

July 2013

After Tocqueville – the curious adventures of Bernard-Henri Lévy and Don Watson

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Bernard-Henri Lévy *American Vertigo: On the Road from Newport to Guantánamo (in the Footsteps of Alexis de Tocqueville)*, London, Gibson Square, 2006 (383 pp). ISBN 9-78081297-471-3 (hardcover) RRP \$27.95.

Don Watson *American Journeys*, Vintage Books Australia, 2009 (332 pp). ISBN 9-78174166-621-2 (paperback) RRP \$28.95.

The myth of America has long moved the minds of humanity—time and changing circumstances, however, have changed the trope. For the politically progressive individual, admiration of America and things American is fraught with difficulties. Such cultural signposts for our understanding and affection as the writings of Samuel Clemens, HL Mencken, Noam Chomsky, and the songs of Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan, popularised by teachers, writers, journalists and politicians, as well as television and radio broadcasters, need to be reconciled with such events as McCarthyism, the Vietnam War and the assassination of Salvador Allende. These conflicts are not new. In 1830 and 1831, as the facts about the New World increasingly challenged the myths about the New World, the French political theorist, Alexis de Tocqueville journeyed across the nascent American democracy. In part, Tocqueville's journey was concerned with sorting fact from myth, or at least providing a normative study of democracy in America.

Tocqueville's journey still inspires interest, especially in the details of the people he met and the institutions to which he gained access. These he described in meticulous, comprehensive detail (de Tocqueville 2004 (1835–40)). Its continuing interest lies as well in revealing in what ways and to what extent democracy in contemporary America measures up to that which he explained to his fellow French—the afterlife of his observations and reflections. In the wake of the bicentennial of Tocqueville's birth in 1805, as well as in the wake of the rising anti-Americanism that resulted from the Second Persian Gulf War (2003–09), the New York journal, *The Atlantic Monthly* invited French philosopher and public intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy (or BHL to his readers) to travel around the United States in Tocqueville's footsteps and to publish his observations and reflections in regular instalments as he travelled. These were later collected, revised and published as a single volume, *American Vertigo*. Shortly afterwards, Don Watson, the Australian historian, speech writer to Prime Minister Keating, and public intellectual published *American Journeys*, a journal of his observations and reflections derived from his extended travels around the United States in the northern summer and autumn of 2005, and the following winter. The themes of reason versus myth, as well as the positive and negative forms of various American mythologies

of American life that seem so conducive to human betterment and with those that are so seemingly otherwise. Both Bernard-Henri Lévy's and Don Watson's narratives of their journeys around the United States reveal this tension. Yet, so much has democracy become the air that we breathe that in the end, through the contemporary eyes of these two political commentators, what the reader finds is a less a neo-Tocquevillian political theory/sociology of democracy than a phenomenology of the United States, or indeed, a phenomenology of Americana.

For Tocqueville, as for the American Founding Fathers, the new regime that was created in the New World from the ashes of centuries of dynastic and religious conflict in the Old World offered hope to

people seeking a new form of life. Their hope was for a new form politics that offered the ordinary person something more than suffering in this world on the promise of eternal bliss in another world. A hoped for salvation of the soul in the afterlife could still be had—but there was now also hope for a better life in this world. This better life in the here and now was predicated on the ideal of equality between citizens, or in other words, democracy, an idea with ancient roots but at that time with few contemporary flowers. Indeed, little distinction had traditionally been drawn between democracy and ochlocracy, mob-rule. Events in Paris in 1789 and thereafter seemed to confirm the ancient writers' scepticism that the people in fact can govern themselves. Tocqueville and others believed that events in Washington, DC in 1776, and thereafter, pointed in a different direction.

