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Something Has Changed

PARIS, France

February 10, 1999

By Jean Benoît Nadeau

We were just coming out of the post office, my rental agent and I, when he opened a window that cast a deep light into the famous French ethos, or *attitude*. It came unknowingly: studying law to improve his career, the 27-year-old man spares few words. He was late for his next appointment and we shook hands hurriedly on the sidewalk. But as I said "*Bonjour!*" the rental agent stopped and almost dropped his cellular phone.

"I've got a piece of advice for you, *monsieur* Nadeau."

"Yes, *monsieur* Mugnier?"

"Don't say *Bonjour* when you mean *Au revoir*. People will think you're an idiot. *Au revoir!*"

"*Bonjou... au revoir, monsieur* Mugnier"

I descended to the Métro with a wry smile. "Thus are the perils and traps of a fellowship in France," I thought. "Neither war, nor dysentery, but ridicule and humiliation."

My wife and I have had ample occasions to reflect on this incident and many similar ones. During our first week, we stayed in a bed & breakfast run by an ex-school teacher. She was very sweet and full of advice, but she could not help correcting us about our use of the wrong auxiliary verbs in past participles and our way of using *peinturer* as a verb instead of *faire de la peinture*, when we meant to *paint*. The French from France have a funny expression for someone who speaks a good, refined language. They say: "*Bien châtier, son français* (A well chastised French)." Scolding is a big part of the custom here, something you have to live with. It is a mark of superiority, and sometimes of ignorance. To be fair, some French people do get what you mean by *Bonjour*, especially when said with a maple-syrup accent. But then other French people, the most noticeable, don't know that France fits four times between Niagara Falls and the tip of the Gaspé peninsula. This is precisely the kind of attitude that irks the Quebecker that I will always be.

To be frank, my attitude has evolved about the significance of the *Bonjour-Au revoir* episode and all episodes of scolding since seeing the film *Le Dîner de Cons* (The Dinner of Idiots), the most popular picture of the year, with 9 million viewers. The comedy revolves around a cruel, albeit factual, anecdote. Some aristocrats used to compete in finding the most perfect idiot. They elected the winner in the course of dinner attended by each contestant and his unknowing candidate, who was made to talk and spell out his idiocy. This lasted until a winner was found and proclaimed champion, unwittingly. One 1960's variation consisted of inviting ugly women. After viewing this

Jean Benoît Nadeau

"I have been asking myself difficult questions for some years now about the impact of language and culture on the individual, both personally and professionally," wrote Jean Benoît Nadeau in his fellowship application. "I feel these questions can be answered only by living outside my own culture."

"Most Quebecers tend to view themselves as a French people living in America, but I have always felt rather like an American speaking French. The fellowship I have in mind pertains to studying why France seems to be resisting the present trend toward globalization. Indeed, this society, once considered the light of Europe, seems to be now in a profound state of withdrawal, refusing the challenge of the Internet and the necessity of putting its financial house in order.



Jean Benoît Nadeau

"My theory is that there are more similarities than differences between the Americans and the French. Like Americans, they have a vision of their country as the embodiment of some universal principles. This explains why they tend to resist external influences of any sort. My hypothesis is that the French resist the trend of globalization because they feel it as a promotion of Anglo-American culture. France's stance has found its expression in a new assertiveness, both military and economic, and a willingness to challenge American interests wherever they are encountered: in Iraq, the United Nations or in the World Trade Organization."

During his two-year effort to understand France, Jean Benoît, a French-Canadian *journaliste*, novelist and playwright, will be supported by his English-Canadian journalist-spouse, Julie Barlow. As he considers his quest, Jean Benoît is "reminded of a former philosophy professor of mine at McGill University, Charles Taylor. A Montrealer who had been raised in French by his mother and in English by his father, Taylor was a Rhodes scholar and a specialist in Hegel and ancient Greek philosophy. After one of his lectures on Plato and Aristotle, I went to see him and by chance, got a glimpse of his notes. They were all typed in classical Greek on a classical Greek typewriter — such a thing exists! And they consisted essentially of words — no sentences. One huge word. Period. Next huge word. Period.

