

ICWA LETTERS

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Dirty Business

PARIS, France

June 11, 1999

By Jean Benoît Nadeau

From the outset, it looked like a normal store. In effect, Surcouf has all the appearances of modernity: bright colors and 200,000 sq. ft. of the most recent computer and electronics brand names stacked three stories. So my wife Julie and I entered the beast unwittingly one April afternoon. And then we realized we had walked into one of those French stores featuring the dregs of clerks and Jurassic, if not Cretaceous, business practices.

We began to realize what was happening at the diskette counter in the basement. Grabbing a box of diskettes, I was walking away with it when the clerk intercepted me, took the box from my hands and put it back on the shelf. Instead, he filled out an order form with the serial number of the product, its price and the number of units and told us where the cashier was. Those order forms are standard in French department stores. But it's a surprisingly old-fashioned business practice for a computer store. I felt like asking the clerk whether he had ever heard of bar codes, or even of a network of computers for cash payments. Instead of showcasing their own product — technology — his bosses prefer methods that date back to the era of sailing ships, possibly to honor the memory of their namesake, Robert Surcouf, a privateer and navigator who made a career of looting English vessels in the Indian Ocean and later became one of Napoleon's biggest shipbuilders. I refrained from open criticism.

Instead of ranting, I asked the clerk where I could find those small cases in which to stack all those computer CDs that proliferate nowadays. His answer surprised us:

"They don't exist anymore."

I had been long enough in France to know there was something wrong with the answer, in spite of the assured tone. A friend had warned me: French clerks will often say a thing doesn't exist when they don't understand. So I explained.

"I know what you mean, but it's not available anymore."

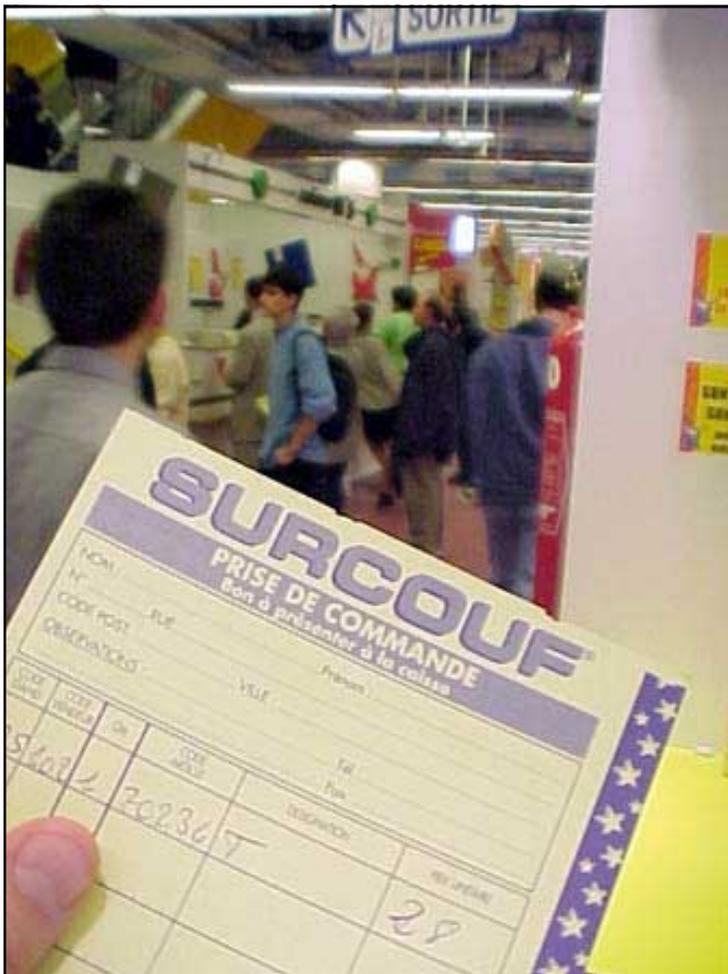
"Really?"

"There is no demand for this product."

"Nobody ever comes, like we're doing, to ask for this?"

"Not anymore."

In the 10-meter walk between his counter and the cash registers, we found the nonexistent computer-CD boxes at another counter that sold half a dozen



Shopping at Surcouf's. The dregs of clerks and Jurassic business practices.

types in all sizes. The clerk manning the other counter filled another order form and off we trotted to the cash machine.

