ICWA LETTERS

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France: Then and Now

A final newsletter and report delivered at the ICWA Members' and Trustees' meeting at Monmouth University, June 16, 2001

By Jean Benoît Nadeau

I'll share a secret with you. Only a few of you know this. After being awarded the fellowship in June 98, it took me six months to leave for Paris mostly because I was extremely nervous about what I was about to do.

I had set out to study "Why the French seem to resist economic and cultural globalization," which sounds grand, if not grandiose. But, for crying out loud, how does one study "France"? And what's globalization, exactly? What was I thinking!

Jean Benoit Nadeau speaking at Monmouth University June 16, 2001

Of France, I knew very little. My only previous trip, six years back, had not been particularly great. During the two weeks I spent there, the French hardly spoke to me, and I didn't have one single, meaningful conversation with them. My recollection was that they were a somewhat somber, grayish people who weren't particularly interested in anything from the outside. It turned out, as I later learned, that many other people who went the same year came back with the same impression. And I returned home convinced that I wasn't a Frenchman living in America but an American speaking French.

I was also nervous because I felt somewhat self-conscious. Unlike most fellows, I wouldn't be living in a yurt, drinking camel milk, eating zebu steaks and fighting dengue fever or typhoid. I wouldn't need to turn on the oil lamp to read my fellow fellows' reports and the way to town would be pretty safe. I would be living in Paris, O dear! Half-jokingly, Peter Martin called me his luxury fellow, with the implicit idea that I had to bring back results in proportion to my fellowship's cost.

Before leaving, I received two pieces of advice I found very liberating. The first was from David Hapgood, whom I met in Washington. I told him what I just told you, and he said to me:

"Don't worry, Jean Benoit. Most fellows change their theme of study after six months. That's why we send you there. No obligations."

The other advice came from Peter at the occasion of our last meeting, about

three weeks before departure. As I relaxed in Peter's house, sipping my Martini, I expressed my concerns. And Peter said:

"Aha! [he always says aha] Jean Benoit, you have to cultivate your first impressions."

"I'll think of it."

"Don't think too much, absorb your impressions and nurture them, especially the first. Because the first impressions are only there the first time around, and they are yours and no one else's."

This great lesson in journalism guided me throughout my stay.

* * *

The first draft of this talk resulted in a speech that would have lasted six hours and thirty-seven minutes. Don't worry, folks. I've done the editing. I'm down to three hours and nineteen.

The only way to make sense of my experience was to reduce it to some nuggets, the strongest impressions France produced. This is difficult in itself because the French *do* produce impressions.

My first impressions of France were varied and very paradoxical. Why are they so discreet at the table and so loud on their cell phones in the train? Why do they correct me when they understood perfectly what I meant? How can they be so creative and so authoritarian at school and in the family? Why doesn't the service provider want me to choose my password? How is it that reporters who brilliantly expose the most complex ideas cannot avoid coming up with adjectives they just made up without bothering to tell you what they mean? How come civil servants are so diligent and big-store clerks so nasty? And why, O why, does this nice man next door let his dog do *that* right in front of our stoop?

Impressions are a great working tool for taking notes, but this speech will not be a collection of those. I have put them into three big boxes. One is Time, or rather how the past and present come together. Another is how the concept of privacy determines behavior from the pillow to Kosovo. Lastly, there's the French conception of the State, their most original contribution. For each section, I'll share with you a wild theory — which will be announced as such. The last section, on the future of France and how it's changing, is just one big wild theory.

But before I do this, I'll tell you a couple of things about my wife. When I speak of my observations and impression, bear in mind that they are sometimes hers. You see, Julie Barlow is not only a partner in life, but in work. We met in Montreal fourteen years ago. She learned French with much tenacity; she began correcting my English with perseverance; and we learned together how to accommodate and decode cultural differences. She's a fantastic writer, and has very good powers of observation. She traveled a lot during my fellowship — Israel (twice), Turkey (twice too), Armenia, Georgia, Tunisia, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain. I remember one day, she was returning from a long trip in Turkey and Israel and we were sharing notes. I was still at the stage of noticing how different France was with respect to Canada and the United States, and she made this remark:

"You know? The French, they're like the rest of the world."

