy's observations offer interesting insight about American dualism from the point of view of an intelligent outsider.

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