Surcouf only had two registers running for the entire basement floor. Did I say "running"? "Taking their jolly good time" would be more appropriate. In front of each machine, 25 to 30 clients lined up, blocking the main alley. Naturally, many tossed their order forms in the air and decided to postpone the purchase. Those who waited had plenty of leisure to admire the general inefficiency. The cashiers, struggling with their machines, had to call for the second-floor manager every single time they had a problem or a decision to make. Which was bound to happen, given that the French customarily pay by check. Surcouf checks with the bank for anything over 5,000 FF, which doesn't buy much at a computer and electronics store.

When we finally paid, we were handed a receipt and

the order form, which we presented to the above-mentioned clerks, who then gave us the diskettes and computer-CD box in a bag. At the exit, we had to go through the *Commissariat général* (inspection) to get ourselves searched before they took our order form from us as proof of something.

Since then, I have learned to avoid stores with order forms. And I bring a book when I shop.

* * *

Not a day goes by without experiencing a new oddity in service and retailing. Not a week goes by without my wanting to fold a bad clerk lengthwise into a hide-a-bed. Over five months, I accumulated so many anecdotes of this kind that I set out to write this newsletter on the topic of business ineptitude *à la française*. This, I thought, was a good occasion to settle scores with the general apathy of clerks, the passivity of clients, the greediness of owners, the medieval organization of labor and the holier-than-thou approaches to marketing. As author of a book on self-employment in Quebec and with my byline on a couple hundred business articles, I felt authorized to rant in high-elevated fashion about this Third-World of commerce. And so I did, in 12 glittering pages of abuse...

...Except that I had to rewrite the entire newsletter when I realized that I was missing the mark badly!

One little detail, a single mere fact kept haunting me and reminding me that more modesty was required. In spite of the bad service of the French and their deplorable methods, I could not help remembering that France produces the 4th biggest Gross Domestic Product in the world, behind the US, Japan and Germany, but strongly ahead of Italy, the UK and Canada¹. Surely, the French must have been doing something right that escaped me. When I asked myself the question, the facts began surfacing. In fact, the French invented the department store.² And a company like Carrefour, which is a sort of upscale French Wal-Mart selling groceries, insurance, cars and TVs, is a 30-billion-dollar business with 1,000 stores in 21 countries. Not a sign of backwardness. Which is to say, France is a very advanced consumer society. After two days of agony, this France Fellow realized that he could not salvage his story, and it sank to the bottom of the trash bin.

I came to realize instead that business flaws were not proof of business backwardness but more simply, and

¹ *The Economist*, June 5th 1999. Special survey on France, page 5.

² To know more about this, read Harvey Levenstein's book: *Seductive Journey, American Tourists in France from Jefferson to the Jazz Age* (The University of Chicago Press, 1998, 378 pages). It is a very detailed account of how people and ideas have circulated between the Old and the New World.

more interestingly, manifestation of French traits. The French are anti-economic, and this mentality is a direct product of the strong, central, unitarian state they have developed since Richelieu. This anti-economic mentality is not immediately obvious to a visitor because business is everywhere. The visitor notices passive and indolent employees, stuck-in-their-ways owners, and concludes that French society is backward. The observations are right but the conclusion is wrong: the behavior is simply the manifestation of a two-tiered society, profoundly anti-economic in its values.

How can they be so anti-economic and yet have the 4th biggest GDP in the world? This is a true French Paradox, for which this newsletter will sketch an answer: the mental process is akin to a form of collective schizophrenia. The duration of this entire fellowship will be required for a full description.

This said, I am not prepared to deny the validity of either my gut reactions to business, nor those of all the other North Americans with whom I have discussed the issue. However, I have identified a strong measure of

prejudice in the North American point of view, and I include myself into this category. Why is it, exactly, that North Americans in particular get so frustrated by the French on the matter?³ The answer is simple: business is a *révélateur*, a kind of photographic developer that reveals strong cultural contrasts. But like a photographer ignorant about chemistry, most people who are first-time travelers in a strange land cannot tell the difference between the developer and the picture. The only interaction they will have with French society will be through trade (taxi, hotel, restaurant, café), and they interpret awkwardness as business backwardness.

The truth is, it is hard to distinguish between differences in customs and objective weaknesses. North Americans, accustomed to dynamic service and streamlined distribution, carry an important bias: they view standardization and high-concept distribution as the epitome of logic and rationality. But is it so rational, really? Could it not be just another disguised cultural choice?⁴

French business, which started to standardize later than in America, is still caught in a sort of quarrel between



A bouquiniste (used-books seller) on the Seine. This sixteenth-century tradition is still alive, and kicking.