Julie, what would I be without you?

In retrospect, Julie's remark guided much of my reflection on the French. The reason for this was that, since about Day Two of my stay, I was already convinced that the topic I had set to study — Why The French Resist Globalization — was the wrong one. This is an awful feeling, especially since the topic was not an imposed one but my own, coming out of my own head out of my own misunderstanding. Everywhere I looked I saw a prosperous people of mixed origins that knew well about what was going on in the world, a people that were at the same time influential, and influenced. The question — Why Do The French Resist Globalization? — sounded very sanctimonious and holier-than-thou, a kind of question that could be summed up by saying, "Why are they so retarded?" Which is not a question, really. In other words, I understood I was not there to judge the French, but to understand them, and there's a world of difference. So, instead of considering my original question, I began examining the French for what they were.

* * *

Having said this, we can now delve into the first topic: Time.

It is difficult to assess in what time the French live in, and it is in this respect, primarily, that the French are like the rest of the world.

Just before Julie and I left Montreal, I asked a French friend where I could buy furniture in Paris. He told me that I had chosen a great time to arrive because the four weeks from mid-January to mid-February are known as *Les Soldes* (The sales). During *Les Soldes*, all stores put their merchandize on deep sale. The rest of the year, small shops and big retailers must seek police permission to announce a sale. And it's the police that sets the date of the big free-for-all, *Les Soldes*, which are held at the same time from Marseille to Calais.

What's interesting about this tradition is where it comes from. It comes from the guilds of the Middle Ages, which were associations of merchants. Guilds had the purpose of protecting tradesmen of one town against out-

Nadeau family members at Monmouth

side competition and against one another. These guilds used to set the standards for quality and pricing — bread, for instance, could contain only ten percent sand! Guilds also managed the members' pension plans. Members had to abide by the rules or get their legs broken by a local thug the Guilds paid and called the Provost. Nowadays, Provosts are out of business, but the system of control is still effective nonetheless.

As you see, it's sometimes difficult to find what time the French live in exactly.

One of my strongest time-warp impressions occurred during a hike in June '99 that took me to La Roche Guyon, a small town west of Paris in a bend of the Seine river. The location is quite spectacular because one side of the meander is made of very tall cliffs of white chalk, about 150 meters high. On the highest spur, right over the town of La Roche Guyon, stands an 11th-century dungeon. Below, there's a Renaissance castle. And into the cliff, behind the castle, there's a bunker where, in 1944, Rommel conducted the defense of Normandy against the Allied invasion (from his perspective, anyway). As we walked across the town, I noticed that some of the homes, about 30 of them, had been dug straight into the cliff. In effect, these houses, which are currently inhabited, are cave dwellings with a neat French facade — that's just 20 miles west of Paris, don't forget.

Once again: "What time do the French live in?"

The same month of June, there were elections for the European Parliament. And the big surprise was that six of the 80 French seats were captured by a new party called "Hunting, Fishing, Nature and Tradition." This party was created to protest European regulations on hunting. You see, there are two million hunters in France. This is a lot of hunters. Hunting is big item in French political lore: one of the first aristocratic privileges to be removed at the onset of the French revolution was hunting. When the monarchy was re-established twenty-five years later, the first thing it did was to restore the hunting privilege. At the next revolution, they removed it. And so on. And so forth.

Once more: what time do the French live in?

The following fall, my parents came to visit and we went to Perigord — a region south of Limoges and west of Bordeaux. One town I found particularly interesting is Les Eyzies, along the river Vézère. All prehistory buffs will tell you that Les Eyzies is where they found and identified the first homo sapiens, the Cro-Magnon man of the Paleolithic Age, which began two million years ago. The term Cro-Magnon is in the language Occitan, one of the dialects of southern France: it means, literally, Mr. Magnon's Hole. It just so happened that Mr. Magnon had had the bright idea of installing his barn right where the first known Frenchman died 22,000 years ago, under a rock shelter. This kind of historical continuity doesn't come by chance.

