

The Weekend Interview with Bernard-Henri Lévy / By Tunku Varadarajan

French Kiss

NEW YORK—Remember those rousing days—amid the acrid havoc of 9/11—when all the world stood by us, and even the French were knocked off course enough to say, “We Are All American”? Of course you do, if only to contrast that time with the months and years that followed, when less of the world stood by us, and when the French—coming to their exquisite senses—rediscovered their contempt for America.

Today in France there are few persons of substance who profess a love for America. Jean-François Revel, the country’s finest political philosopher, is one, on the right; and Bernard-Henri Lévy—whose practice of a journalism larded with philosophy has made him better known to the man-on-the-street than anyone else who can spout Wittgenstein—is another, on the center-left. There are five other prominent French Amerophiles, by my reckoning, giving us a grand total of seven. Guessing identities would make an amusing parlor game. (Answers on a postcard, with a bottle of Calvados for the first all-correct missive. Hint: There are no women.)

Of these seven, Bernard-Henri Lévy is the most complex, the most complexed and, by far, the most flamboyant. He is, in an old-fashioned way, a fine ambassador, kissing ladies on the hand, and using his French accent to impish effect (such as in his insistence on pronouncing the name Sulzberger, of New York Times fame, as “Sulz-bare-zhay”). He also has a connection (albeit of sorrowful source) with this newspaper, being the author of “Who Killed Daniel Pearl?”—a courageous, if somewhat eccentric, investigation into the murder in Pakistan of a young Journal reporter.

Mr. Lévy has a new book out—not so much an investigation, this time, as an inquiry. His latest project has been to follow in the footsteps of Alexis de Tocqueville and travel through the United States in the manner of the author of “Democracy in America.” The world being what it is, the result was never likely to be an update of Tocqueville. Instead, we have what might fairly be described as “Bernard-Henri Lévy in America.”

The author has called it “American Vertigo”—not a bad name, as it speaks to America’s vertigo, as well as to his own—and the literary poobahs in Paris have their *culottes* in a twist over his decision to bypass France and publish it in America first, in English. Much harrumphing has happened in Paris, much talk of betrayal; but Mr. Lévy—who in a conversation with New York magazine this week laid out his love for America in terms that were almost pornographic—regards the book as his gift to this country: “It had to be published here first,” he says, with an upward tilt of a nose so aquiline one might hang a hat on it. “Unquestionably.”

We are dining together at a very swank Manhattan hotel—one in which Mr. Lévy, who inherited a fortune from his father, is contemplating the purchase of a pied-à-terre—and we’ve just ordered raw clams. “Six each, sir?” asks the waiter—to whom Mr. Lévy, pausing to ponder, replies, “No, nine. Make it nine.” The steak he asks for later is to be “rare, very rare,” and the spare precision of his à la carte ordering is in contrast to the tumble of words that follow when we talk of America, and of the anti-Americanism that reigns in France.

“In France, with the nation based on roots, on the idea of soil, on a common memory . . . the very existence of America is a mystery and a scandal.” This is a particular source of pain, Mr. Lévy says, for “the right.” Contrary to what is

thought generally, he insists, anti-Americanism “migrated to the left, to the Communist Party, but its origins are on the extreme right.” America gives the French right “nightmares,” as the country is based on “a social contract. America proves that people can gather at a given moment and *decide* to form a nation, even if they come from different places.” The “ghost that has haunted Europe for two centuries”—and which gives fuel, to this day, to anti-Americanism

A philosopher who hates the Iraq war—but loves America.

there—“is America’s coming together as an act of will, of *creed*. It shows that there is an alternative to organic nations.”

These are important insights, and surely gratifying to an American. But is this the whole picture, I ask. Isn’t today’s French *gauche*—and the European left as embodied by Gerhard Schröder and Spain’s Zapatero, to name but two leading offenders—more than just a passive inheritor of a right-wing anti-Americanism? Why this insistence—and Mr. Lévy does, sometimes, protest too much—on anti-Americanism as a sort of rightist Original Sin? Here, Mr. Lévy is evasive: “It is true of the left,” he concedes, nodding his head in accord, but then checks himself: “It is *partly* true. . . . But you *must* see that in France you have the Gaullist tradition, which is strongly anti-American.”

Would he say that Jacques Chirac, a Gaullist, is anti-American? “Chirac is pragmatic. When he plays chess, he plays with both black and white. He thinks two things at the same time, constantly. Mitterrand was like that, too.” Ideology, suggests Mr. Lévy with more than a hint of lament, has given way to “pragmatism” in French politics, to cynicism. “The reign of ideologies in France was linked to the concept of revolution. As long as some believed in revolution, you had a distribution of ideologies.” The moment when “the dream of revolution collapsed”—a dream of which Mr. Lévy once partook—ideology decamped from the battleground of French politics. (Mr. Lévy lingers nostalgically over the word “dream.” Fifteen minutes since their arrival, his clams languish untouched. I have but one left, which I leave for later, in awkward solidarity.)