³ In my opinion, the French attract flak due to a certain measure of francophobia to be discussed in a future report. I have seen in Mexico, Nicaragua, New Zealand, Canada, the US and the UK many of the aspects of behavior reproached in the French. Other people with whom I have discussed the matter observed that what we reproach in the French could stand for all Europeans in varying degree. So the French don't have a monopoly of business incompetence, just an apparently high concentration.

⁴ In chapter V of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Max Weber wrote a few words that ring familiar: "That powerful tendency towards uniformity of life, which today so immensely aids the capitalistic interest towards standardization of production, had its ideal foundation in the repudiation of all idolatry of the flesh [typical of Protestant aceticism]." The brackets are mine. This book was written in 1904.

les Anciens et les Modernes. Traditional mom-and-pop stores still dominate the scene, holding their eroding ground in the face of high-concept, high-growth, high-turnover distribution. Small shop owners don't seek growth: small shops are a way of life. They are, therefore, ferociously traditional. They know their product in and out. And since their shop is an extension of their home, they expect the client to observe courtesies by saying *bonjour* and *au revoir*. It's the key to good service in France. Hence the frustration of most North American travelers, who do not understand the need for *bonjour* and *au revoir*, and who have lost the habit of dealing with stuck-in-their-ways small-shop owners after a century of standardization.

And, to be frank, North Americans are bad sports. The other day, I wanted to bring clothing to the dry-cleaner – *le pressing*, in French parlance. But the shop was closed for lunchtime. I thought, "Damn it. Can't they just get organized and eat lunch one at a time to stay open?" So I went to the Chinese chop-shop and ate in the company of a bag of stained shirts. I wasn't angry for very long, because I realized I was trying to have my wonton and eat it too. We come to France precisely for its *art de vivre*, human-sized society and respect for age-old traditions, but we get angry if we don't get our sanitized Disneyland, with clerks behaving like good Wal-Mart soldiers. If we want great French cuisine, we have to accept that the French stop at lunchtime to eat it themselves.

Unarguably, the French do have an odd attitude towards business. Consider this. At the end of January, Julie and I were in Angoulême, near Bordeaux, for the *Festival international de la bande dessinée* (International Comic-Strip Festival), which attracted more than 200,000 visitors to stay for over four days in a city that has obviously seen better days. On Sunday we wanted to tour the countryside. But the information bureau, run by the local Chamber of Commerce, was closed that Sunday. Yes, the very Sunday Angoulême receives more visitors than the rest of the year put together. It is particularly sad when you consider that the French call information bureaus *syndicats d'initiative!* By the same token, no French-national car-rental service answers the phone after 8 p.m. This is logical: people have to sleep. In one sense, you can't help but admire this sense of independence, or rather aloofness. But you can't help feeling sorry for them too, especially when you end up calling Hertz...

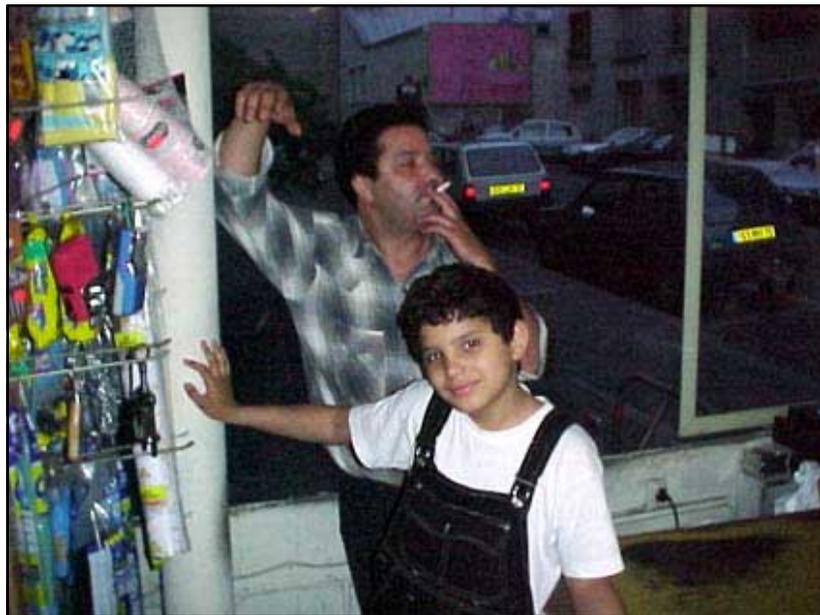
* * *

Business as a *révélateur*... In the last 20 years, political analysts have often observed that the French political

right is the most idiotic in Europe because of its divisiveness. One could also say that France has the greediest capitalist, and the most passive consumers in the world, Old and New.

