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Why the French Resist Globalization: Setting the Terms

PARIS, France August 30, 1999

TO THE READER: Even the baguette supplies are threatened during the French vacation season, and I confess I had trouble writing this newsletter — not simply for lack of bread but because my sources were beached, literally. Topics like the Internet in France, the Holocaust and spelunking, all had to be put on the back burner unless I rang people in their tents. Instead, I used the opportunity to write about vacations, and to reflect on what brought me to France in the first place, namely globalization. To my great surprise, these two apparently widely separated topics were related. But if you will, you can see them as two sides of the letter: dry stuff, fun stuff. Choose your weapon.

By Jean Benoît Nadeau

Why, why hurt myself?

Stimulating as it may be, the self-inflicted rationale for my entire fellowship — Why Do The French Resist Globalization? — has been nagging me like a splinter since my arrival in France. I had promised not to write "big issue" essays before the middle of the second year of the fellowship. But the topic keeps popping up in the news and in conversation: the bull is inviting me to take it by the horns.

The question is big, no doubt, but what really embarrassed me from the start was its sanctimonious, holier-than-thou undertone, like that of a vegetarian scolding a gourmet. Why do you eat meat? Why don't you do as I say?

Not that the question is wrong, but in all fairness, words like "globalization", "resist", "French" are loaded with subtexts and assumptions that deserve to be spelled out. I have waited for six months before writing an essay on the subject, mostly for fear of the boomerang effect. Indeed, "Why do the French resist globalization" calls for a refreshing "Why would anyone care?" in return. The issue goes far beyond the caricaturable realm of the-Pentagon-Meets-The-Hexagon[1], as the French media like to call it. In fact, it questions the US just as much as the French, an unexpected aspect of this fellowship.

In many ways, the question itself is just as interesting as its object. Rather than answering the Big Question, it would be much more constructive to set the terms of an answer by defining the words. So let's go over each of the four terms

[1] The French often refer to Metropolitan France as the Hexagon. The term was used for the first time by de Gaulle in his book on military strategy, in 1934. It refers to the borders of France, which can be pictured as an hexagon. The term has stuck, and a whole slew of words has derived, like Hexagonal, which refers to the language of the media and the administration.

in disorder: Globalization; the French; Resist; Why.

1) ***Globalization.*** No less. What globalization are we talking about?

Over the last 30 years, financiers and economists have convinced the media and most decision-makers, that high taxes, high inflation, high national debt, trade barriers and other protectionist measures all curb prosperity. Globalization refers to the opposite: prosperity by free movement of capital, currency, goods, labor. The state's role is that of an arbitrator. Its central policy: "Markets know best," as goes the mantra in The City of London.

But to many outside financial circles, this definition sounds like an act of faith in a truncated reality, and that globalization involves much more than this. For instance, last year the editor in chief of *Le Monde Diplomatique* revived an old idea, a one-tenth-of-one-percent tax on financial transactions. It's dubbed the Tobin Tax, after Nobel prizewinner James Tobin (1981). The newspaper was flooded with enthusiastic responses and an association was created, ATTAC, *Association pour la taxation des transactions financières pour l'aide aux citoyens* (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Benefit of Citizens), now 10,000 members strong and coordinating dozens of similar organizations worldwide. The Parliaments of Canada and Finland have already debated for such a tax in principle.

It would be too simplistic to reject these speculations as "resistance" to globalization. Quite the contrary, Tobin's notion of such a tax, not national but global, signifies full adherence to the principle of globalization. This is the backbone of a new form of internationalism, Globalization Plus — a global market with rules, institutions and maybe global government. Taxing multinationals or financial trade is not antiglobalization: it's globalization with a new form of government. Indeed, why should globalization be only about economics? Can't an international treaty on landmines or a permanent war-crimes court of justice be regarded as important features of any globalization?[2] In a perfectly rational and virtuous world, self-regulation would be the norm. But in practice, markets alone cannot police the world.

Bernard Kouchner, the new UN administrator for Kosovo, has beaten this drum loudly for 30 years. He was already famous as the founder of *Médecins Sans Frontières*, (Doctors Without Borders), and later of *Médecins du monde* (Doctors for the World). The medical teams of these non-governmental organizations, often the first on the battlefield or on the site of catastrophe and often the last to leave, want to "heal and bear witness." This was the second purpose of Kouchner in founding *Médecins Sans Frontières:* he hated Red Cross-style neutrality. He has long campaigned for a *droit d'ingérence*, a right to intervene and interfere. Dr. Kouchner is now at the forefront of an "Army without frontiers."