When did the dream of revolution die? “With Cambodia,” Mr. Lévy answers. This was an event “much more important than the fall of the Berlin Wall. When the Hegel of modern times will write this history, he will say that the real crucial event was Cambodia.” Why? “Because till Cambodia all the revolutionaries in the world believed that revolution had failed because it didn’t go far enough, because it wasn’t radical enough.” And then Cambodia happened—“the first revolution in history to be really radical. . . . And what did we discover, all of us? Instead of paradise, revolution gives absolute hell.”

So would Mr. Lévy say, improving on Francis Fukuyama, that Cambodia, and not the fall of the Berlin Wall, was “the end of history”? “No, not history. The end of revolution. The end of the desirability of revolution.” Mr. Lévy has this disagreement, and others, with Mr. Fukuyama. “I do not believe that with the death of communism we entered into an age in which there will be no more radical contradiction, dialectical

war, and so on. I don’t believe that.”

If Mr. Lévy’s debate with Mr. Fukuyama is benign, his differences with another American sage, Samuel Huntington, are positively acrimonious. (“I met him once, and he . . . maybe he drank too much wine, but at the end of the lunch he was so strange. I told about my thoughts on America as a nation based on a creed, and that this was not very different from the foundation of Israel. There is an American creed, and there is an Israeli creed—and this idea, of America having to share its concept of creed with Israel, did put him in a very strange anger. He was furious at this idea. ‘You cannot compare,’ he told me, ‘the creed of Israel, which is an ethnic creed, with the creed of America.’”)

Mr. Lévy describes Mr. Huntington’s last book, “Who Are We?” as “racist,” and rejects the notion that there is in the world, or has been, a clash of civilizations: “We are engaged in a war against terrorism, but the war is a political one, not a religious one, not a civilizational one. It is, I stress, a *political* war.” I press him on this point: How does he make the distinction?—these concepts, surely, are all intertwined. “Of course,” he replies, unimpressed. “But I make the distinction because I believe that you have some Muslims who do not hate the West. Being an enemy of the West is not a necessary condition of being Muslim, of adoring the God of Islam.” I persist: Isn’t his preference for the description of this war as “political” itself a political decision? “It is suicide to say that this is a civilizational war, because if it is such, it is an endless war, bloc against bloc. If you say ‘political’ you make a bet on the outcome.”

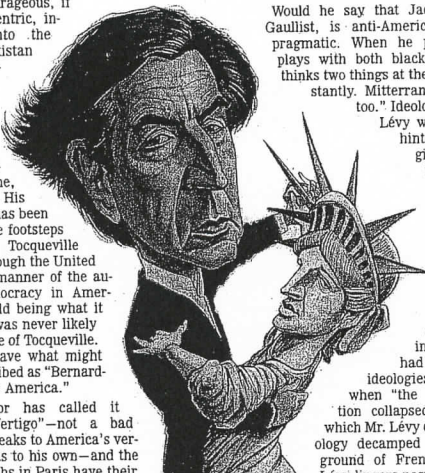
Does he have something in common, therefore, with American neoconservatives, who also believe that we are engaged in a political war, who believe, after all, that Islamic societies are capable of practicing democracy? “I have a lot in common with them—our history is in common, as are our reflexes. What is not are our conclusions, the way of transforming our ethics into politics.” Mr. Lévy is an acknowledged critic of the war in Iraq, but here, not for the first time in our conversation, he is unpersuasive.

Was the Iraq war justified? “No,” he says, almost gruffly, and then elaborates: “I think it was morally justified and politically a disaster.” Mr. Lévy’s complaint is that the Bush administration did not exhaust all “political” options before going to war. “Politics . . . more politics . . .” he said, wagging a finger. But with Messrs. Chirac and Schröder such adamant opponents, what more, I ask, should have been done? Mr. Lévy’s response was as follows, and chivalry prevents me from making a public judgment of it: “America supported Saddam for years and years. You could have waited a few months more for him to die, of natural or non-natural causes . . . or for an opposition movement to grow up. . . . Besides, he added, referring to the Iraqis, “you cannot liberate *un peuple somnambule*”—a people sleepwalking.

Mr. Lévy regards his own criticism of America not as anti-Americanism, but as tough love. He is an assiduous believer in America’s “manifest destiny,” and expects this country, clearly, to uphold the highest standards—as he sees them. Some of these standards he would prescribe to France, in particular the American approach to citizenship. He contrasts the “model of Dearborn”—the Detroit suburb, home to significant numbers of contented Arab-Americans—with the “model of St. Denis,” the Parisian *banlieu* where discontented Arab immigrants (never referred to as Arab-Frenchmen) ran riot late last year. “What is good about America is that in order to be a citizen, you are not asked to resign from your former identity. You cannot tell Varadarajan or Lévy, ‘You have to erase from your mind the ancestors you had.’ In France, we erase.”

America, Mr. Lévy concludes, “is a factory of citizens, which has some defects, some problems, but the country works, not too badly. Better, I think, than mine.”

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