

Books

On the Road, Notebook in Hand

French philosopher and personality Bernard-Henri Lévy follows in Tocqueville's footsteps.

By Carol Berens

Few Americans have ever actually read Alexis de Tocqueville's 1835 *Democracy in America*. They know the name of course. It's trotted out by political commentators and reporters on an as-needed basis for pithy statements claiming to reveal the American character. Similar to easy adages, they are simultaneously vague and specific, so this mirror held up to show us Americans our true selves seems prescient, quite on the mark, even today.

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America, easy to observe, is much more difficult to understand and analyze. In 2004, *The Atlantic Monthly* asked French philosopher and personality, Bernard-Henri Lévy, known as BHL, to "follow in Tocqueville's footsteps" and write his observations for the magazine. Appearing in serial form beginning in May 2005, these articles have just been published in America as a book entitled *American Vertigo* by Random House. (The book will be published in France in March by Grasset.) One travels to expand one's own understanding and broaden one's personal experience, and in fact, Lévy

admits that both he and Tocqueville were responding to events in France. In the present case, the rising anti-Americanism in France and the question of Europe's role in the world.

The overarching question, of course, is the shape of democracy in America since 9/11 and the war in Iraq. It's quite wide ranging, not only in geography (America is larger than in Tocqueville's time) but in topics. From the flag-draped buildings of Newport, Rhode Island, to the dying cities of Buffalo and Detroit in the industrial heartland, to the Mall of America, to the barrier of the Mexico border, to the centerless Los Angeles, to the easy charm of historical Savannah, Lévy zigzags across the country, his path paved by editors, assistants and drivers, with access to Hollywood activists and presidential candidates.

It's quite dizzying. At the end of the journey, Lévy summarizes his experience and molds his wide-eyed observations into a critical framework, which sheds little new light on the American character. For an American, his political analysis is infused with whiffs of academia. One has the feeling of entering into the middle of a dinner conversation. Much of his last chapter responds to other social and historical observers such as Francis Fukuyama, Michael Walzer, Samuel Huntington among others. The discussion appears geared to

Europeans, not Americans.

Throughout the book, Lévy is quite taken aback about the American preference for the fake over the real—or as he states, the "derangement of the mechanisms of memorialization" such as museums that recreate events and objects. Secondly, he is shocked at what he calls obesity, not of people's bodies, but of the social obesity of places and objects—too large malls, cars, parking lots, churches, public deficits. His third concern is for the "Balkanization" of society that can be seen in such diverse places such as Sun City, Arizona (a city reserved for the elderly), prisons, and identity politics.

But Lévy retains hope. Because, despite his analysis, the people he met spoke with a sense of national solidarity. When the Mexican-American border patrolman and the Arab-Americans of Deerfield, Michigan, considered themselves primarily Americans, it was Lévy who was shocked, not the Americans. ■

American Vertigo by Bernard-Henri Lévy. Random House, 320 pages, \$24.95.

