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Book Review: Deconstruction in America

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Deconstruction in America


Charles Angell

Bernard-Henri Lévy finally gets around to explaining the title of his rather petrified travelogue, American Vertigo, on page 238. He writes of “these myriad Americans who continued to be viewed as an elite people, sure of itself and domineering, whereas in reality no large modern nation today is as uncertain as this one, less sure of what it is becoming, less confident of the very values, that is to say, the myths, that founded it; it’s a certain disorder, a disease; a wavering of points of reference and certainties, a vertigo once again that seizes the observer as well as the observed…” Certainly Lévy found himself seized, but then after interviewing James Ellroy, Warren Beatty, Jim Harrison, Charlie Rose, Russell Means, Sharon Stone, Woody Allen, and assorted strippers, trippers, and zippers who wouldn’t find himself vertiginous? As for “the observed,” in this case an American reader, difficult to say. Lévy’s scattergun and dizzying prose style creates more glare than clarity. Remember that Lévy resides in a country that recently awarded the king of dizzy, Jerry Lewis, his highest honor for artistic achievement. Deano!

Lévy undertakes to repeat Alexis de Tocqueville’s 1831-32 travels in the then fledging United States to observe its prisons. What resulted from his journals was Democracy in America which examined the strengths and weaknesses of democratic institutions. Tocqueville observed the United States from the perspective of a post-Napoleonic Frenchman who attributed the success of American democracy to its vast landscape available for expansion. Tocqueville created more glare than clarity. Remember that Lévy lives in a country that recently awarded the king of dizzy, Jerry Lewis, his highest honor for artistic achievement.

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In a recent Paris Match (April 13–19, 2006) interview, Lévy was asked why American reviewers have not responded virulently along the lines of “what right does he have to meddle?” But OK, that’s precisely the point I’m aiming at! (my translation). But Garrison Keillor, who reviewed American Vertigo for The New York Times and must be Lévy’s resoundingly false note, accuses Lévy of “tedious and original thinking” that is “short on the facts, long on conclusion,” resulting in writing akin to “a student padding out a term paper.” Martin Peretz uses his “Cambridge Diarist” column in The New Republic (2/13/2006) to take Keillor to task for his inability to “fathom the intellectual weight of Lévy’s transaction between Tocqueville and the present.” Peretz finds Lévy’s observations about the United States “suffused with that wrenching Tocquevillian tug between liberty and equality—the very drama of America, which is still the arbiter, for better or for worse…of the new century!”

Lévy invokes Tocquevillian precedent early in American Vertigo when he asks rhetorically: “Isn’t the author of the two volumes of Democracy in America the inventor, after all, of this modern form of reportage where attention to detail, the taste for personal encounters and circumlocutions, did not prevent—quite the contrary—make possible—faithfulness to a fixed idea?” Lévy’s fixed...
Lévy suggests, “that this man is something of a child.” Lévy’s portrayal of George Bush, whom he clearly observes at the outer margins of our society provides communities a flash of intellectual insight or simply implies the parallel between two maximum security in the great outdoors, on this former plantation—“a wholesome life in New Orleans, Lévy finds in the prison’s setting—“a wholesome life in the United States excepted—a puritan land where in a Las Vegas lap-dancing club he tries to engage Linda in a question and answer debate about her profession and concludes by remarking on “the wretchedness of Eros in the land of the Puritans.” And, in a postscript written after hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Lévy spares that “I saw—I heard.” The manner in which the American nation persists in viewing itself as an immense middle class devoted to the American Way of Life, despite the obvious refutation—the very real existence of the 37 million outcasts, the victims of social exclusion.”

Who has the right take on Lévy—Keillor or Peretz? Keillor would assert, I think, that Levi’s conclusions outlined in the preceding paragraph are fairly obvious and even banal to anyone minimally familiar with life in the United States. Preetz would likely argue that Americans in their quest for liberty overlook the glaring banality and—in what he sees as our childlike and ephemeral pleasures. Lévy reduces the victims of social exclusion from this mausoleum of merchandise, this funeral accumulation of false goods and nolongeries in this end-of-the-world setting? Lévy sees in the faces of the Mall shoppers “the easily led, almost animal-like face Alexandre Kojève [a French philosopher] said would be the face of humanity at the arrival…of the end of history.” The Mall of America represents in microcosm for Lévy the United States as an economic gated community—“or if you’re one of Lévy’s mall walkers, a gated community—whose middle American shoppers content themselves with childish and ephemeral pleasures. Lévy reduces Americans to banality and—in what he sees as our innocence—brutality.

Still, France is not without shopping malls, quite large ones like the one I had occasion to visit in St. Laurent du Var just outside Nice. The French apparently use their malls for recreational walking as well as shopping, accompanied quite frequently by their dogs. The signs above the spacious entrance to the supermarket that occupied an entire section of the mall read “pas de chiens dans le marché” The French, I’ve noted on my visits, tend to view any sign prohibiting something as an affront, so dogs accompanied their owners into the market. I began to wonder whether the sign above the market entrance shouldn’t perhaps have read “don’t purchase items off the lower shelves.” But, I’m pretty sure a French person would have informed me, had I made the suggestion, that I lacked a clear understanding of the cultural signs.

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and Book Review Editor of the Bridgewater Review.