It is not by chance that this new idea of globalization is crystallizing around the French. The conventional, solely economic conception of globalization irks them. Prime Minister Lionel Jospin is famous for having said: *"Oui à l'économie de marchés, non à la société de marchés (*Yes to a market economy, no to a market society)." The French model is called *dirigiste* (interventionist): the State manages the economy and arbitrates national interest. In essence, it is power manifesting itself — a notion viewed as out of fashion in The City. Should public policy be subject to markets only? The state makes mistakes, and bad ones at that — but so does the market. Markets don't give citizens five weeks of paid holidays: *governments do* (*see* accompanying text #1*).*

"The French do trust the State," says Jean-François Delage, a civil administrator at the Ministry of the Interior and an ex-cabinet chief for Overseas Territories during the Juppé government of 1995-1997, whom I befriended at my hiking club. "In the last 20 years, the French have become convinced that stock markets and markets in general can generate prosperity. But they are not yet sure that the market can solve social problems." At the individual level, this means that having no house or no job is not strictly a personal problem stemming from essentially personal decisions. It's partly the system's fault and the French, rich or poor, left wing and right, expect the system to act.

"Big deal," you might say. "That bunch of commies hates markets and economics anyway." Indeed, the French attach a stigma to private interests and initiative. But, this did not prevent them from building the fourth

Flag bearer. It was Bernard Cassens, Editor in Chief of Le Monde Diplomatique*, who floated the idea of a tax on financial transactions. This may be a utopia, but mean-while 1,200 associations from all over the world are pre-paring a protest against the World Trade Organization's reopening of trade discussions in Seattle. They will demand a moratorium. The WTO is not taking it lightly: these guys sank the OECD's talks on MAI, the Multilateral Accord on Investments.*

[2] Neither France nor the US were enthusiastic about these...

strongest economy in the world, and a country that is even a paradise by many standards.

I don't regret describing this behavior as a form of schizophrenia *(see* JBN-5), but I should have mentioned then that they are not alone. All societies display this kind of schizophrenia, albeit in different forms. In America, and particularly in the US and Canada more and more, the schizophrenia goes the opposite way. The stigma is on governments and civil servants. The norm is a strong measure of defiance, if not distrust, of the State, and the economic agents get all the glory. Naturally, such schizophrenia creates a paradox analogous to "How can the French, being so anti-economic, produce such a strong economy?" How can the Americans, being so anti-political, produce so much government and such an influential State?" The consequence: France is much more liberal than it pretends, and the U.S. is more *dirigiste* than it would like to admit. It is as if Americans need to believe, psychologically, that markets can do all and governments cannot, just as the French need to believe the contrary.

Therefore, one should not confuse silence with non-existence. Says Jean-Pierre Pellegrin, a retired OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) researcher whom I had met to discuss quite another topic, "Discourse is often unrelated to the true mode of organization. The die-hard liberal discourse hardly corresponds to real practice: Why save American banks from bankruptcy? Why make a deficit?"

2) ***The French*** may resist, but what do we mean by The French?

For a long time, it meant the Parisians, who called all the shots. But other parts of France welcome globalization and Europe as levers against the power of Paris. The city of Lyon, for instance, demanded and obtained a direct high-speed train link with Brussels with no stop in Paris. The Parisian nomenklatura has pretty good reasons to "resist," since a more open system can mean only that the influence of Paris will dwindle, at least within France. The picture is not even uniform within other groups that strongly oppose globalization, at least those who get the most attention. Europe is profoundly transforming France, arguably one of the oldest and best organized nation-states in the world — with China and Japan close behind, depending on which feature you emphasize.

In all fairness, the notion of resistance cannot be dealt with without addressing another question: why is it always the French who are blamed? France is not alone with high taxes, a prolific civil service, a *dirigiste* state, a defiance of the English language and a love-hate relationship with the United States. Same for the 35-hour week: it's a German thing, but the French, who are trying to implement it, are bearing the brunt of the ridicule.

Divided. Some French farmers do welcome globalization and mass production, but others don't. Opponents, who proudly call themselves peasants, have found a martyr in the person of José Bové, a goat milk producer who was arrested after dismantling a McDonalds in Millau, Southern France, to protest a 100% taruff imposed by the U.S. on Roquefort cheese.

Why do the French attract flak?

The simple answer is, this country has influence and likes to flex its muscle. In the economic, political, diplomatic and scientific spheres, it simply cannot be overlooked. The French have always been a US ally when really needed, but only then. In other circumstances, they cannot be accused of being yes-men in international politics. Being good Contrarians, they stand for national affirmation and opposition. Quite plainly, they never accepted American hegemony, or any kind of hegemony, and Americans know this and resent this. Who else in the G-7 but the French has the desire to have a foreign policy and an agenda of its own? What other country, save the US, has bits and parts of its nation far and away?[3] What other country has maintained an effective free-market with its former colonies? France has all the trappings of global power: a space program, a nuclear program, its own CIA, its own Marines (the Foreign Legion), its own spy satellite (Europe's only one), even its own mercenaries. It uses all these means to assert itself.