So here I offer you Wild Theory Number One (the least wild of three): the French are the aborigines of France. We of the New World associate modernity with something very novel that arrived by ship or spacecraft from the outside and pushed aside every kind of tradition to build something entirely new. But in France, as in

much of the rest of the old world, the new grew out of the old, using it, sometimes replacing it, sometimes not. In a way, it's as if Cortés had not conquered Mexico, really, and the Aztecs had stayed around and ended up sending space rockets into orbit.

The French are at the same time archaic and very modern. They invented the metric system, the civil code, high-speed trains and the Concorde; they were the first to speak of Human Rights; but they also relish traditions — native or borrowed. And a man like De Gaulle — at the same that he ordered the development of French astronautics, toyed with the idea of re-establishing the monarchy.

So, when you consider a country like France, it's a mistake to contrast progress and tradition.

France is really like the rest of the world.

Mind you, I don't want to fall into the bag of determinism: Things change and traditions are lost or borrowed. A good example is the famous little piece of pastry called a *croissant*. In fact, it's not French at all. It was the idea of Austrian bakers during the siege of Vienna by the Turks in the 17th century. *Croissant* means crescent, and this little pastry was a way of making light of the attackers' emblem. And it was a famous Austrian, Marie-Antoinette, who brought this pastry to the French court a century later.

* * *

The second topic I wanted to address is the concept of privacy.

It takes quite a while to get used to the French because they have strong idiosyncracies and customs. One of the most bizarre, but one of the most vital for the visitor to understand, is the habit of saying "bonjour" when you enter a store, and "au revoir" when you leave. The pitch must be right, very high on the last syllable, with the v pronounced always as a W, like in "au rewar".

It took me a long time to understand where this funny habit of saying *bonjour* and *au revoir* came from. It comes from the particular French understanding of privacy. In North America, a store or a shop is an extension of public space, even indoors. In France, it's the other way around: The shop is the extension of the shop-owner's home, so you should say something nice when you come in. This is why it's so hard to get good service in a big store in France: There's no way you can enter, say bonjour, and be heard by everyone.

BONJOUR!!

The definition of private and public space is at the root of many French differences. The French are very private about many personal issues that are regarded as public matters to North Americans. Asking someone's name and occupation right off the bat is a big No-No. At hotels, they don't want you to fill out any form. I've often been invited inside homes by people who never asked me my name and never gave me theirs. In their personal relations and in the way they build friendships, the French are very private. All this is beneficial because it forces people to talk about something beside themselves, and therefore make good conversation.

Another impact of privacy is on the understanding of morality. The French don't want to know what presidents do with cigars in the intimacy of their office, living room or bedroom. Sure, at dinner parties, they like to gossip about the president's mistress or his illegitimate daughter, but not necessarily to make it public — in the press, for instance. By extension, politicians don't like to be held accountable for bad things they do. This is regarded as private.

Another ramification of this notion of privacy is with respect to proprieties.

For that matter, you absolutely must read Raymonde Carroll's *Cultural Misunderstandings.* She's a French ethnologist married to an American ethnologist, which is in itself an ethnological experiment of sorts. My favorite chapter is the one about couples, or rather what people expect as proper behavior in public for a couple. According to Carroll, the typical American couple seeks to display harmony: Spouses rarely contradict each other in public and outwardly show support for one another. Arguing and criticizing each another in public is regarded as distasteful, if not dysfunctional. The French expect just the opposite: a relationship should be strong enough to withstand differences, which are only normal. All the better if these are displayed with wit. To the French, there's something wrong with a couple that will not contradict one another in public and display constant harmony.

Here I offer you Wild Theory Number 2. In my opinion, Raymonde Carroll's observations apply to international relations, and especially that old couple, France and the United States. On important issues, the Americans would like nothing better than a perfect show of harmony (we agree in the end, don't we?). Whereas the French think the relationship is strong enough to withstand strong differences in public. Naturally, this angers the Americans, and then the French don't understand at all what the fuss is about.

* * *

Now, the third topic I want to talk about is the French concept of the State. I hold that the one reason that France raises so much interest is precisely because it's the birthplace of the State as we know it. And everything in France relates to the State, somehow.

