



When Less Is More

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Books

BHL In The U.S.A.

At tea with France's premier public intellectual, Bernard-Henri Lévy, as he tries to get his hands around America.

Gabrielle Birkner
Staff Writer

In March 2003, Franco-American relations, long a complex pas de deux, appeared to hit bottom when "freedom fries" supplanted French fries on menus in Washington's congressional cafeterias. Many stateside recalled Normandy, and derided the Gauls as snobbish, selfish and ungrateful for their government's unwillingness to support the U.S.-led war in Iraq.

There was no love lost on the other side of the Atlantic, where to the French populace, Americans were a swaggering, hawkish, and semi-literate people.

There has since been little attempt for the nations — embittered by a two-way cultural chauvinism — to understand each other's psyches.

Until now.

In an effort to glean insight into the American soul, Bernard-Henri Lévy, a 57-year-old Algeria-born Jew who is arguably France's premier public intellectual, has written "American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville," the culmination of a dizzying yearlong, 15,000-mile road trip through the United States.

French intellectuals, like French filmmakers, have a propensity for the fiercely abstract and esoteric. Yet Lévy, in his new book, opts instead for the painfully concrete.

"I tried to be honest," said Lévy, over tea at the Carlyle Hotel, where the famed philosopher stays while in New York. "I tried to say what I saw. I tried to see the country with love, not with hate or preconceived ideas."

"American Vertigo," which has not yet been published in France, began as a series for The Atlantic Monthly. The magazine commissioned Lévy (known widely as BHL) to retrace, albeit loosely, the footsteps of fellow



Road warrior: America's primal sin, Lévy believes, is its inability to resist a good image.

Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, who, intending to write about the American prison system, spent nine months in 1831 and 1832 traveling through the still-new nation. Tocqueville ultimately cast a much wider net, exploring not only America's penitentiaries, but also its circumscribed gender roles, capitalistic verve, populist journalism and institutional and ideological anatomy in his two-volume classic "On Democracy in America."

While Tocqueville painted America in broad strokes, Lévy seems to prefer the pointillistic logic of induction in his thoughtful travelogue composed of short, personality-driven vignettes.

"America is such a huge and complex country," Lévy told The Jewish Week. "You discover the American way of life is plural, not unique."

Among his multifarious experiences in the U.S. are excursions to Iowa's Amish country, a Las Vegas strip joint, a fervently Orthodox neighborhood in Brooklyn, an Indian reservation in South Dakota, a megachurch in Illinois, the Democratic National Convention in Boston and a handful of American prisons.

He encounters a lively cast of characters, from a divorcee tending bus to an anti-Semitic Native American to a death-row inmate to philanthropist George Soros.

Yet the real action hero of "American Vertigo" is the author himself. As he makes his way through the American expanse, Lévy, who calls himself a "humanistic and universalist" Jew, displays a unique ability to capture in words America's irrationalities, contradictions and idiocies without exploiting French, received ideas.

"It's one thing to denounce the absurdity of a discourse that turns the United States into a figure of speech, a cliché, as well as a scapegoat for the mistakes, and inconsistencies of other countries," Lévy writes in "American Vertigo." "...[It's] altogether another thing to go out into the field, to judge on actual evidence; it's another thing to contrast that chimera with the concrete body and face of America today."

He points out, for example, America's willingness to memorialize Doubleday Field in Cooperstown, N.Y., as the "birthplace of baseball," even though baseball was invented years before Abner Doubleday supposedly baptized the game there in 1839, and even though Doubleday wasn't, in 1839, in Cooperstown.

America is, according to Lévy, "a country where Hollywood has supplanted Hegel and where, consequently, the maxim 'What is reasonable is real; that which is real is reasonable,' of the philosopher of Jena has

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The baseball scenario is a rather benign illustration of America's willingness to embrace mirages — thus vertigo — but the book is also peppered with more disturbing examples, most notably the nation's disregard for its pervasive urban poverty.

"I saw the poor of America all through my journey," Lévy writes, invoking the slums of Boston, Washington and New York. "But I saw as well — I want to say, especially saw — the extraordinary denial of that somber lining in this positivity-driven country, where the lights never go out. I saw — I heard — the manner in which the

of social exclusion. New Orleans, according to Lévy, is a peerless example of the nation's refusal to ignore such victims of social exclusion who, even before Hurricane Katrina, were living in "a cesspool of ghettos, a doomed city." It took the tempest, he writes, to begin "chipping off the veneer and opening America's eyes."

The nation's "original sin," Lévy believes, is its inability to resist a good immité. The French, on the other hand, are unable to resist a good quip. And true to his national character, the author's typically drols out quips in "American

this funereal accumulation of false goods and nondesires in this end-of-the-world setting"; and neocouservatives are "conscienceless, fierce psychopaths."