A professional dog trainer once said to me that a large size poodle, properly trained, would be as ferocious and as dangerous as a Doberman. Its only problem: it's not dissuasive enough. Who fears a waist-high poodle? If you stare only at the curls, the hair-do and the *Fifi* look of it, you cannot believe how aggressive it can be — until it

[3] The US has, for instance Hawaii, Alaska, Guam and Puerto Rico. France is in exactly the same position: Corsica, an island of the Mediterranean, is a Department of France, and so are French Guyana (in Latin America), Martinique and Guadeloupe (in the Caribbean) and Reunion Island (Indian Ocean). Other territories of consequence are St.Pierre et Miquelon islands (in the Gulf of St.Lawrence), Polynesia and New Caledonia in the Pacific Ocean, and the Kerguelen islands in the Indian Ocean. All these scattered parts play an important role and require presence: Polynesia is where the French blast bombs. Guyana is the best launching ground for space rockets as well as a good source of precious metals. The Kerguelens are one of the best fish reserves in the world. Among European powers, only the United Kingdom has comparable dispersion, although mostly in the Caribbean and in the Atlantic.

goes away with your hand. And you get to hate yapping poodles all the more.

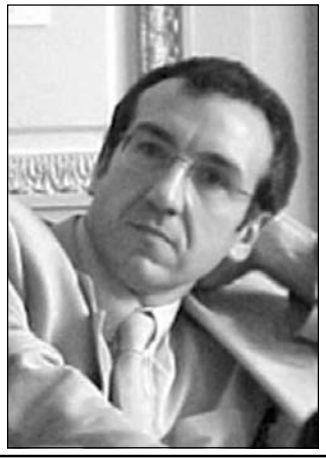
The history of French assertiveness is always full of surprises. I realized this when I met Louis Laidet, Deputy Director of the CNES (*Centre national d'études spatiales*, the French NASA), to discuss the European space program. In the late 1960s the French space program had almost crumbled, but American attitudes rekindled the French scientists, as Louis Laidet explained. "NASA agreed to launch our telecommunication satellites but under the condition that we would never use those satellites commercially. We refused that condition and we now run a much more viable launching program, economically, than the Americans." Nasty poodle it is.

The French don't mind playing the bad guy, either. Take Iraq: the French fought on the good side in 1991, but they oppose the recent wave of bombings. Because they want to get petrol from Iraq? Maybe, but as the French point out, their companies are not the only ones that want in. They just are more up-front about it. Besides, maybe it was not such a hot idea to bomb Iraq once more. Oh, and yes, the French do like speaking for other nations, as the newsletter on Francophonie (JBN-6) has shown.

"The French are hypocritical when it's question of their influence," says Thierry Leterre-Robert, a professor of political thought at *Institut de Sciences Politiques de Paris*, France's oldest private university. I had met him to discuss the Internet in France but our discussion quickly moved to another plane. "The French like repeating that France is an out-of-breath, middle-aged power, but it really is a powerful and rich country. It's just that they like the ugly duckling act." Ugly duckling? Poodle?

Sure, France may remain second-best, like a perennial challenger. But this is missing the point. The French, like it or not, don't want to be the best: they like being alone.

3) Whether the French actually ***resist*** globalization is the most controversial aspect of the question and the one that is the most difficult to avoid answering. But one must try, since this essay essentially aims at "setting the terms." Understanding the notion of resistance supposes three corollary questions:



Professor Thierry Leterre-Robert, of Institut d'études politiques de Paris. He thinks the French purposely downplay their real influence.

• *Do they compete internationally? Do they push their own concepts internationally?*

The French resist much less than they pretend. Because they are so strongly anti-economic in their values, they were pretty good at convincing themselves and the world that French capitalism is an oxymoron. Yet France is a decisive actor in globalization. French business is extremely aggressive worldwide — consider petrol, aviation, waterworks, construction, agro-business.

Internationally, the French have successfully pushed concepts like *Appelation d'origine controlée*, a label of origin on agricultural products (*see* JBN-4), and *l'exception culturelle*, a protectionist notion by which cultural products of any kind cannot be regarded as normal merchandise subject to international trade rules (see JBN-6). There is no doubt that more French notions are in the works. But their most famous and most universal export — and a truly global one at that — has been the metric system, and guess who's resisting? (*See* accompanying text #2).

• *Do they welcome competition and external ideas at home?*

You don't need to walk around Paris or any provincial city very long to feel the foreign presence and influence. English is chic. More importantly, "France is becoming more and more liberal, even if the word is avoided," says Jean-Paul Fitoussi, director of the *Office Français des Conjonctures Économiques* (French Bureau on Economic Climate), whom I met in March.

But there is no debating, either, that the French are strongly nationalistic, economically. They buy French spontaneously: no need for a Buy-French Act. They take their holidays in France. With reason, weather forecasts never show the signs of cloud or sunshine outside French borders, even in neighboring countries.

The French have always tolerated a fairly high degree of managed economy. A clear objective of the French has been to maximize yield internally, which explains why French car production is religiously reported every month, and why the companies cater so strongly to nationals (*see* accompanying text #3). When the government cannot actually decide which way to lean, it will lobby for the national interest. The business class tolerates involvement. Sales, for instance, are regulated: discounts take place only in January and July. Pension money is used to fund social housing rather than support the stock market.