Abusive pricing is the norm in France. This is why a French daily newspaper costs 77FF (\$1.15) on a weekday, or that three spoonfuls of coffee will cost up to 32 FF, or that dry-cleaners charge three to five times what it costs in Montreal. Granted: Higher prices are partly explainable on grounds of higher taxes, higher basic costs and scarcity. Typing paper, for instance, costs 2 cents a page at retail in part because Europe has few trees to spare. But part of the pricing is cultural. For instance, French retailers don't offer discounts on volume. Every time I shop, I ask paper sellers for a deal. Just for the heck of it. Universal reply: If a box contains five packs of 500 sheets, it will be sold up to five times the price of one pack. No deal. Period.

When the French do business, they don't seek high turnover, but the highest possible profit on the lowest



Grocer Redha Ben Hamouda and son Amir. He's the pillar of our neighborhood's social life. His small 300-sq.-ft grocery is the life of the family in many senses of the word, with a nuance: they don't sleep there.

possible volume. All shopkeepers in the world dream of making their week with a single client, the sucker-born-every-minute of mercantile lore. In France, they try to make all clients into the week-maker. The only curb on prices is the maximum level of tolerance, no more.

Having been advised by a former fellow of the Institute to get myself a few business cards when I arrived, I called a printer as soon as I got a permanent address. He was asking 1,500 FF (U.S.\$250) for 500 cards and 500 mailing cards, the smallest lot he could produce, which amounted to 1.5 FF a pop, or about 25 cents. I expected a better deal at a photocopy shop, which is geared to

accommodating orders for smaller lots. I asked for a price on 200 business cards and 200 mailing cards. I fell on the ground when they quoted 2,200 FF (4.5 FF a unit). How could it be possible? It turned out the clerk added up all the operations required in his book of charges: laying out, cutting, etc. Neither he nor his boss had the notion of an attractive final price. All they wanted was to make a profit on each operation.

This kind of abusive pricing is not reserved for the small and menial enterprises. Even the big do it. Conforma is a chain selling a wide variety of goods at decent prices. Julie and I showed up there in February to buy about 8,000 FF worth of furniture. We wanted to know if we would have to pay the conventional 250 FF delivery fee usually charged by such stores. Absolutely.

Conforma wouldn't budge, even when we told them that their next-door competitor, the more upscale Habitat (a branch of IKEA), wrote off the delivery charge for any order over 3,000 FF. But listen to what the Conforama clerk added:

"Actually, we charge a separate fee of 250 FF for each delivery from each store floor where you have bought goods to be delivered."

"The price tag for the bed says it includes delivery. Surely you could lump the whole order together."

"It comes from another warehouse. It's not possible unless you speak to the director. I can't help you."

"Then you lose 8,000 FF of business to the Swedes."

Greed is everywhere. If you look in the yellow pages, the ad for the SNCF, the French train company, mentions in small print that phoning them will cost you 2.23 FF per minute — on top of what the phone company charges! This is an additional fee charged to clients by the company you call for service. "At the sound of the tone, it will cost you 2.23 FF per minute. Please hold." So it costs you 22.30 FF to wait for 10 minutes until the clerk answers and takes your order. In short, you pay to bother them — and no rebate on the ticket or the rental. Compared to SNCF, Air France's charge of 0.79FF/min is a deal! Even the Ombudsman of the Republic will charge you 1.01 FF per minute to inform you of your rights. If this is not greed, what is?

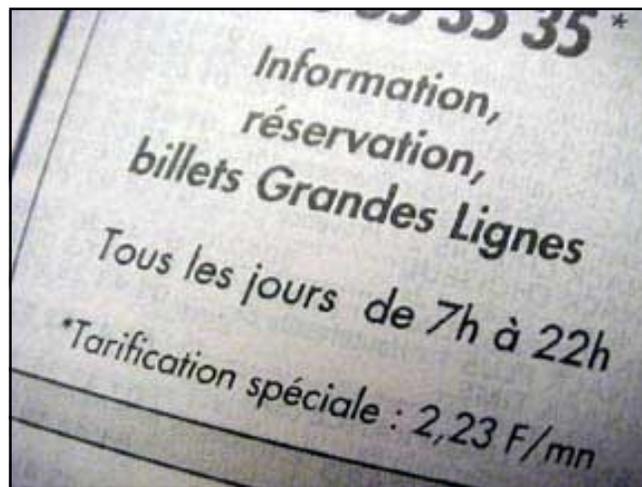
Shopkeepers, storeowners, car-renters and even the Ombudsman get away with it because the French are absolutely passive about the matter. They rarely