"I now understand the essence of Taylor's work to be translating concepts from a mind-set foreign to ours into terms that we could understand 2500 years later. Reaching across mind-sets and cultures to communicate ideas is what I think journalism is all about."

film and discussing it with friends, I came to the conclusion that my rental agent meant well with his remark. The French have a proverb: *Qui aime bien, châtie bien* (spare the rod and you spoil the children). Therefore, to qualify the remark on superiority: scolding is a mark of well-meant superiority. If the rental agent had wanted to humiliate me, he would have said nothing and introduced me to his friends. But then, maybe I am twice a fool...

A fellowship in France is far from a minefield, especially if you are not too self-conscious and can live with the scolding. But the *Bonjour-Au revoir* anecdote shows that, indeed, I may not be ready for debate in the hottest political and literary salons. I may be fluent in the lan-

guage without understanding the codes of that culture. Acquiring those is where the fun is.

I discovered this in 1992, during my first and only trip to France prior to this fellowship, on the occasion of my honeymoon. Owing to political propaganda, most Quebecers are led to believe that they are French people living in America. This belief holds until their first traumatic trip to France. This honeymoon trip made me discover one or two things about life. Aside from the language and a certain culinary, literary and artistic heritage, I was much a virgin in terms of Frenchness. But a taste for spoiled cheese does not make one French any more than loving sauerkraut makes one German. Know-

ing the streets of Paris by reading Victor Hugo and Émile Zola does not make a good pimp, so to say.

During that honeymoon, nobody even opened a conversation with my wife and me during the entire two weeks, and some even addressed me in English, with that reproachful undertone of a parent correcting, or scolding, a child. Nobody yelled at me, but did I ever feel like screaming! Having barely two weeks to see everything, the days were jam-packed with old stone and good food, but attempts to do normal things like phoning, or paying by credit card, were often frustrating since nothing is done the same as it is in Canada. Can't I put a quarter in the telephone? No, I don't want to buy a 40-dollar smart card! (I did). Sure the food was nice and the stone was old, but I came back home two weeks later very disappointed at myself for not having realized the obvious: I was not a Frenchman living in America, but an American speaking French, and I felt consequently more at ease in San Francisco and New York than in Paris.

Yet as this fellowship began, the first three weeks of my stay were such a complete pleasure that I concluded initially, after discussing the issue with a few people, that something has changed, or is changing, in the *République Française*. People seem more welcoming, less closed-minded and about other ways. One scholar, well versed in American and Canadian history, even insisted that France was undergoing a quiet revolution from within,



Sunday afternoon at the Tuileries, between the Louvre and the Obélisque. A popular family hangout after the Sunday dinner.

akin to the quiet revolution that modernized Quebec within one generation in the 1960s. The rationale, therefore, is no longer why the French resist globalization, but how it is transforming them. But I cannot yet write on for lack of substantiation; besides, a measure of skepticism is required before jumping to conclusions. Some insights I've collected are very sharp, but the problem lies in the fact that the French are adept at formulating an opinion even when they have none. Having no opinion is not viewed well here. Only idiots have no opinion.

In all fairness, and in humility, the most obvious explanation is that this observer has changed more than France. First and foremost, coming as a nontourist into the world capital of tourism makes an immense difference. There's no rush to see as much as I can in a wink of time. Part reporter, part student and part dilettante, I have two years to observe, learn and make sense of what I see. Anything a tourist calls annoyance is simply a window in the wall of misunderstanding.

This what I should call a passive transformation, for there has been a more active process called reading and interviewing. But the best thing I did was to modify my intellectual approach at the last minute. A few hours before leaving Montreal, I made the very atypical move of *not* taking with me on the plane the elaborate file of clippings and notes I had painstakingly put together. Rather, the file is being shipped by sea and will follow sometime in February. This free-fall approach has forced me "to let go" and collect first impressions rather than push too hard on topics and contacts like the thorough, high-strung, freelance reporter I have been for 12 years.

Another thing I did in my preparation was not assume that, as a French Canadian, I would have easy



access to French culture. On the contrary, I considered France a very foreign land, much like Mexico or India. Finding the Eiffel tower is easy, so I focused on customs and etiquette in my questions and readings. I was greatly helped by a brilliant little book simply titled *France*, published by Graphic Arts Centre Publishing Company of Portland, Oregon, in a collection under the telling name of Culture Shock!