Of course, some *dirigiste* decisions have failed. But then again, markets fail too. In Canada, the giant retail chain Eaton has bled red ink for years and is finally sinking. Does this mean capitalism doesn't work? In base-

French pilots in front of a Rafale jet fighter at the Paris Air Show, in the sururban town of Le Bourget. Those guys are ready to take the flak.

ball, any batter hitting the ball once every three tries will be regarded as a baseball genius — if this is not an oxymoron. In business, the survival rate for startups is one in five, in good times. Why should a managed economy get 100 percent or be damned? What then should be the objective measure? Gross National Product? If so, then France ranks fourth after the U.S., Japan and Germany, but before the United Kingdom. In all, five member countries of the G-7 can be regarded as *dirigistes.* Which brings us back to the question: Why do the French attract the flak?

This is not to say nothing should change in France. A friend of mine, Philippe Delannoy, a self-employed architect with a good head for economics and history, says that France has grasped economic globalization late, "partly because we strongly believe in our institutions, and partly because my fellow citizens do not believe as strongly in themselves and in their capacity." Indeed, France has much to gain from allowing more initiative and attempting to manage less. But this will come slowly, like all cultural changes, if it ever happens. A case in point was the recent announcement by Michelin to cut 7,500 jobs in Europe. The press went berserk: "How can they do this at the same time they post record profits?" Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, in a TV interview, agreed he was disgusted but said he would not do a thing: "The economy cannot be managed by the State alone, but all social actors should play their role." Surely, a veiled encouragement to unions to mobilize, which is indeed their social function. If anything, the French are not fatalistic about the inevitability of job losses within a globalization.

• *Do they accept the fact that their institutions and social makeup will be transformed by globalizing influences?*

Even at the political level, the notion of "resistance" is debatable. The principles of economic globalization have long prevailed in France and are currently being implemented — although they are hidden. Prime Minister Jospin, although a Socialist, has presided over the longest streak of privatization, which he calls "normalization" — a euphemism, but a critical one in the French mentality. A velvet hand does not signify pussy-footing. Since 1986, the French have sold 329 billion FF (U.S.$65 billion) worth of interest in public companies, half the amount scored by Thatcherian Britain. There is no debating the fact that the French State has decided to move gradually and to "resist" partly out of an understanding that profound change must go slowly. Even gung-ho economists admit that Thatcher went too quickly. France keeps its head above water — well above it — so they have not necessarily missed the boat — although this is debatable for the future. The French have a say: *Le mieux est l'enemi du bien* (literally: Better is the enemy of good), meaning, If it ain't broke, why fix it?

Much fuss has been made about the catastrophic management of Crédit Lyonnais. The bank lost over 100 billion FF (U.S.$16 billion) over 10 years in the 1980s. The government covered the deficit until the European Commission, under pressure from competing banks, told France to stop in the early 1990s. And the French government did stop and ordered the management to clean up its act! The point is not that the State mismanaged a bank, but rather that France, this very old nation-state, agreed to yield some of its sovereignty to a bigger entity called Europe. And to take orders from it. The effect of Europe, both internationally and domestically, is just beginning to be felt. There will be screams, and then things will change. At a political level, Europe is a form of globalization much more thorough than conventional Free-Trade. Europe is an extraordinarily bold move on the part of France and other European countries. Imagine if it were applied to North America: Canada and Mexico could suggest that US revoke the second amendment and support minority languages, like French and Spanish... (long silence)...

France joined the Common Market 42 years ago, and Europe remains at the top of the agenda, come hell or high water. The countries are far from integrated into a federation: Europe is viewed as a cooperation between states, which supposes much give and take. But the move from cooperation to federation will come. Jean-Paul Fitoussi makes the case that France, through Europe, has become much more liberal, economically, than the US: "Consider the Euro. Here you have the creation of a currency, of a European bank, or rules, without a State to

regulate it. This is perfectly liberal by definition, even ultraliberal: no State. European countries are having it easy right now because there is no severe European recession. But when things go ugly, a European State will become necessary to legitimize tough action."

4) And then there is the question of ***why***, the fourth word of the question. Being a good Utilitarian, the typical North American, when asking "why," is really looking for a cause-and-effect relationship and basic explanations. What's the cause of all this? And where do I fit in?

But "why" may mean purpose as in, to what end? Develop trade for what? To make more money. More money for what? To make more money? To gain influence? To have a better society?

I discovered the multiple meanings of "why" in a place that is furthest from Paris, at least in mindset: on Wall Street, at the head of office of Moody's, the famous credit-rating agency. It was the fall of 1997 and I was interviewing Vincent Truglia, a vice-president in charge of evaluating the bond ratings of half a dozen sovereign nations, including Canada. The rating of the Canadian government was going up and that of Quebec was about to be re-evaluated. I wanted to assess what was objective and subjective in the evaluation process. Truglia explained the ins and outs, but he was obviously frustrated at the significance and results of his rating.

"Moody's doesn't create *any* crisis, Mr. Nadeau."

"But there is no question that rating a State down from Aaa to A creates a polemic."

"You see, Mr. Nadeau, we only measure the chance of defaulting, not political choices."

"But Aaa is much better than simple A, you can't deny this."