My dry-cleaner. Le pressing, as dry-cleaners are called in France, can clean a wallet dry.

complain about prices. When I asked the dry-cleaning clerk why cleaning a shirt is three to five times more expensive in Paris than in Montreal, she looked at me with *les yeux de merlans frits* (glazed eyes of a fried fish). I was obviously the first person in a generation asking for an explanation.

The French *never* discuss prices, partly for status reasons, partly because it is impolite. They don't want to look poor, and they pay the price. How do they make ends meet with their salaries, which are not astronomical? I confess that in five months, I haven't figured out how. But I certainly have noticed that they are more thrifty than they care to admit: they save old bread, they dry their clothes on a drying rack instead of a mechani-



Greed. The national train company, SNCF (Société nationale des chemins de fer), charges 2.23 FF/min. to any caller who wants to buy a ticket.

cal dryer, which makes them last longer. They drive used cars, they do a lot of repair work themselves and they savor their 32-FF cup of coffee. They will not stoop to comment on the overpriced menu, but they will bitch about service and quality. Not incidentally, this concern for quality and service is a display of status. As you see, *tout se tient* (everything holds together).

Employees also display a particular type of indolence and lack of initiative that irks North Americans. One reason for this is the French habit of scolding one another like children, a behavior they learn at school. One way to avoid this is simply to wait for orders and display no initiative. There is an additional disincentive: the risk of making a *faute professionnelle* (professional misdemeanor) that could be a firing offense in spite of the collective agreement. The problem is that the definition of *faute professionnelle* is so broad that a cashier can be fired because the cash did not balance.

There is another cause for overall indolence. Notice that you find very few kids under 18 working in gas stations, newspaper stores, restaurants and the like. The



Passivity. It's not polite to talk money in France. You pay and the seller cashes in.

reason is that student jobs are not customary in France. One problem is time: the school week in France is 37 hours – 40 hours for those who take Latin and Greek. True, schools compensate with frequent holidays, but this doesn't favor regular employment. Laws against child labor complicate hiring, although poor youngsters manage to work. Even at university, very few will work if they are not in dire straits. More jobs are available in the



Grade 10 students at a private school. Their school week lasts 37 to 40 hours of class. Unlike their parents, they haven't got the 35-hour work-week.

summer but people who can afford it, even the lower-middle class, will pay their children pocket money to stay away from this kind of work. The kids will comply, partly for reasons of prestige. Summer jobs are designed to replace employees during their holidays, but there is hardly any possibility of getting a steady part-time job during school year. This doesn't produce a work force trained in customer service.

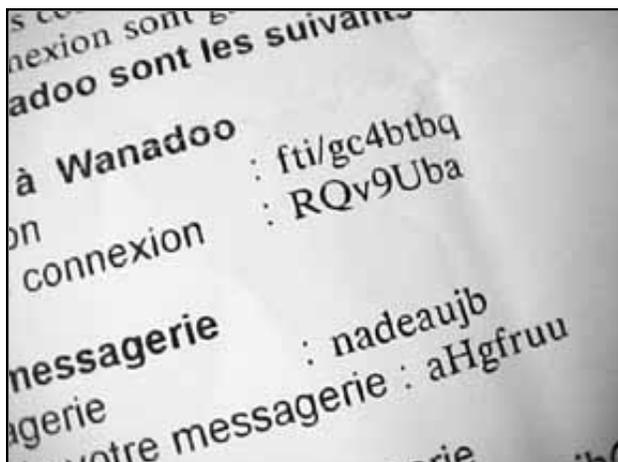
Result: The only person in a business who is likely to have a measure of business competence and a notion of service and initiative will be the owner — who rose up through the same system.

* * *

Companies expect the French to sit and wait and be told what to do, and most of them do just that. I discovered this when I tried to get hooked on to the Internet⁵. At first I thought of giving my business to Wanadoo, France Télécom's new Internet service. It took me two days to finally reach the server, after speaking 20 times to their technical service. I was ready to forgive this, but not what followed.