Lévy also wields his bouis mots to critique America's model of bringing issues of race, religion and other differences into the public sphere, which he says, results in sectarianism and tribalization. A gated-community of Sun City, Ariz., he argues, foreshadows something much more sinister: "[The] temptation of apartheid that, if nothing comes along to oppose it, might bring together in distinct enclaves not just those obsessed with security or a good climate but also Jews, gays, lesbians, dwarfs, the blind, and so forth."

One could make, of course, the commensurate argument that France's efforts to sublimate ethnic identity in public is as polarizing as our model of hyphenated identities. The riots, last fall, by the poor and disenfranchised children of Arab and African immigrants, proved that much. There are equally convincing cases to be made about France's own propensity for revisionism — its bloody war in Algeria is, 40 years later, barely part of the French national conversation — and its marginalization of the poor, who tend to live in bleak and soulless housing projects on the outskirts of French cities.

It is all, perhaps, fodder for the ambitious American scholar who wishes to write about the soul of contemporary France.

Lévy allows that his American journey improved his understanding, for better and for worse, of the French republic.

He writes: "Just as Tocqueville took the road in the United States to try to answer questions posed by the situation of France in his time ... so I went to answer questions that are of my own time, and to learn not just about you, my American friends, but about all of us."

During an interview with The Jewish Week, he elaborated on what he learned.

"America is a nation based on an idea, contrary to most European countries, which are also based on common soil, common race, common blood," he said. "France, in a way, is more solid, more perennial but more dangerous because it feeds easily on racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia."

As a result it makes sense, according to Lévy, that anti-Semitism has deep roots in France.

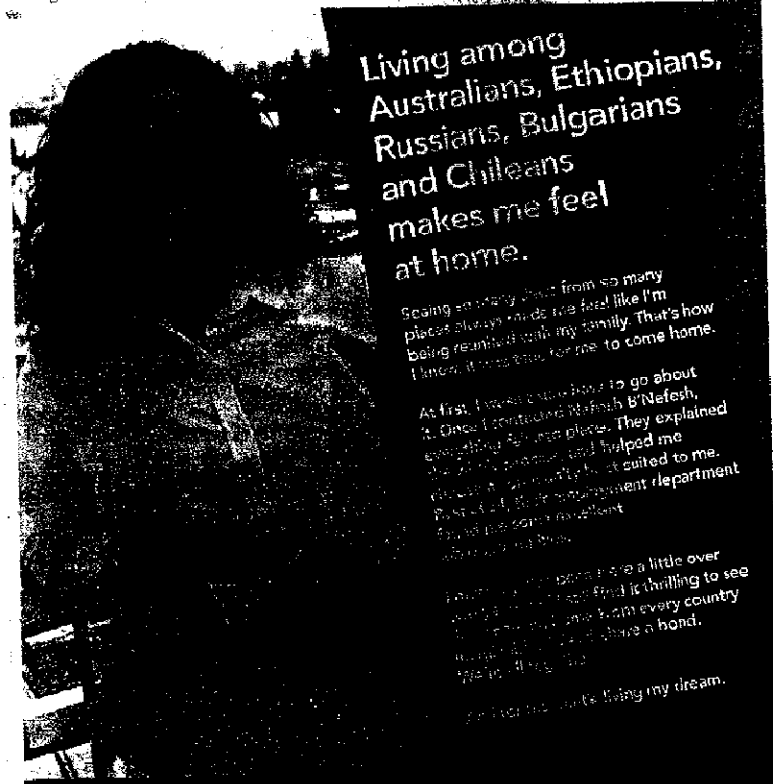
He said: "It is not an epiphenomenon at all, but it is not Kristallnacht yet, and I think it will not be."

Nonetheless, in "American Vertigo," the author's pensiveness is, for the most part, devoted to the United States, a nation he claims to love despite its dark underbelly.

Lévy, who has written dozens of books, including "Who Killed Daniel Pearl?" in 2003, is surprisingly generous in pointing out American beauty where it does exist: in its magnanimity its possibility and, above all, its premium on freedom.

"[I]n the sheer fact of being American, or at least expressing yourself, or wanting to be one," he writes, "there is a gentleness, a lightness, an element of freedom and, in a word, of civilization that makes this country one of the few countries in the world where, despite everything, you can still breathe free." ■

Lévy will be interviewed by The New Yorker's Adam Gopnick on Sunday, Jan. 29 at 7:30 p.m. at the 92nd Street Y, 1195 Lexington Ave. He will be speaking and signing books on Monday, Jan. 30 at 7 p.m. at Barnes and Noble at Union Square, 33 E. 17th St.



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