All OECD statistics show that, each year, France re-

ceives no less than seventy million tourists — seventy-four million in 2000. This is not airport traffic: they stay an average of one week.

Seventy-four million tourists. This figure is the highest in the world — the US gets forty-five million. Everyone wants to go to France, or feels they have to, or gives strong reasons for having never been.

One reason for this is that France means something. I had figured this out early in my stay, but it took me two and a half years to realize what it actually meant. Great cuisine? Sure. Splendid architecture and city planning? Yes. Great art and culture? Indeed. But there *is* something else.

So here's Wild Theory Number 3. Four centuries ago in Europe, the wars of Religion were waged, and it was a very ugly scene. Anyone with sense realized that big changes were needed in the feudal order to ensure better economic output, better use of manpower and a general betterment of living conditions. People found two "solutions." And here I put the word "solutions" in quotes, because it took everyone a while to understand what they had done.

One solution was to go abroad and create a new kind of society working on very different principles, ethics and values. It took two centuries before a Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, woke up to the fact that Democracy in America (the title of his book) was something very new — and working. "Hey, Look!" he said. "Come and see this! Wow!"

It's not by chance that a Frenchman identified what it was all about, because the French had found *the* other solution. It's called the State. The original idea was to have an entity that would actually function as an arbitrator between the aristocracy and the people, between the Catholics and the Protestants, between the Revolutionaries and the Royalists, between the *Republicains* and the Catholics, between the Right and the Left. And it would be the purpose of this State to mold its subjects, and later its citizens, into a single national identity. The French State was up and running long before the French Revolution, but it took new dimensions after 1789.

So, what's so special about this revolution? Simply this: The French attempted to export and impose their baby to neighboring countries. With great success, because most features of the French State have been imitated and copied elsewhere — Turkey is one prime example, but also Germany. But the original is France.

It was this State that created the nation out of an extremely balkanized country, not the other way around. It was this State that took the lingo spoken in Paris and forced it on others. It is this State that determined the standards of beauty and taste. It is this State that decides what is the general interest. It is the State that arbitrates conflict. It is the State that maximizes national output. Sure, it has done perfectly horrible things in the past, and certainly will in the future. But it has done splendid things as well, one of which was to create France. Adam Gopnik,

Peter Martin and former Fellow Nadeau listen to the fin-de-fellowship *gift music box of Jean Benoit and Julie Barlow.*

the author of *Paris to the Moon*, wrote that the State occupies in the French mentality the same place the Constitution occupies in the American mindset. He could not be more right.

Last summer, I was here at Monmouth University with you for the seventy-fifth anniversary of our Institute, and what struck me, in the US, but also in Canada, was the habit people had taken up of always using adjectives, like incompetent or corrupt, when they spoke of politicians and civil servants. In a way, this is a self-fulfilling prophecy: After all, you can get only the service you expect. In France, you rarely hear that kind of language in public so it's no surprise that their public services are generally regarded as the best since they expect them to be the best. One survey made by the World Health Organization ranked France first for the quality of its healthcare. The United States ranked thirty-ninth, although it spends twice as much per capita. In my opinion, the only explanation comes from the fact that the French have an extremely high opinion and expectations with regards to what they call public service and the general interest — which is not the sum of all particular interests.

(Or, as we say in Quebec, it's not because everyone shovels the snow in front of their house that the street will be clear...)

* * *

You may have noticed that the notion of globalization is conspicuously absent from this speech. It's because I realized from Day Two of my stay that the question was not pertinent. More importantly, there are three other forces, or factors, that have a much more determinant impact on France's future. They are: Peace, democracy and Europe. Having said this, I warn you that the last leg of this talk will be one big Wild Theory Number 4.

Before I explain, let me tell you a story that happened one Wednesday at noon in June '99. I was trying to finish an Institute report. A siren began to howl, then another, and again another. The Kosovo war was dragging to an end and I thought, "That's it. The Russians have sided with the Serbs and the big BBQ is on." Fearing I would be Kentucky-Fried in a minute or so, I thought I should open the window to see the show. I looked down in the street. Everyone walked calmly. A couple of seconds later, the sirens stopped. Since the end of the world appeared not to be coming just yet, I resumed my work. Suddenly, ten minutes later, the sirens started again.