The Wanadoo mainframe insisted that my connection code be: fti/gc4btbq (my own name was no good). I also needed a connection password (whatever for?), which they selected: RQv9Uba. Finally, needing an e-mail password in addition to all that, I was granted the comical aHgfruu. They also recommended that I tell those codes to no one. When I realized I would never be able to remember that gibberish myself, I got rid of Wanadoo and installed AOL (in three minutes, I chose my own password — which was *not* aHgfruu). I sent the CD back to Wanadoo, suggesting they rename their service Wishidoo. Yours Truly, Ahgfruu

This is not an isolated example. The *Banque Nationale de Paris* does just the same. Even better: the password for



No choice. Wanadoo will tell you what's good for you, aHgfruu!

the bank card is four-digit and the password for their phone service is six-digit! When I complained about this practice to French friends, they did not understand. You mean choose? You mean having the same easy ID code for all? That's the stuff of Science-fiction. It's hard not to feel superior.

In the face of international competition, France Télécom is learning to think in terms of the clients' needs. The national phone monopoly will nowadays install a phone line immediately instead of having you wait for a year. And the days when an operator could request that an impolite client be unplugged are over. But old habits die hard. In order to circumvent their two-phonelines-per-household policy, France Télécom has developed a service called Numeris, which in effect puts two phone lines and an Internet line on a single wire. So I asked the clerk:

"Do I get voice mail on each phone line with Numeris?"

"Voicemail doesn't work on that service."

"But do you know anyone wanting Internet who doesn't want voicemail?"

"At first, we were selling voicemail on Numeris, but engineering said the technology was not compatible."

Blaming technology for French business shortcomings is missing the mark. France is not a technological Third World. In fact, its engineers are among the best. Tens of thousands of Frenchmen travel at 300 km per hour every day in TGV trains. The country has 11 million cellular phones. Waiters process credit cards with a little portable credit-card reader on short wave. And should I mention their Ariane space project, which can send the biggest load in space? A case in point is my dry cleaner, who cannot wash a shirt in less than three days, but who processes payments on smart-card with an embedded microchip!

French engineers and managers are trained to consider the needs of their company first, then of employees and then of users, incidentally. They have no desire to create the illusion that they care about you.

One cellular phone company, Nomad, is making a killing on the French market by offering a monthly fee and the capacity to cancel one's subscription anytime without penalty. The subtext is that French subscribers are normally captive. This means that once they have signed the contract, they can't quit for the duration of the contract. This kind of system applies for the regular phone, cellular phones, TV-cable service and even insurance. I discovered to my great horror recently, that I would have to live with my life-insurance company until the end of the annual contract: they will never interrupt and

⁵ Don't worry. Internet and the Minitel will be the subject of another report.



France Telecom. The ex-monopoly phone company has made such improvements, both in technology and in terms of customer relations, that consumers are near perfect bliss. Recently privatized, the company counts 140 000 employees, who have kept their civil servant status nonetheless. It shows.

refund me the balance of the annual payment, as is customary in North America. Nomad is turning the client-relationship on its head because the client is free, for once.

French companies customarily take clients for granted, if not for hostage, and French customers are trained to shut up and take what they are given. This goes a long way to explain the business experience in France.

* * *

But why?

At this point, it is perfectly plain to the reader that business practices cannot simply be explained away by the stereotypical answer, — the French are stooped — but rather that a complex mentality is feeding it and being fed by it. I hope the reader will forgive me for a certain circularity in reasoning, but this is impossible to escape when considering mentalities. In some instances, there will be a direct explanation: customers are passive

because they have been trained to shut up. In other instances, the explanation is by analogy: It is as if French business was trying to imitate another structure, much bigger than itself. And that structure, as we will see, is the structure of the State.⁶

What are the features that our observations have highlighted? On the one hand, that customers and clients are remarkably passive and employees are indolent because talking about money is not polite, because they are expected to act as they are told, and because decisions come from above, not below. On the other hand, shopkeepers and managers are obviously asking as much as they can by reflex. They consult little and generally decide behind closed doors.

So why? The best formula was given to me by journalist and author Louis-Bernard Robitaille⁷: “The French don’t like money. They find it degrading. And by extension, business is dirty too.”

Adds Jonathan Story, a professor of political economy at INSEAD, an international school of management in Paris: “Their anti-economic mentality comes from different forces in French history that feed one another and are difficult to isolate, like Catholicism, Marxism, nationalism and Jacobinism.”