"In terms of default, yes, but journalists, politicians, financiers ascribe a moral value to it. We don't."

"At all?"

"You don't understand the philosophy behind credit. You see, Aaa, which is very low risk of default, is the equivalent of someone earning a high salary, living in a small house, driving a small car, paying cash for everything, buying few clothes, and going out rarely. The A-rated may have a bigger house, a bigger car, or two cars, a larger debit on the credit card, more clothes. A's risk of defaulting is therefore higher, but only marginally compared to B's or C's. But both Messrs. A and Aaa might be horrified at one another's choices, and rightly so."

"It's a matter of personal choice indeed."

"More than that: it's a matter of purpose and this is why you get political debates over our rating. You see, if you use your credit, your rating goes down. But what's the point of having a perfect rating if you never use your credit? That's the paradox of credit and the answer depends on your purpose."[4]

That's the essential problem with France. They have all the features of a modern developed society, but they seem to view everything and value everything so differently, almost in an opposite way from those they call the "Anglo-Saxons."[5] And maybe the reason for this is that France is a very different animal in spite of its resemblance to other nations — much like the difference between donkey and horse, tiger and lion, wolf and dog, Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon. (You choose the image that suits your purpose.) But the point is that any attempt to cross-bread any of these pairs result in sterile animals, at best. They look like real animals, but they are not.

It is well known that radical neoliberal views at the IMF and the World Bank provoked recession in Russia, Brazil and Korea, among others. Could it be that globalization owes more to doctrine than to reason? Maybe globalization supposes a certain type of society and a certain type of values. Maybe the focus on the economy is a culture in itself. Maybe it is an offshoot of America, just as *dirigisme* is an offshoot of the French system — although not exclusively.

No object is strictly neutral: most have effects unrelated to their actual purpose or nature, because objects are the product of a culture, and act both inside and out of it. Why is it that French mechanics speak with so few anglicisms, whereas Quebec mechanics use a lingo full of English terms? Simply because the North American car industry was speaking English. Not that Ford was pushing the English language on purpose, but it followed in a much more durable way than the vehicles themselves. If a car can have such indirect side effects, what of a mental construct like globalization? ❑

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[4] For the record, the US's defaulting risk is minimal. Moody's rating: Aaa, same as Europe. France's rating before Europe was the same.

[5] This said, let's steer clear of pure relativism. Some systems are so rotten that people are destroyed by the thousands and children are left to die of hunger, or worse. These horrors cannot be justified by the logic of any system, mentality or whatever doctrine or religion. Some systems are better, some worse, and even evil at times. But who dies of hunger in France?

Accompanying text #1

CLUB MED FRANCE

Vacations are a serious matter in France: They are both a national institution and a civil right. France is completely beached in August and, to a lesser extent, July.[6] Shops are closed, shutters stay down for a month. In some neighborhoods up to half the business ceases completely. Even my bicycle shop closes. Reputedly, the only ones who never leave are Arab grocers, but then not my Tunisian grocer downstairs, Redha Ben Hamouda — whom my wife Julie nicknamed Red. Redha mans the breach almost 14 hours a day (if you count the siesta) six and a half days a week, but he closes from July 25 to Sept. 3 and goes to the family's villa on Djerba Island in Tunisia. He also manages to put together three weeks of holiday during winter. "I have no complex about it," he says. "I work hard 10 months to offer myself two months of vacation per year."

My hiking friends consider North America as a sort of Third World because of the lack of statutory weeks of holidays. They wonder why The Word has not spread. The notion of personal choice and merit are alien when it comes to this: holidays are a citizen's right. Europeans can rightly ask, Why do Americans resist five-week holidays? All the more strange given that America produces more wealth than ever while people have less time and work more than a generation ago.

Holiday time. Vacations have been so massive for such a long period that the movement produced a culture of its own. Here, a page taken from Marcel Gotlib's humorous comic book, Dingodossiers 3.

To be frank, the whole business of five-week holidays enraged me. Why are they closed? Why are they so sure of themselves? Why are they so primitive? Typically North American. Why would I be so proud about never taking this much holiday? This feeling lasted until I realized I was simply jealous. One conversation with Redha made me realize what this was all about. He regards himself as French and openly refers to Tunisia as a Third-World country. Yet he is amazed that so many Tunisians are partying in Djerba. "Maybe we are poorer than they are, in a way. They have no money, yes. But we have no time. Never. Except during holidays." One thing is certain: five weeks per year, the French do take their time, and yours too.

Naturally, the French are not the only Europeans with long statutory holidays, but they certainly are the most herd-minded — with the possible exception of the Belgians. Year after year, holiday-time in France follows a pattern akin to the migration of white geese.

Jitters start in late winter. In March, a friend asked me where I was planning to spend my holidays and he did not seem to understand that I hadn't given much thought — I'll know better next year. By mid-March, there are no copies left of *Le Guide Bertrand des vacances* (Bertrand's Holiday Guide), listing accommodations, facilities and rental opportunities. Will it be July or August? Those who go in July *(juillet)* are called *Juilletistes* and those who go in August *(août)* are called *Aoûtiens.* In May, the statutory holidays are used for inspection tours for July and August. The final countdown begins during the *lycée* (college) exams in June (another great mass event). People buy the *cahier de vacances* (holiday homework book), so kids can prepare for the next school year while adults play beach volley.