It took me a couple of month to figure out that these were the sirens of fire stations and city halls. They are activated twice every first Wednesday of the month for practice. The first shot is for the beginning of alert, and the second streak, ten minutes later, is for the end of alert.

This just goes to show you to what extent war has penetrated a society like France. Permanent danger has made the idea of a strong, pervasive State necessary. After all, a city like Strasbourg used to be closer to Soviet tanks than it was from Paris. This present episode of peace, which started in 1945, has been the longest in Europe for five centuries. Peace is having an immeasurable impact on this old society that has had to live with domestic and foreign aggression for so long. For that matter, the end of the mandatory military service for all young men under 25 is only the most visible effect of the state of permanent peace.

Democracy is another custom that will change the French in odd ways. Isn't France a democracy? Yes, but a new one, in the sense that a functioning constitution was established only 43 years ago. Since the creation of Parliament in 1789, the French have gone through 5 democratic regimes, 5 monarchies, 2 empires and one fascist dictatorship. Most of these regimes changed because of revolution or war. After seizing power by means of a legal coup, De Gaulle established the first working democracy in 1958. The French who are my age and slightly older are the first ones to live in a democratic system that is foreseeably stable, with institutions to which they all adhere. The French are beginning to witness a degree of tolerance and respect for institutions unheard of in the past. This is not without growing pains. The present outcry for more accountability on the part of politicians and more devoluted powers to regions are just examples of this change.

Europe will be the third factor of change, but the least predictable. Who would have thought three years ago that the French economy would have suddenly boomed simply as the result of the creation of a single currency? Nobody knows what form Europe will take. Will France become a mere province or jurisdiction within a bigger federation, a state in a loose, Canadian-style confederation or a strong state in a free-trading zone? Who knows?

The only certainty about Europe is this. All UN and OECD demographic statistics show that the relative weight of France in Europe will rise with respect to Germany. How so? Simply because the generation that was born after WWII did not make enough German babies. By 2040, the population of Germany is expected to go down from 80 to 50 million, whereas the French population will remain stable at about 60 million people. This German population bust will have fantastic implications on the conduct of European affairs. As a matter of fact, the Institute should send someone quickly to that country because Germany will be the real sick man of Europe: It's written in the statistics.

What will France be? Who will the French be? I cannot tell. I can only hope that the snapshot I took at the turn of the Millennium will play a useful role.

It was a great privilege to be able to hold the camera for a while, and I would like to give my thanks to the memory of our founder, Charles Crane. He and our first

*A fellowship toast to (*around table from left*) Trustee Vandewalle, Avuncle Hapgood and Spouse Julie.*

director Walter Rogers created a fantastic formula. There are other great fellowships that reward past accomplishments, but who else does so on the basis of future development? Who else offers people under 36 the possibility of living a life of dilettante for two years on really, really, really unearned income?

Another word of thanks goes to our globe-trotting director, Peter Martin. Peter who trusted me in the first place. Peter who gave me good advice, on my Fellow business and on future projects. Peter whom I had the luck of seeing not once, but *five times* in Paris. For Paris is not only a feast, it's a hub.

Another word of thanks goes to my three mentors. Each Fellow of the Institute has appointed mentors who comment on the first drafts of their newsletters. Mine were Judson Gooding, David Hapgood and Miranda de Toulouse-Lautrec. Their advice saved me from ridicule more than once. For instance, in my last newsletter, I was paraphrasing Hemingway, saying I would always have Paris. Immediately, David Hapgood responded. "You can have all the Paris you want," he said. "But the quote is Humphrey Bogart's, in *Casablanca*." That's what mentors are for.

As a matter of fact, I extend my thanks to all ICWA members and friends for their support, comments or the clippings they sent me.

I'll now be happy to take questions. You can ask any topic: The recipe for crepes, where to find the best Champagne, which cafe sells the cheapest draught beer in the Paris region... You name it! ❑

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