



American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville

By Bernard-Henri Lévy

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What does it mean to be an American, and what can America be today? To answer these questions, celebrated philosopher and journalist Bernard-Henri Lévy spent a year traveling throughout the country in the footsteps of another great Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, whose *Democracy in America* remains the most influential book ever written about our country.

The result is *American Vertigo*, a fascinating, wholly fresh look at a country we sometimes only think we know. From Rikers Island to Chicago mega-churches, from Muslim communities in Detroit to an Amish enclave in Iowa, Lévy investigates issues at the heart of our democracy: the special nature of American patriotism, the coexistence of freedom and religion (including the religion of baseball), the prison system, the “return of ideology” and the health of our political institutions, and much more. He revisits and updates Tocqueville’s most important beliefs, such as the dangers posed by “the tyranny of the majority,” explores what Europe and America have to learn from each other, and interprets what he sees with a novelist’s eye and a philosopher’s depth.

Through powerful interview-based portraits across the spectrum of the American people, from prison guards to clergymen, from Norman Mailer to Barack Obama, from Sharon Stone to Richard Holbrooke, Lévy fills his book with a tapestry of American voices—some wise, some shocking. Both the grandeur and the hellish dimensions of American life are unflinchingly explored. And big themes emerge throughout, from the crucial choices America

faces today to the underlying reality that, unlike the “Old World,” America remains the fulfillment of the world’s desire to worship, earn, and live as one wishes—a place, despite all, where inclusion remains not just an ideal but an actual practice.

At a time when Americans are anxious about how the world perceives them and, indeed, keen to make sense of themselves, a brilliant and sympathetic foreign observer has arrived to help us begin a new conversation about the meaning of America.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Lévy's journey through this "magnificent, mad country" is indeed vertiginous as he loops from coast to coast and back, mounting to the heights of wealth and power—interviewing the likes of Barry Diller and John Kerry—and plunging into the depths of poverty and powerlessness, in urban ghettos and prisons. (In this last, he truly follows Tocqueville, whose assignment in the young America was to visit prisons.) Each scene is quite short, which is frustrating at first, but soon the quick succession of images creates a jostling, animated portrait of America, full of resonances and contradictions. Sharon Stone in her luxurious home, railing about the misery of the poor, is quickly followed by Lévy's chat with a waitress in a Colorado town struggling to make ends meet. A gated retirement community in Arizona seems to the author like a prison, while Angola, a prison in Louisiana, has lush grounds that resemble a retirement community's. Lévy (*Who Killed Daniel Pearl*), the celebrated French thinker and journalist, is a master of the vignette and the miniature, whether explaining why he could feel at home in Seattle or pondering whether Diller's apparent amorality is "too flaunted to be completely sincere." In France, where anti-Americanism has been so popular, Lévy has been an anti-anti-Americanist, and while he finds serious fissures in this country's social landscape, in the end he is an optimist about the future of a country he admires for the richness of its culture and its political vision. (*Feb. 1*)

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From [The New Yorker](#)

When Tocqueville wrote "Democracy in America," in the eighteen-thirties, it seemed as if only a foreigner could identify the essence of American culture. Now Lévy, a new kind of French aristocrat, has retraced his steps, travelling through our malls and megachurches and prisons. Lévy's writing has always been an arms race between shrewd observation and rapt self-absorption, but that's not the only problem here. The outsider's advantage is to see things fresh; his disadvantage is that he doesn't know when his observations are anything but fresh. In recent decades, our national self-scrutiny has spawned a library of its own—Joan Didion, Christopher Lasch, Mike Davis, Richard Sennett, Thomas Frank—and the time is long past when extracting profundities from the Mall of America seemed daring, rather than trite. Lévy's hortatory prose seethes with provocation and paradox; the trouble is that so many of his observations are so stale and predictable.

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Critics describe Bernard-Henri Lévy as erudite, entertaining, charming, and more than a little smug when it comes to examining a country not his own. The author of *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?* (***) Nov/Dec 2003), Lévy describes himself as an anti-anti-American, which leads to interesting support for Warren Beatty as a politician, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Norman Mailer, among others. Though its advocates call *American Vertigo* a "sequel" to *Democracy in America*, most critics view this tract as a superficial catalogue of America's contradictions (its "vertigo"). The book even largely fails to consider the implications of Tocqueville's concerns about democracy. Instead, it latches on to peculiarities that readers may never have considered (such as our collective flag fetish). In sum, though Lévy's book is provocative in places, read the original De Tocqueville.

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Lori Barnes:

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