The *Juilletistes* vanish, and just as they are about to reappear, the *Aoûtiens* take off, provoking the worst highway jams of the year — 600 kilometers worth this year alone. While nobody is paying attention, the government set fiscal policy and makes unpopular announcements. This is prime mating season. Not all find the proper outlet, but sex ads appear by mid-August, offering related service. There is 3615 CPL75 for swingers, and then 3615 Domi if you prefer a dominatrix, or 3615 Ross if you want to be *rossé* (beaten). You know the holidays are coming to an end when whiners start whining about the fact that the Paris subway network will not include August 30th and 31st in the September commuter passes. At home, the income-tax hike is waiting in the mailbox. By September, the French are rested and ready to be in a bad mood again. It all ends with *la rentrée* (literally: back to school), applied to all sorts of meanings: *la rentrée parlementaire, la rentrée littéraire, la rentrée théatrale.*

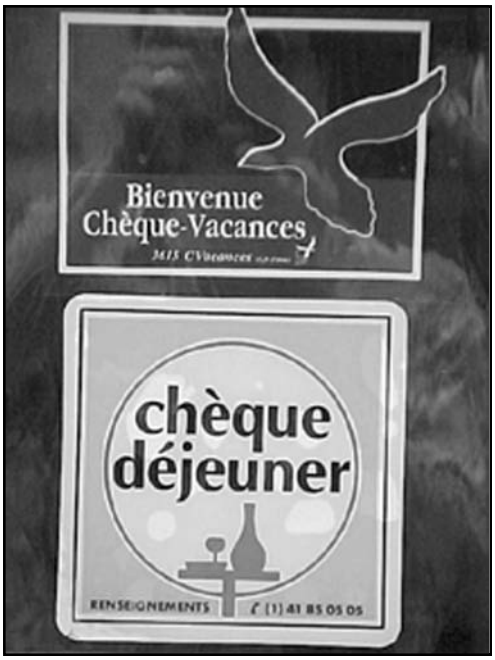
The beauty of staying at home during this gigantic

[6] The business of dividing the year into quarters is a Stock-Exchange fad. The French year is thought of in thirds. There is Yule time, then May, then August. Half the month of May can be off-work because of the number of statutory holidays. There's First of May, then Victory Day (the 8), then the Ascension of Mary a few days later, and the Pentecost another week later.

farandole is that it forces some changes in habit: half of what you're used to is closed. But any Frenchman will tell you: the August vacations are not what they used to be. The French long for the good old days of total paralysis when there was no such nonsense as *Juilletistes,* and any good vacationeer was an *Aoûtien.* Back then *nothing* worked; even the supply of bread or medications was broken. Since then, the government has asked companies, associations and people to spread the vacation time for humanitarian reasons. Bakers and pharmacists, for instance, now divide themselves into two groups: those stopping in July, and those who stop in August. Naturally, anyone is allowed *not* to take a holiday, but who doesn't? Nonetheless, the French maintain a high level of stoicism, all the more remarkable given that they can be so intolerant the rest of the year for even the slightest delay in the train schedule. The truth is that they have seen worse. In a society long structured to call to arms all its men 20 to 40 years old and get a great proportion of them killed or maimed, things get organized, somehow.

The weekend may be a British institution, but socialist president Léon Blum (1936-37) invented the statutory 15 *jours de congés payés* (15 days of paid holidays). It has been inflated to five weeks, and may be six soon, as the reduction of the working week from 39 to 35 hours is so difficult to implement that this may translate into an additional week of holiday instead. Léon Blum also happened to create mass tourism before anyone else. As a consequence, France developed facilities and infrastructures. This is why France can welcome 70 million tourists per year so smoothly without having to build Cancun-style resorts: room for them has already been part of the landscape for a long time. [7] Hence Club Med, another French invention.

Naturally, since vacations are a right, holidays are regarded as such too. Indeed, as some are more equal than others, and not all who get paid to stay at home can afford to get away. *Qu'à cela ne tienne* (that needn't matter)! Unions insist that big companies refund the holiday, or at least half of it. Two thousand French companies even run 8,000 resorts with a capacity of 240,000 beds. "Still, because not all low-wage workers, especially those working for smaller companies, can afford the getaway, the government created *le chèque-vacance* (the holiday coupon) in 1982. It works like this: employees who pay less than 11,450 FF (U.S.$2,000) a year of income tax, contribute between 4 and 20 percent of the minimum wage (up to 1,360FF) and the employer chips in as much as 2,500 FF — the rate is negotiated by the union."