For BHL and for Don Watson, the trope of the stranger in a strange land provides the context for their observations and reflections upon the forms of American life that they encounter on their travels. While both are ostensibly writing about American society, what the reader in fact finds are narratives of two very different Americas. For BHL, at issue is 'What shape is this democracy in, the one Americans (with good cause) are so proud of and which they have always wanted to hold up as an example for the rest of the world?' (Lévy, p. 288). Watson on the other hand chooses to traverse those spheres of American life that the Enlightenment appears to have bypassed, or perhaps has not yet reached, guided by Samuel Clemens, HL Mencken, Clarence Darrow and the deep flowing river of United States secular humanism. Both travellers moreover freely admit that they completing another stage of political and spiritual journeys that began long ago on different shores. Both are at heart *soixante-huitards*, at one with the events in Paris in 1789 and thereafter, and late-comers to the thought of Tocqueville. For both, the United States was at one stage or another the pernicious imperialist power, though in later times both have realised that there is more to the story of democracy in America than the traditional anathemas would have us believe. On these American journeys however, one takes the high road, the other the low; their paths do not appear to have crossed at any point, although at one stage or another they reflect upon common scenery. BHL's (or *The Atlantic Monthly's*) fabulous rolodex takes him into the salons of the truly powerful, and often rich and influential; Watson's American journey highlights the lives of those at the margins. As he traverses the lingering frontiers he is, as well, able to highlight the many points of collision between man and nature, at whose cross-roads the marginalised so often become history's road kill. In the end, BHL more than Watson is following the footsteps of Tocqueville, though Tocqueville remains an important source of inspiration for the latter.

Tocqueville's message to the world was a positive one, if you were a democrat. Though not a perfect political system, have no fear, democracy will not loose the mob, (in fact, the opposite is more likely). BHL's message is somewhat more complex. First, what is evident elsewhere is also evident in the United States, that is, traditional political roles have been reversed. In contemporary political life, the Right, BHL observes, not the Left is ideologically seminal, the fount of new political ideas. BHL observes despondently that after looking for *au courant* progressive ideas in the Democratic Party, 'The results, I'm afraid, didn't measure up either to my hopes or—far more serious—to what anyone might reasonably expect given the quality, intensity and strength of the ideological argument mounted by the right' (p. 227). What he finds instead is a movement pre-occupied with money. His interviews with neo-conservatives Richard Perle, Bill Kristol and Francis Fukuyama, and later with Samuel Huntington, all uncompromising, unrepentant, and unforgiving, reveal a disputatious frisson that is absent from his discussions with prominent Democrats.

Secondly, BHL is not shy in his critique of the relative indifference of the majority to the fate of the poor, the black and the closeness of violence to the surface of social life, using the example of the Hurricane Katrina's ravages of New Orleans as his prime example. For Lévy, Katrina's message was clear: the undermining of the institutions of government can have some quite drastic consequences and that the United States must reconsider its faith in small government.

Thirdly, BHL finds that prison reform is not a vote winner in American democracy. In taking a leaf from his illustrious predecessor and his associate Gustave de Beaumont, whose journey to the United States in 1830 was ostensibly to study American penology, he highlights how the best intentions can produce a system that is quite barbaric. Little it seems has changed in this sphere, though one must add, prison reform is not exactly a vote winner in any other democracy either. That the US criminal justice and penal system is of a piece with the values of retribution and responsibility found in its political and religious values is often forgotten.

Despite these critical observations, BHL is generally optimistic in his outlook concerning democracy in contemporary America. ‘If I had to offer a prognosis,’ he argues,

it would be a crisis, not an extinction, of the model. If I had to risk a hypothesis, it would be that of a new dialectics between the *pluribus* and the *unum*, alterity and identity, between the two ideals, ethnic and civic, democratic and republican, that continue to form—in a different way, of course, according to a differently negotiated compromise—that daily plebiscite that is still called America.

He adds that

If, despite everything and despite, especially, the accumulated evidence of American vertigo, I had to make a bet on the future, it would be that of a newly defined reconstitution—around parameters that are ancient but arranged in a new order—of that old national model, which is really unlike any other in the world, where a subtle equilibrium of talents and countertalents, devotions and predations or, to phrase it in religious terms, fidelities and heresies, have allowed the affirmation of a given identity to think of itself as enriching the nation with precisely what it had chopped away from it.

He concludes this by observing that ‘If I had to make a bet, it would be that this double affirmation, this symbolic deathless exchange, will continue—and that America’s identity machinery has not said its last word’ (Lévy, pp. 317–318).

