

Delphine Ménard
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J.B.
Conferences on American Ideology

DISCOVERY, FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA

FOREWORD

You might find it all lacking sense, and rigidity. Some would definitely say I got carried away. But hey ! we ain't no cats and we've just this one life to live. Actually, I had started a very calm very academic very researched kind of essay... But when the night draws nigh there are elves dancing round the clearings and I still wonder... Maybe they wrote it, and not I...

So the title was...

'DISCOVERY' FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA

In order for me to change my mind about the United States, I should have to go to the United States. It is somehow too easy, and quite a challenge, too, to say that one, just by giving a conference, should manage to change people's opinion about a country.

Somehow, I have the feeling that one cannot - for one does not know how to defend his own country, or even pretend to know his own country. You'll always find people who think they're wiser (and they might even be, for they are not blinded by love and thankfulness). You might throw in a little History and try to explain the whys with the whens, but the bottom line is... if you want to change people's opinion about a country, go on and do it, but the other way around.

Go back to the US and hear what people say about France. If you tell them they are wrong, they might believe you, for you're one of them. If I go and tell them France is not full of stuck-up, smelly people, I'm not sure they'll believe me, for I am on the wrong side of the fence. But let's say I stay here, in France, and stand up for the Star Spangled Banner, they might believe me, because I am one of them....

I have experienced America as a reality, and I cannot say that a conference on American daily life and ideology has changed my beliefs, for they come from experience. The conference has just given me yet another viewpoint on the country, and increased my belief that America is full of people who are so different from each other it makes it impossible to generalize (although I'll admit I do it quite often... Nobody's perfect.).

I have lived in America, I have travelled in America, loved it and hated it. It was my home for two years. I've seen poverty and wealth (try to compare Las Vegas, New Mexico and Coronado Island, in San Diego, California). I have seen racism (better not have blue eyes if you live in New Mexico, and don't even think of getting by with a French sounding name...) and I have seen kindness and sane curiosity (those families who hosted us for the week-end and wanted to know everything about us and our country...). I have seen black and I have seen white. I have vibrated to the sound of "America, America, God shed his grace on thee, and crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea..." when Barbra Streisand sang it, and sneered at those pupils in school "pledging allegiance to the flag of the United States". I have almost cried with emotion at seeing how amazing a landscape could be, far in the Southwest (ever been to the Grand Canyon ?) and almost cried with despair at the fakeness of a Caesar's Palace, far in the Southwest (ever been to Las Vegas, Nevada ?). I have learned to hug and mean it deeply, I have learned that hugging can also be as fake as our little kiss-on-the-cheek business. I have learned a language and read e.e.cummings and learned that :

"Life, for eternal us, is now; and now is much too busy being a little more than everything to seem anything. catastrophic included" [1]

But I've also learned that :

*"Roses are red
Violets are blue
Sugar is sweet
And so are you"*

I have found out that the American Dream might be dead in Europe, but that it still lingers on in the slumber of children in America or other parts of the world. I have learned that French bread is best in France, but that Haagen-Dasz (how on earth do you spell the thing!!) makes the best butter-pecan ice cream I've had in my life. I have experienced that cheese (and here I mean real cheese, stinky and all...) is an unknown concept in the States, but, hey! we don't know shit (pardon my French...) about hamburgers. I have learned to hate Los Angeles (too American) and I have learned to love San Francisco (Sooooo American!). I have learned what a pick-up was but oh! how I did miss my little car! I have seen the Rockies, but we have the Alps. I have seen the Pacific Ocean, and we only have the Mediterranean. I have seen, smelt, felt everything, and its contrary. That is what's so incredibly interesting in that country... They manage to make you cry with the funniest movie, and laugh with the most serious (ever seen *It's a Wonderful Life*, by Frank Capra ? If you haven't, run and rent it.). They manage to put black and white together, and it does not make grey.

If you (or others) really want to give a definition to the word "culture" so that people do not say "Americans have no culture ! ", go ahead and find a definition, I give up. There are too many things to live, feel, eat, discover in the world to try to change the mind of people who think they're so smart and know better. I don't know if I've changed my mind. Maybe not. Maybe I don't want to live in the United States, because I don't feel I am fit for it. Maybe I could try. Maybe I'm prejudiced and there are things I don't like, but then, I have as much to say against France... When I read what the others have written, it drives me nuts. Not because they are nasty, but because they are ignorant. And I might sound conceited (I may even BE that, but *It's a Wonderful Life*, Zouzou's petals and -- *Dad, the teacher says that when a bell rings, an angel gets his wings!*) but I'm different, I have learned, before I said anything. I have seen and looked and scrutinized and experienced and laughed and cried and, best of all, I have discovered.

Whether it was good, or bad, to tell you the truth, I do not really care right now, for it all evens out in the end, doesn't it ?

[1] e.e.cummings, *No Thanks*, 1935