Jacobinism refers to the reflex habit of French leaders of knowing what’s best for all and to decide behind closed doors, without consulting. Over the last 400 years the French have built a very strong, unitarian State, mirroring the Catholic church to the smallest detail (see accompanying text). The administration is gigantic and the decision-making process is more often than not completely opaque. The state consults little simply because there is no independent, inferior level of government that can force it to do so. This has had powerful psychologi-

⁶ Three readings are absolutely necessary along this line. Alexis de Tocqueville’s *L’Ancien régime et la révolution* (The Old Regime and the Revolution) is a thorough analysis of the disappearance of political liberty in the French system since the 16th century, and its consequences. Written 20 years ago, Alain Peyrefitte’s *Le Mal Français* (The French Problem) follows the same reasoning, although with more economic and contemporary reasoning. Max Weber’s masterpiece, *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, is a thorough study of the practical impact of Protestant theology and shows, by negative inference, the impact of Catholicism on the political and economic mentality of the French.

⁷ A keen observer, Louis-Bernard Robitaille is a Quebecer who has lived in France for 30 years. His book, *Et Dieu créa les Français* (And God Created The French) is a collection of his best articles written in the late 1980s and early 1990s plus a few more essays remarkable for their pertinence. The title is the punch line of an old joke: “Having created the perfect country called France, God wanted to even it out. And God created the French.”

cal implications for generations of French. In addition, the French are nationalist in the sense that they will seek answers within before looking without — you can call this mental protectionism. They buy French first and they don't need an act of the Parliament to tell them to do so. This is great for their economy, but it explains why so few French customers have said, until recently, "Hey! This is not the best way to do it."

During the Kosovo war, I was surprised to see the French media give so much space to the opinion of intellectuals for so grave an issue, when it was plain that some were ill-informed or even dangerously tendentious. Not one newspaper or magazine gave a line to a business leader. And this is not for lack of very important French multinational businessmen. Wouldn't the French president of Total, the world's #4 petroleum company, have anything of interest to say over a conflict where petrol played such a vital role? After all, it was a Russian pipeline feeding Belgrade. Silence. Why did they never interview business leaders for social commentary or international questions? I tested the idea with friends at the hiking club, and the reply was absolutely uniform: "Business people have nothing to say about politics and society. They have to stick to business. That's their job." This in fact is the standard line. However, one particular hiker, a friend of mine and a graduate of the *École Nationale d'Administration* (the breeding ground of the French élite)⁸, added an additional twist. "Business people will not voice an opinion because they are afraid of alienating political support and being blackballed by the entire political class." Business people mind their business and will comment on fiscal matters, when asked.

France, in effect, is a two-tiered society. The business class (owners, financiers, entrepreneurs and management) ranks well below the political class or intelligentsia (politicians, civil servants, journalists, intellectuals). As a result, the worst intellectual is regarded more highly than the best entrepreneur. In fact business is hidden, as



View from the Paris Air Show at a suburban town called Le Bouget. France produces airplanes and launches 60 percent of commercial satellites. Yet, you can't choose your telephone password.

if it were a caste below the political class — not quite untouchable, but definitely a second order of society.⁹ Therefore, a lot of what France does best is not even visible to the French, forget the outside world, and is therefore not a matter of pride or a generator of social models. The consequence is that whatever learning is acquired doesn't circulate as well. There are business schools and the political class naturally consults high business circles, but this is very seldom publicized. Outside the arts, there are very few private foundations or public tribunes where you find business and political classes working or speak-

⁸ Yes, I will report on this as well.

⁹ To understand better the workings of these two orders of society, consider traditional African societies. In some areas of pre-colonial Africa, it was common to find that slaves and non-slaves were almost undistinguishable. There could even be slave-generals. The reason: these societies made the difference between rank and status. One could achieve a very high rank (general), and yet have no status (slave), and be seated beside a general who was not a slave, and be consulted just as much. This distinction has almost completely disappeared in North America where all are equal before the law and the main element of social distinction is money and its attributes. In France, and other European countries, the law is the same for all, but a self-made-man (or woman) remains a *nouveau riche*, a *parvenu*, with less status than a poor intellectual, and less worthy of consideration. This is particularly strong in France.



Sex of angels. The French have an expression for intellectual hair splitting: Débattre du sexe des anges (arguing over the sex of angels).

ing together. This is why it is so impolite to talk about money in general, or about what things cost, or even asking someone what they do in life. You are supposed to guess from the conversation and read between the lines, if you care, which means you are supposed to be able to talk about something else.