This is where I found what I had been so badly missing in 1992, two keys to the kingdom:

- *Don't smile.* The French can tell North Americans in a crowd from their smile. We have developed powerful smiling muscles because we want to be accepted. In France, a brief smile is engaging, but no more: the broad smile is considered idiotic, if not phony. Smiles are reserved for true friends (and they have a narrower definition of the term at that!).

- *Be sorry.* Being sorry in France cannot be the automatic response we learn as North Americans. You've got to mean it. Conversely, when I ask for information, I have to say: "*Excusez-moi de vous déranger* (Excuse me for bothering you, but...)" with a strong emphasis on *déranger* because I do bother them. That should be a given.

I don't deny that these two keys are stereotypical, but like all stereotypes, they are based on a lot of truth. Using them since my arrival, I found the French becoming rather cordial, if not congenial. I call it the magic wand. I can now ask for the most outrageous advice from even the notoriously unfriendly Post Office employees and get a positive reaction. One Post Office employee even went so far as to tell me exactly where to go to send a fax at a cheaper price. These two tricks allow the most impromptu conversations on any topic. In fact, they occur all the time, for conversation here is an art form. Having thus broken the ice, I can now make the best use of my mother-tongue.

This new-found comprehension allows me to use the best prop I have: being Canadian. Boy, do they ever love Canada. How *belle* is your *province*! Some people engage me in conversation simply to hear the accent. I made the experiment of dropping a quarter while waiting in line at the cinema. Upon seeing the moosehead on the quarter, the man who picked it up began telling us of his cousin who went snowmobiling near the Harricana River, in northern Quebec. In fact, they all have their little Canadian story, much like the British do. My landlord did the 17-day trip (3,000 miles) from Niagara Falls to the Gaspé Peninsula. The fact that my wife grew up in the countryside doing snowmobile is a sure winner at dinner parties. My *piéd-noir* newsseller (*piéd-noirs* are descendents of French colonialists in Algeria) is "flabbergasted" (his term) by my accent, which he rarely heard before. He also blames me for the weather. Three days after our arrival, an ominous three inches of snow fell, provoking



Ménilmontant Street, in the 20th arrondissement, is the heart of working-class, multiethnic Paris, where you can get a good baguette at the bakery or chops at the muslim butcher's shop.

record traffic jams over 300 kilometers of road. Sorry... That is what I call the natural advantage of the colonial and his moosehead. Better make best of it while winter lasts...

Paris being Paris, we received visitors less than two weeks after our arrival. They were Julie's pregnant sister and her husband, now living in Brussels, and a cousin of mine, Daniel, from Meriden, Connecticut, of the assimilated, Franco-American branch of the family. This "American weekend" (as I call it now) was the occasion of an experiment in comparative tourism, in which our guests played the part of unwitting guinea pigs.

We took the weekend to visit the must-sees of Paris: Montmartre, the Eiffel Tower, Notre-Dame Cathedral, the Péré-Lachaise Cemetery (to say Hi to good ol' Jim Morrisson) and the Catacombs. We ate crêpes, sipped wine and feasted on cheese. But the best part was walking around town speaking English loud and clear with a group of tall, blond men with very long hair and tall, brown women with short hair. The point was that I immediately noticed changes of mannerism in the crowd: conversations would stop in the subway train; other guests of La Crêperie would place their chairs so as not to see or hear us; people would reply to me in English even if I addressed them in French. Half a dozen girls

were coming down the street when one exclaimed:

“What time is it?”

Girl two: “Let’s ask those people...”

Girl one: “You can’t. They are American.”

Then I had the spontaneous reaction of giving them the time in French, and one started mocking my Quebec accent, which was a first in nearly two weeks.

Rudeness being, therefore, a very particular feeling primarily reserved for foreigners of the English type, or perceived as such, Julie and I have changed our language system. A native of Hamilton, Ontario, she is as English as I am French. As she was learning French back in Montreal, we decided to speak one month in English, the next in French, in turn. This approach, which had held to since 1990, has had to be modified in Paris. We now speak English at home and French in public. The few times we forgot ourselves, it was 1992 once again. Three weeks after our arrival, during a supper at an acquaintance’s, in the company of three people from southern France, we were much surprised to discover that the French thought my wife’s accent was not English, but Quebec. They had to listen twice to get the English accent! The camouflage is perfect...