Don Watson’s American journeys began as BHL’s articles hit the newsstands—his description of the United States, as well as his reflections, provides an interesting counterpoint. Gone are high profile interviews and the glitzy events—instead we are treated to a vivid description of journeys around the United States, first by train, then by car. Watson’s interlocutors are often poor, black, patriotic and religious, and intensely proud of their identity. The fact that his journey is initially by rail naturally frames his description since long distance rail travel in the United States is often the only option that the poor and minorities have if they want to re-locate to somewhere else.

Don Watson’s narrative unlike BHL’s highlights the United States’ underbelly of poverty and lingering casual racism, as well as its unyielding bare-knuckle religiosity. Watson affirms many of the same aspects of American life as BHL—its diversity, its greatness in many spheres and its popular culture that celebrates ordinary life. This he attributes to the notion of national ‘exceptionalism’ which permeates so much of the American political discourse. As he observes:

The idea (of exceptionalism) is essential to the doctrine behind the War on Terror, to the strength of religion, the weakness of the social security system, the pervasiveness of the flag and other symbols of the nation; to its violence, its self-deceits and hypocrisy, its inability to confront its own contradictions, its childish fears and paranoia, and its mind-numbing provincialism. It is also, very likely, the reason for its power, its creativity, its capacity for self-renewal, its numberless heroic examples and the desire of people everywhere to live in

the United States (Watson, pp. 322–323).

More than bringing him into contact with the poor and with minorities, Watson's train travels have also brought him into contact with nature, and in a sense with the frontier mentality that is such a prominent feature of American ideology. These journeys also brought him into contact with the effects that the decades of economic exploitation of nature have had on the environment, or 'creative destruction' as he dryly quotes Joseph Schumpeter. Both BHL and Watson are deeply affected by the power of nature as exemplified by Hurricane Katrina to destroy decades of human social and technological artifice and to humble the world's most powerful and implacable military power.

At times, Watson's narrative takes on a noir-ish dimension. At nightfall he is so often far from the comforts of a friend's hospitality; the landscape and the road are replaced by the garish lights of desolate roadside motels. These temporary sanctuaries provide for the wandering body a brief respite between a journey's start and its distant end; and for the wandering soul an ersatz domesticity that tunes into an ersatz call to God at the turn of a dial. Here BHL's toney hotels and restaurants really seem quite distant. Watson, needless to say, keeps moving on.

A weakness in Watson's book is its failure to push the political meanings of his observations to their logical conclusion. He does provide a sense of the degree to which so many issues such as patriotism, religion and social conservatism as well as race, crime and poverty are historically interconnected, yet the reader is not given any idea how they are systematically a consequence of the American ideology, if that is the case. Watson, like BHL, is no fan of President Bush, nor of the neo-conservatives, yet his critique never really penetrates beyond the surfaces of American life.

Moreover both BHL and Don Watson are writers who are not particularly encumbered by any sort of religious faith. Their criticisms of media fundamentalism, of commercialised and superficial faith and of punitive Puritanism suggest that for them the American version of the missionary position is best understood as 'hands against the wall, feet back and spread 'em'. Yet religion in America is as diverse as America itself and contributes in no small way to its institutions and to the moderating of individual self interest, rightly understood or not, something that Tocqueville well understood (de Tocqueville 2004 (1835–40), pp. 332–347, 503–508). BHL much more than Watson appreciates the centrality of religion, especially its Protestant forms, to democracy in America and to both the best and the worst of American life. For BHL, though, the matter is not that simple. He recognises on the one hand that the United States is 'A nation that, if words have any meaning and if one wants to take literally the deflation that all of the master signifiers of natural, idolatrous, traditional nationalism have undergone, is infinitely more unbelieving than is generally thought' (Lévy, p. 320) and on the other hand, following Tocqueville, that the Protestant churches were the laboratories of American democracy, fully traceable in any genealogy of American democratic values. As he notes,

Individualism? Directly inspired by the one-to-one relationship, typically Protestant, between the believer and his Lord. Freedom of conscience? Linked to the practice of reading the Scriptures without a priest, armed only with reason and good sense. The taste for free debate? The practice of it? The multiplicity, precisely, of the readings; the theological impossibility of resolving this multiplicity and choosing between right and wrong interpretations. The ideology of advancement by merit? The indifference—asserted very quickly, and so characteristic of this country—to hierarchies of birth or nature? A secular version of the responsibility of the believer summoned to answer, alone before God and before God alone, for his failure or success on this earth ... (Lévy, pp. 350–351).

