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America, seen through a French monocle

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PENNY ALLEN

French intellectual Bernard-Henri Levy's "American Vertigo: Travelling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville" arrives on American shores about 170 years after French aristocrat and philosopher/jurist Alexis de Tocqueville's masterful "Democracy in America" was published, the latter surely the best sociological work ever done about the U.S.

Written in Tocqueville's late 20s after his nine-month trek across the United States of 1831, "Democracy in America" is still valid (with minor historical updates), still taught in American schools and cited widely across the political spectrum.

"Democracy in America" is a living work, one that adroitly grasps complex notions such as how Americans internalize democracy through participation in associations, how nearly everything of importance in the U.S. becomes a judicial question, how the aspiration for equality can inform or deform the populace, how majority rule can drift into tyranny and religion into ideology or, worse, banality.

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In France, where he's known as BHL, the wealthy Levy (inheritor of his father's wood-products fortune) became famous in the late 1970s with his anti-Marxist "Barbarism With a Human Face." He has since lent his fame to political causes, such as Ahmed Shah Massoud's rebellion against the Taliban in Afghanistan, the resistance of secular Muslims in Bosnia or the forgotten wars in Sudan, Algeria and Angola. Most recently he wrote "Who Killed Daniel Pearl?" (the Wall Street Journal reporter who was kidnapped and beheaded in Pakistan), a book vilified as narcissistic dissimulation by, among others, William Dalrymple in The New York Review of Books. BHL's rhetorically violent inquiry, which featured himself as the main character whose flashy grandstanding often overshadowed any potentially interesting thinking, was praised by some for its courage, an example of the dual response to his work that has led to the writer's mixed reputation.

In "American Vertigo," Levy keeps Tocqueville's original assignment -- to examine the U.S. prison system, deducing what its prisons imply about America's inequality and racism. He includes Guantanamo, in Cuba, a place the Bush administration (led by the "childlike, archdemagogue who happens to be president") insists is not part of the American system at all, where prisoners are thus neither tried nor treated as prisoners of war. But Levy sees Guantanamo as the quintessential American prison, a miniature of the larger system, a disaster that should be closed for the health of American democracy.

Levy identifies his love for the American journey as the possibility to see concentrated the pre- and post-historical dreams, which are usually separated by thousands of kilometers and by millennia. He riffs successfully, and with no lack of evidence, on many of Tocqueville's central theses about America, including the role of religion, the perpetual childhood of Americans and the lack of limits in a material culture.

What BHL does not seem to understand about America is the post 9/11 atmosphere, or the health care/social-safety-net crisis. His extended focus on the stars of neoconservatism (Bill Kristol, Richard Perle, Francis Fukuyama, Christopher Hitchens, etc.) is glaring, as is his "aristocratic" interest in famous people in general, something Tocqueville did not share. Nor does Levy seem interested in how much space associations continue to take up in American life, perhaps because that's not where he could find the powerful and famous, even though an interesting angle on the subject would have been the way some associations have evolved into powerful interest groups whose lobbyists and financial payoffs to elected representatives are just now hitting the fan.

But Levy doesn't discuss lobbyists. Nor is it satisfying, especially toward the end of "American Vertigo," when he throws around ideas and names (such as Michel Foucault, Michael Walzer and Leo Strauss) which, with no further elucidation, might not resonate with American readers the way they do with the narrow, self-referential Parisian intelligentsia. It's been said that Levy writes fast and publishes his work unedited. "American Vertigo" could have benefited from a more considered presentation.

Bernard-Henri Levy discusses "American Vertigo" at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at Powell's City of Books, 1005 W. Burnside St.

Penny Allen lives in Paris. Her Web site is www.pennyallen.info.

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