Although I have begun accumulating notes and quotes on a variety of topics, looking for an apartment has been the main activity of the nontourist, and has supplied me with much insight into the social and physical makeup of the city. It is hard to get a dwelling in Paris, but the difficulty lies less in availability, which is abundant, than in the requirements to get a legal lease — as you will read in the next report. The housing question brought me my first moral dilemma as a fellow. This is how it happened and how it was solved.

With the help of the Quebec Delegation in Paris, I had located a 100-square-meter apartment in the pristine 16th *arrondissement* (a district, of which there are 20 in Paris) within less than 48 hours. This was expemplary for someone on the typical expatriate circuit: the apartment was occupied by a Quebecker working for UNESCO, but it belonged to a Frenchman whose wife, a German, had been an employee of the Delegation and was a Quebecophile in addition to being a Francophile. The apartment was perfect: it was on the first floor, it opened onto a yard, it was all furnished and ready to live in and easily habitable for two writers writing at home. The price was right and it was mine for the taking.

But somehow, somewhere, I had the feeling that taking it would be untrue to the fellowship. Indeed, taking it would have made me quickly functional and pro-

ductive — and this would surely have set a record for a fellow. But my understanding of the fellowship is that looking for a roof is as much the purpose as getting it. So I called the owner and said *au revoir*.

Another consideration was sociological. The 16th *arrondissement* was not right. Clothes, cars, shops were too nice. After two days of walking around Paris, we already preferred the more downscale 18th, 19th and 20th *arrondissements* of the East Side. In fact, nowadays in Paris, the old, cute distinction between the right and the left bank has almost disappeared in favor of an East-West rift — the East being made up of the 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th, 18th, 19th and 20th *arrondissements*. The 18th, 19th and 20th are the last districts of Paris that have not been gentrified. They are a perfect blend of rich and poor, old-stock French and immigrants, working class and professionals, techies and beggars. They vote socialist, they have a gay Member of the National Assembly, the ethnic mix is strong, and so is the mix in life styles. The 18th in particular is a little chunk of Africa, especially around Barbès and la



Friday is market day on Boulevard de Belleville, at the junction of the 20th and the 11th *arrondissements*. It had the ambiance of a souk.

Goutte-d’or, and the 20th is Sahara North.

Finally, a more technical consideration decided me against the easy way. In order to obtain our *carte de séjour*, which is a long-term resident permit, Canadian immigrants need a job (which we don’t have) or a true fixed address confirmed by a lease. In turn, the *carte de séjour* is necessary to open a bank account. These requirements pushed us quickly outside the expat market. Expatriates often tend to rent or sublet apartments to other expats for cash, without lease, as a kind of gentleman’s agreement, and often pay themselves for the power and the phone.

Fortunately, a friend of a friend living in the 20th happened to leave France for Rwanda for five weeks just at the time we arrived, and offered us her place for free.



As far north as Paris, a Mediterranean influence.

This allowed us the luxury, while looking leisurely for a permanent address, to have a true experience of the Paris lifestyle, with the minuscule, ill-equipped kitchens, the phone-showers, the poor heating, the noisy neighbors, the intrusive concierge, the tiny elevators, the yelling in the stairway. There is nothing like doing the laundry at the automatic *Laudromat* next door in the company of a group of Malian women, all half naked under their boobos and sporting ritual scars on each side of their eyes. Or discussing the merit of sponge versus mop with vendors Ibrahim, Ahmed and Mohammed at Mr. *Bricolage*. Or chatting with the Arab convenience-store owner while he downs a beer to celebrate the end of Ramadan. Immigration is transforming France, but France does change the immigrants, too!

On my first visit, I had not noticed to what extent urban France is Mediterranean in character. Not only because of its social make up — there are four to five million Muslims now living in France. But as far north as Paris, the architecture is open to the fresh air, contrary to London, where housing is more nordic (although both cities enjoy a similar climate). For instance, all shops are open on the street whatever the temperature. It never really freezes. And on the evening that it snowed, even the *Taqueria Biju* was opened and people ate their fajitas and tacos in their down coats and mitts, if they had them. Houses are also open, with a yard in the middle, which is typical of the South — not of a city that is, after all, lying on the same degree of latitude as Montreal.