Coupons. 130,000 stores and businesses accept holiday coupons, but also chèques déjeuner *(lunch coupons). Companies with more than 50 employees must run a cafeteria or chip in with employees, on a 50-50 basis to offer them lunch coupon of 30 to 50 FF per day. These can be used for payment in any restaurant showing the label.*

The money is managed by a national agency called *l'Agence nationale pour les chèques-vacances,* which issues a holiday coupons to employees in proportion to their contribution — up to 3,800 FF (U.S.$750). This coupon, valid for two years, can be used as payment at 130,000 French travel agencies, hotels, restaurants, resorts, etc. In all, 1.3 million employees received a holiday coupon in 1998. The first stage was applied in companies of 50 or more employees, but the government expects to double the number by applying it to smaller companies. In many cases, the holiday coupon will be the only social program provided by the employer.[8]

Association and government programs also try to cater to the 10 million *exclus des vacances* (vacation-excluded people) — mostly minimum-wage workers in very small companies, the unemployed, people on social welfare or poor suburban kids. So-called "social tourism" aims at giving them a getaway, even if for only one day. For instance, the Tourism Department puts social-tourism associations together with resorts, hotels and summer camps willing to discount excess capacity at a low price, say 600FF for a week of lodging and meals. This system, akin to discounting plane tickets for stand-by passengers, manages to avoid creating vacation ghettos for the poor, and the companies go for it because nothing looks better than a full house. Likewise, companies with private resorts are known to contribute as well, including Moët-et-Chandon. You've gotta do something with all that champagne...

[7] The only other country where facilities, infrastructures are so good and so discreet is New Zealand, which implemented redistribution measures early in its brief history. Besides, it is so far away from anything else (Australia is 1,000 miles away) that Kiwis vacation at home.

[8] You may argue that many low-wage workers might wish to use this extra money for something else, but the point is that the State has decided that everyone should take a holiday, like it or not. Nobody seems to mind.

Accompanying text #2

INCHES, POUNDS AND OTHER MONSTROSITIES

(During a hike with my hiking club, I had the following memorable conversation. It is absolutely true: only the names have been changed to protect the innocent.)

CHORUS: "What's your weight, Moose Hunter?"

MOOSE HUNTER: "175 lbs, which is not bad for 5'8""

CHORUS: "What's a pound? What's a foot? What is he talking about?"

MOOSE HUNTER: "There are 12 inches per foot, three feet per yard."

DAYCARE WORKER: "A yard!" (In French, yards are called *verge*, also meaning male sexual organ).

MOOSE HUNTER: "Medieval systems are full of body parts!"

My hiking club friends. They would agree that one way to learn the decimal metric system is the hard way, like NASA just did. Its Mars Climate Orbiter crashed in September because Lockheed built an auxiliary booster using feet and pounds while NASA was measuring in meters and Newtons. They were punished by Newton's law and a satellite that burned up in the Martian atmosphere.

AUTO-MECHANIC (RETIRED): "And what do you call a thousand yards?"

MOOSE HUNTER: "A thousand yards. The next biggest unit is called the mile, about a kilometer and half. It measures 5,280 feet, that is 1,760 yards."

AUTO-MECHANIC (RETIRED): "Anything square in that nonsense?"

MOOSE HUNTER: "Yes, My father, at 5'3", is one thousandth of a mile in length."

CHORUS: "And you weigh 175? Pounds, he said. And how much is a pound?"

MOOSE HUNTER: "A cubic foot is 62.5 pounds sharp. Or five gallons."

AUTO-MECHANIC (RETIRED): "Five. Now that's square!"

MOOSE HUNTER: "Unfortunately, water freezes at 32 and boils at 212."

CHORUS: "What kind of degrees are those? I think they are called Fartenette."

TOP-RANKING CIVIL SERVANT: "Fahrenheit!" (yelled from afar.) "That's German, not English."

MOOSE HUNTER "Sure, but Celsius was Swedish."

DAYCARE WORKER: "People still count like this. Unbelievable."

MOOSE HUNTER: "There's also these people, Americans I think they are."

The French laugh so much at non-metric weights and measurements that this conversation inspired me to go into a little routine for parties whenever it pops up. I was well prepared for that: my father is an engineer and I have recollections of him teaching me fractions by cutting apples at the table. Later, we played with Imperial vs. metric systems — Canada converted in 1970. When I studied engineering (one term), the chemistry class consisted essentially of conversion drills. Some were outrageous: "How many British Thermal Units in a kilojoule? How many horse-powers in a megawatt? How many hectoliters per hour in an acre-foot per minute?"

In truth, the French have good reason to be proud. In 1791, the *Assemblée Nationale* adopted the standard meter measuring one millionth of a quarter of a Meridian between the North Pole and the Equator. It took eight years for geometers to figure it out by measuring a

known segment of it between Dunkerque and Spain. From this it was easy to establish the standard kilogram, which is one thousandth of a cubic meter of fresh water.[9] The beauty of it all resides in its squareability. For instance: 10 millimeters make a centimeter; 100 centimeters make a meter (about a yard); and 1,000 meters make a kilometer (0.6 mile). But the French did even better: they matched the measurements with water to create absolute coherence between measurements of length, volume, weight and even temperature. For instance, one cubic meter (a 1.32 yard cube) weighs exactly a metric ton. The cubic meter holds 1,000 liters of 1,000 kg. Each liter being one kilogram, each milliliter measures one cubic centimeter weighing one gram. Too boot, this water freezes at zero and boils at 100. This triumph of rationality is one of the best by-products of the French revolution. Within a century, most countries had adopted it. So you can imagine their puzzlement at the fact that some still resist Enlightenment.