In a particularly mind-boggling anecdote, Alain Peyrefitte¹⁰ mentions a reception offered in honor of a French Nobel Prize in physics. At the occasion, one of Peyrefitte's assistants deplored the fact that the professor had never patented his discovery and that others (Americans) had got rich on his invention. One science student exclaimed: "At least he was honest!"

So how do the French produce a strong economy while entertaining a strongly anti-economic mentality? Although anti-economic, the French never proclaimed the eradication of capital, unlike the Russians and the Chinese, to name only two. Quite the contrary. They regard economic matters as a means, never as an end. A strongly anti-economic mentality doesn't deny the importance of the business class; it is simply ignored. However since economic matters cannot be ignored fully (one has to work and or have one's shirts dry-cleaned), people act strangely. In many ways, the French attitude toward business is a massive case of collective schizophrenia. □

Sidebar: **A CATHOLIC SOCIETY**

Religion had a deep impact in the formative years of the French State between the 16th and 19th centuries, in large part because the French state mirrored the structure of the Catholic Church. Although the state is now officially secular, half of French school kids go through Catholic private schools. This is bound to have an impact, even if the vast majority of the French are not religious. A case can be made that a Catholic society will value theory over practice, politics over business, science over technology, and so on. It is not by accident that during the 19th century, French Protestants and Jews, although a minority, came to dominate industry, finance and commerce in France. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber argues that the notion of calling and worldliness, so central to Protestantism, is at the origin of an ethic of capitalism. Weber quotes an interesting sermon by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism: "We ought not to prevent people from being diligent and frugal; we must exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can; that is, in effect, to grow rich." It is noteworthy that French playwright Molière wrote in 1668 a comedy deriding *l'Avare* (The Miser) just when the Protestants were beginning to apply their "philosophy of avarice" (Weber's expression). So while the English aristocracy was becoming industrious, the French bourgeoisie began to ape the aristocracy's idleness and used its profits to buy offices or aristocratic titles.

Nowadays, the Catholic ethic is compounded by socialist and marxist doctrine, which is positively anti-economic, and has become the dominant discourse during this century in France. Eighty percent of teachers belong to the socialist or communist parties, which creates up to half a million preachers of the anti-Capital faith. French capitalists finished discrediting their cause, morally, during the Occupation, when the majority of the so-called 200 "*grandes familles*," that is the top economic establishment, sided with the Vichy government and collaborated sometimes openly with the Nazis.

Notre-Dame-de-Paris' flying buttresses. State and business have mirrored closely the organization and spirit of the Catholic church. Customs and habits are firmly buttressed.



¹⁰ Alain Peyrefitte, *Le Mal Français*, p. 207.

INSTITUTE FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

Shelly Renae Browning. A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology. **[SOUTH ASIA]**

Chenoa Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. **[THE AMERICAS]**

Paige Evans. A playwright and former Literary Manager of the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, Paige is looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts. With a History/Literature B.A. from Harvard, she has served as counselor at the Buckhorn Children's Center in Buckhorn, Kentucky (1983-84), as Arts Editor of the International Courier in Rome, Italy (1985-86), and as an adjunct professor teaching a course in Contemporary American Playwrights at New York University. She joined the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1990. **[THE AMERICAS]**

Whitney Mason. A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called The Siberian Review in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the Vladivostok News and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam. **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

Marc Michaelson. A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." **[sub-SAHARA]**

Jean Benoît Nadeau. A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization." **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

Susan Sterner. A staff photographer for the Associated Press in Los Angeles, Susan received her B.A. in International Studies and Cultural Anthropology at Emory University and a Master's in Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt. AP gave her a wide-ranging beat, with assignments in Haiti, Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexican border; in 1998 she was a co-nominee for a Pulitzer Prize for a series on child labor. Her fellowship topic: the lives and status of Brazilian women. **[THE AMERICAS]**

Tyrone Turner. A photojournalist (Black Star) whose work has appeared in many U.S. newspapers and magazines, Tyrone holds a Master's degree in Government and Latin American politics from Georgetown University and has produced international photo-essays on such topics as Rwandan genocide and mining in Indonesia (the latter nominated for a Pulitzer). As an ICWA Fellow he is writing and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings. **[THE AMERICAS]**

Daniel B. Wright. A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andraee, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. **[EAST ASIA]**

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