In contrast to BHL's appreciation of the links between the faith of the Puritans and the rise of commerce and democracy in America, Watson observes that:

The idea that a divine plan is at work is a powerful theme in America, and not just among preachers in the South or the people who regularly listen to them. You hear it from politicians, celebrities and sportspeople, and you hear it from people on the street. Even if you share their belief in a living God, and suppose that such a God must have a plan of sorts, you might still wonder why he would concern himself with the football results, or why he would provide a surfeit of bad food for poor people in a Shoney's and none at all for hundreds of millions of people in other parts of the world. What can't be questioned is the part religion plays in the lives of both those who overcome their circumstances and those for whom the circumstances are too strong against them. Nor can you question what Americans of this persuasion sometimes achieve in their lives, or the love they inspire in others, the example they set or the rare grace their religion gives them (Watson, pp. 51–52).

Their differing conceptions of America are further revealed in the relation to the perennially thorny question of US foreign policy. Both readily refer to their formative hostility to the Vietnam War and the related questions; both have had second thoughts and, in the case of BHL, more. Moreover, both opposed the Second Persian Gulf War, though evidently for different reasons—BHL it seems for reasons of foreign policy prudence, and for Watson, a more general scepticism of any policy that bore the fingerprints of the neo-conservatives. In contrast, BHL does believe that the United States still has an international role as protector of human rights and freedom.

While America, for Tocqueville, was synonymous with democracy—his two volumes analysing in comprehensive detail the institutions and practices that he found in his travels there, America for both BHL and Don Watson, as the reader has seen, appears to be synonymous with other things. While both appreciate its freedom and individualism, and for BHL, its pursuit of international human rights, both take issue with various elements of American life, as has been outlined. What is missing from both accounts is the sort of causal analysis that takes the reader from the consideration of mere phenomenological curiosities to an appreciation of their causes, from the singular of one modern democracy to the universal tendencies of modern democracies in general, *à la* Tocqueville.

BHL's and Don Watson's many *obiter dicta* point to many interesting questions. Is consumerism merely an excuse for individual vulgarity and self-indulgence, or does it represent an expression of the individual's right to happiness, or to put it another way, is consumerism a form of exploitation or is it the democracy of consumption? Is religion the expression of intellectual or cultural backwardness or does it provide individuals with a system of enlightenment, social solidarity, participation and empowerment? Do the lingering manifestations of racism represent the failure of pluralism, or does reconciliation remain a work in progress? Have Tocqueville's fears about equality proven well-founded or does modern democracy's tolerance of extreme disparities of income and wealth represent a still greater threat? Does the decline of an independent, transparent and publicly accountable public sector make for a genuine and effective sphere of public right? Is celebrity culture and its posthumous resurrections in museums intrinsic to democracy? Both writers allude to these issues in passing however the focus of their narratives is elsewhere.

The reader finds in both writers examples of just how far the contemporary political discourse has evolved since Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* was published. For both writers, the roles of women and minorities are now central to any discussion of democracy. Their modern American journeys reveal that these changes however remain works in progress, and that in some areas manifest inequalities point to problematic lapses from Tocqueville's times.

Much has happened in the liberal democratic world since BHL and Don Watson returned to their more familiar turfs. The recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have called into question the ideological supremacy of the neo-conservatives and the Global Financial Crisis has challenged the post Cold War neo-liberal

consensus. The intractability of both issues has created despairing electorates whose prevailing moods of hopelessness and disenchantment are proving fertile ground for extremists. This naturally raises many problematic questions concerning contemporary democracy, especially in relation to the immense inequality (compared to the Great Society period 1966–1970 in the United States) that has riven the United States and other democracies.

These two journeys to America however show that there remains a need to penetrate its mythologies. They show that much of what inspired Tocqueville to journey around the United States in the first place—its people and its institutions—remains true to this day, and remains true for all democracies. Where they perhaps fall short is in their interpretations of the changes that have since taken place since Tocqueville's journey, why many see these changes as a Fall from a modern paradise, and why, even after Tocqueville, so much mythology continues to surround democracy in America.

REFERENCE

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ISSN 1832-1526
Australian Review of Public Affairs
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