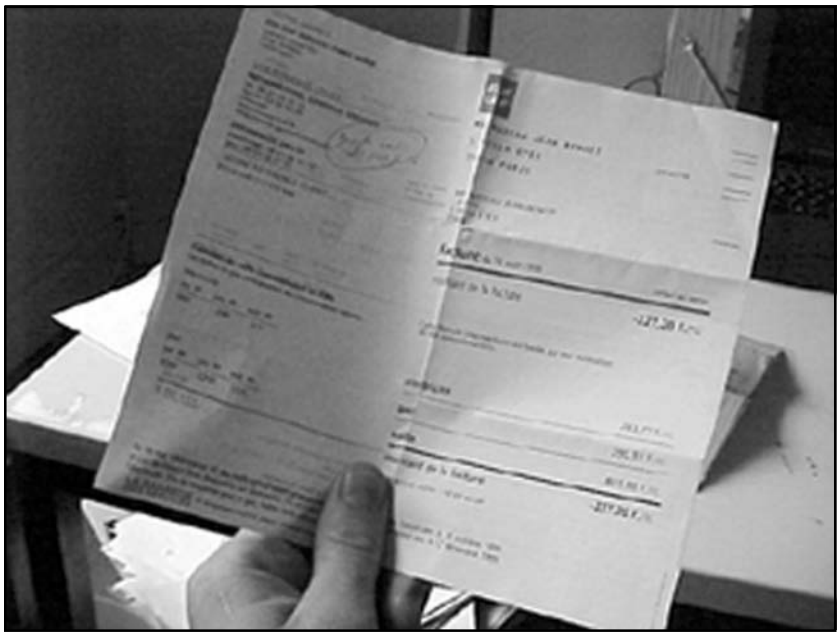
Nonetheless, for all they care about logic, the French still have archaic ways of numbering. Seventy is *soixante-dix* (literally sixty-and-ten). Eighty is *quatre-vingts* (four twenties). And ninety is *quatre-vingt-dix* (four-twenties-and-ten). At least, the Belgians and the Swiss say *septante, octante and nonante*. But this is foreign, and one more reason for the French not to adopt totally coherent numbering. It goes to show you that all societies are not quite perfect.

[9] Nowadays, the standard meter is rather the distance made by a beam of light in one 299 792 458th of a second.

Accompanying text #3

A NEW TYPE OF CHAUVINISM

Having no kids to entertain, I much prefer vacationing by making small expeditions away from base instead of long stays in the middle of nowhere or its edges — called beaches. Trying to rent a car for a weekend in the Champagne area, east of Paris, I discovered a new form of economic chauvinism, completely unexpected and so peculiar that foreigners usually remain unaware of it. Not that I want to underplay the pleasure of washing down a meal with champagne, but the car-rental process was memorable.



An electric bill. Don't leave home without it — your French home, anyway.

Until then, I had rented cars from international companies like Hertz because, contrary to French companies, they will answer the phone after 7 p.m., have overnight service and let you drop the car even when there is no staff to receive it. But since there is an ADA next to our apartment, I decided to give them my business. ADA is a big company, with hundreds of locations in France and thousands of employees, renting hundreds of cars every day.

The clerk was very nice and walked a few blocks with me to show me exactly what a Peugeot 306 was like. I made a reservation and, being aware of French business practices, I asked:

"And what papers do I need?"

"Driver's license, credit card and proof of residence."

The latter meant that I needed the latest electricity or phone bill. This only half-surprised me, because "proof or residence" had been required to open a bank account and get a driver's license. In France, gas and phone utilities vouch for someone's existence. I came back later with the necessaries, but I wanted to know why the phone bill? After all Hertz finds it sufficient to ask for a credit card and driver's licence. Why not ADA?

"Company policy," said the clerk.

"Suppose I had gone to Lyon by train and wanted to rent from ADA. Do you expect me to carry a phone bill everywhere?"

"Yes, that, or a power bill."

"Seventy million foreign tourists per year visit France. They can't possibly have a phone bill."

"We are not interested."

Here's the bottom line: ADA is a car rental company that only wants to rent to French people and couldn't care for others. Big as they may be, they operate like your traditional mom-and-pop store: they trade only with people they know, or who show their credentials.

Want proof? Just ask me for my phone bill.[10]

[10] While the clerk did the computer plotting, I amused myself at reading the contract. It stressed that I should drive *en bon père de famille* (as a good father should), a key concept in the principle-driven French Civil Code - meaning that you are going to be reasonable and prudent. It applies to men and women alike. Then I signed, with the mandatory mention *Bon pour location* (good for rental) — whatever that does.

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 Andreae, 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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