

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments June 2011

Of laws, not men

On Bernard-Henri Lévy's moral blindness.

We would not care to guess whether the case of Dominique Strauss-Kahn—French socialist, political rival of the French President Nicholas Sarkozy, and (soon-to-be-former) head of the International Monetary Fund—will still be titillating the public when this issue of *The New Criterion* finds its way to the nation's mailboxes and computer screens. The story of a grandee escorted from his first-class seat on Air France mere moments before takeoff for sexually assaulting a West African chambermaid in a plush Manhattan hotel was guaranteed to provide many hours of sordid entertainment. And so it has. The panoply of details with which an eager Fourth Estate has been supplying its indefatigable audience assures a good run. We suspect, however, that it won't be long before some other outrage supervenes to provide alternative gratification.

Before the saga of Dominique Strauss-Kahn entirely recedes from the collective consciousness, we would like to draw our readers's attention to the commentary by the French celebrity "philosopher" Bernard-Henri Lévy in *The Daily Beast* of May 16. A certain amount of Lévy's column is utterly out-of-date since it is predicated on the trope that "no one knows" whether dsk is guilty as charged or whether, as his defense initially said, he was having lunch with his daughter at the relevant time. The wonders of modern science in the form of DNA analysis turned that lunch-with-daughter gambit into the claim that "it was consensual." Perhaps it was.

But the arresting thing about Lévy's column is not his abundant outrage at the press for pillorying his "friend for twenty years," but his resentment that the judge (an "American judge," no less!) should treat this great man as "a subject of justice *like any other*" (our emphasis).

We are not precisely sure how they do things in La Belle France, but in this country the statues of Justice wear blindfolds while they hold the scales, precisely because everyone is (at least, everyone is supposed to be) equal before the law. That, anyway, was what John Adams meant when he endeavored to frame a government of "laws and not of men." Which means, O *philosophe*, that not even chaps who happen to run the IMF—not even those who are friends of Bernard-Henri Lévy—may rape chambermaids with impunity.

We suspect this may be a truth Mr. Lévy has difficulty absorbing. As we noted, it is unlikely that the case of the pathetic Dominique Strauss-Kahn will long engage the public. But anyone familiar with Lévy's work will have reason to think again about the significance of the arrogance and minatory frivolity that are its leading characteristics. They are the traits, no doubt, that have made him such a hit among the extensively educated. But as his latest effusion suggests, his coy, involuted ironies betray a profound moral obtuseness and political infantilism.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 29 Number 10 , on page 1

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