Paris being no Timbuktu, the fellow in France also has a particular professional problem: the wealth of information available. True, fluency brings easy access to a wealth of details and observations for a multiplicity of topics. But France is a very old democracy and the French are particularly adept at producing contradictory opinions and argument. The number of newsstands and the

number of publications, right, left and centre, is mind-boggling. Amongst dailies, the fellow has the choice between morning, noon and evening papers. There are about five or six major weeklies, notwithstanding the monthlies, plus special editions of all sorts. In subway cars, self-described “poor unemployed editors” commonly peddle 10-franc newsletters of social commentary.

Because everything and its contrary is available, a lot of judgment will be required to form an opinion. Since I once authored a book on self-employment, I was pleased to detect a number of new publications on that topic in France, an indication that something may be brewing in the entrepreneurial front. But next to those, I could see two publications titled *Profession Fonctionnaire* (profession Civil servant) and *Fonctions Publiques* (Civil Service), providing tips and exam questions and

advertising the creation of 3,000 jobs of assistant *gendarme* on the back cover. Next to those two, but unrelated, was a special issue of *Vie Ouvrière* (the magazine of the communist union CGT), giving tips on how to evade taxes. Could this mean that the French are reluctant socialists? Too early to judge.

But this brings us to the core of the problem of the French fellow: Do I consider France on its own terms with a strictly exterior eye?

Maybe part of the answer lies in another form of information that is even more abundant in Paris: the arts, which often provide a good indication of where society is going. The quantity of shows, exhibitions, presentations and vernissages is astonishing. In cinema alone, 300 films are shown simultaneously each week, including all the American and French productions. On the week we arrived a festival named *Les Belles nuits du Ramadan* (Beautiful Nights of Ramadan) began, which showcased two dozen shows from performing artists coming from all over the Mediterranean. Where else can you watch a jazz concert featuring instruments like sax, bass, *oud* (a kind of zither) and *zarb* (a drum)? The *zarb* was played by a French of Greek origin who learned the art of improbable sounds from an Iranian master who had been living in Paris for 35 years.

We also went to *La Comédie Française* to hear actor Fabrice Luchini reading Baudelaire, La Fontaine, Céline, Nietzsche. The high point of the show was reached when Luchini read Jean de La Fontaine, the well-known, 17th-Century fabulist who brilliantly adapted Aesop’s fables to verse. La Fontaine’s triumph of circumcision remains relevant 350 years after his time. Luchini read half a dozen fables, but the most memorable certainly was *Le Corbeau et le Renard* (the Raven and the Fox), a fable that every Francophone learns by heart at school (The raven is



*'Lenin on Bentley, rue de Grenelle. Is this a sign of reluctant socialism?
The French have a special term for this class : they call it la gauche
caviar (left-wing caviar eaters)?*

perched on a tree holding a piece of cheese in his beak. The hungry fox wants the cheese, and plays on the vanity of the raven. The raven decides to sing, but drops the cheese and loses it to the fox).

However, Luchin read the fable in Verlan, rather than French. Verlan is the slang of the suburbs invented in the

1970s by young *Beurs* (Arabs) in need of a secret, encrypted language. It consists simply of reversing syllables within a name or a phrase of monosyllabic words. The word Verlan itself comes from the verlanisation of *l'envers* (reverse) – l'en-vers becomes ver-lan. Hence the first strophe of the Fable:

*Maitre Corbeau sur son arbre perché
Tenait en son bec un fromage*
(Master Raven, perched in a tree, in his beak held some cheese)

becomes:

*Treme Beaucor son sur bréar chéper
Naite en bec son un machefro.*
(Termas Venra shteper treena in beak his cheesosome held)

The room, jam-packed with *Bon Chic, Bon Genre* (well-heeled) Parisians, went wild, and Luchini read read *Le Corbeau* twice. Oddly, most linguists predicted the disappearance of

Verlan within a few years of its creation, but it has endured and is even influencing mainstream Céfran ("French," in Verlan).

I doubt I will ever become fluent in Verlan, but if I want to explore the suburbs in the next months, I'd better get the hang of it quickly. No doubt. □

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