

# What Are The French Thinking and What Should Americans Think About It?

*We need to get along in some fashion with the French and understanding our differences may help.*

**By N. Hartley Schearer, Jr.**



## About the Author

N. Hartley Schearer, Jr., a Pennsylvania native, received his B.A. from Virginia's Hampden-Sydney College and his

Masters from James Madison University. He taught Latin in the Winchester (Virginia) Public Schools for 27 years, retiring in 2000. He and his Latin-teacher wife, Susan, have traveled extensively and have ten times led their students to Rome and Pompeii.

Mr. Shearer is active in his community, leading the Friends of the Handley Library, the library board, and a local fine arts league. He was named the local Jaycees' Educator of the Year in 1981. In 1995, he participated in an N.E.H. seminar in Avignon, France, but he credits a month-long 1997 stay in Rotary homes in the Loire Valley of France as the basis for his paper.

Presented to the Winchester, Virginia Torch Club on February 7, 2001.

.....  
Some of you know the old joke about the nations of Europe complaining to the Creator that France had been made too lovely, too scenic, too richly endowed y fertile fields, rich rivers, and beautiful coasts and mountains. The Creator agreed and balanced the largess by creating — the French people.

Why is it that French people have been the butt of jokes for centuries — both by foreigners and by the French themselves? What is different about them? What are the French thinking? What are typical reactions of Americans and are those reactions justified? How

---

*Since French thinking  
proceeds from the abstract,  
the real world for them  
is abstract.*

---

can relations between the French people and American people be improved?

In our media-rich, Internet-connected world, cultural differences between peoples and between countries are evident. The danger of talking about these differences lies in assigning reasons why such-and-such is so. Here, we are looking at differences between the French people and the American people; and how the long historic connection of these two peoples can be made better by increasing mutual understanding.

I hope to show that the French think differently from Americans. My first realization of this occurred during a month-long Rotary Professional Exchange in the Loire Valley in 1997. In the nine cities we visited, as I was introduced as a Latin teacher from the U.S., French people hundreds of kilometers apart shocked me with essentially similar responses: "How can that be? America is an Anglo-Saxon country?"

At first, I was side-tracked by our melting pot being described as "Anglo-Saxon." (More on this later.) Eventually, I paid attention to the more significant implication: here I was an example that did not fit into the French preconceived pattern or schema. Worse, for my way of thinking, since most of these people had studied English, they should have known how rich the English language is with Latin derivatives. Nevertheless, they could not believe Latin was taught

in America.

The French are proud of their analytical thinking, which they describe as Cartesian, meaning coming from the great thinker, Descartes, who is remembered for his "I think, therefore I am." French thinking is deductive. The French proceed from principles or theory to illustrations in the real world — from abstract to concrete. To the contrary, Americans are inductive. They start with facts and use those facts to formulate the theory — from concrete to abstract. Facts are the real world for Americans.

Since French thinking proceeds from the abstract, the real world for them is abstract. They love ideas. American business managers working in France often claim that the French are great at coming up with ideas, but then nothing happens — there is no carry through. The fun for the French is playing with the ideas; when they have developed a plan, they are through; they want to start a new project. The French are not thought to be good marketers or sellers of their products, I think, because they believe they have thought up the best possible product and the world will beat a path to their door.

One reason France often causes an uproar at international meetings is that once they have their theories in place it is not easy to throw them over. Whereas, American expediency will often settle for any solution in order to move on. The view of France as intractable at times may come from their thinking process. Likewise, the French hotel clerk or salesperson who says, "It's not possible, Monsieur," may be working from an abstract premise where it is not possible.

Researchers claim that France is a



high-context country, which means the French think about and around the question in an almost circular fashion — they want the most brilliant and elegant solution. On the other hand, American thinking is called low-context: Americans think in a linear manner; they head directly to the solution, they want the most pragmatic and efficient answer. This difference causes the French, who have spent much time thinking out all the details, to view American thought as sloppy and superficial.

The French educational system does not aim at opening up the mind. The French word for education is our word *formation*: the implication is that the French student's mind is shaped from the beginning with abstract principles — and lots of facts that flow from those principles.

In addition, France is described as an affiliative culture, where belonging and personal relationships are most important. In other words, “us” versus “them.” An American anthropologist returned from France and told Raymond Carroll, author of *Cultural Misunderstandings: The French-American Experience* (1987), that the French were distrustful, basing her theory on cutting off their gardens and houses behind walls and keeping their shutters closed. Carroll feels this enclosing is a manifestation of the “us” keeping the “them” out. Furthermore, this concept of the protected home is why so few Americans are invited into French homes. During my Rotary stay in eight French homes, I usually asked near the end of the stay why Americans often felt unwelcome in France but I was so warmly received. The answer was always, “But **you** are our invited guest” — in other words, a part of the “us.”

In an affiliative society, accepting blame is a loss of face and reflects poorly on the group. Some Americans' unhappy interactions with French people may arise from this difference. The French having devoted much thought to what they do and not wanting to bring shame

on their family, friends, or associates, are unwilling to admit they are wrong. American society is quick to cast blame and equates admitting mistakes with honesty. Americans view mistakes positively, as a basis for learning. But Americans do want an apology. The French, at best, can offer only “Ce n'est pas grave” — “It's not serious.” For an American to hold out for more is only going to lead to unpleasantness. In France, the best way to deal with a problem is not to cast blame, but to say, “I think there may be a problem.”

What French people think about something as simple as a smile lies at the heart of many Americans' assumption that the French are unfriendly or haughty. How can there be a problem with a smile?

Polly Platt, in *French or Foe?* (1996), shares this tale of French journalist, Philippe Labro, who, in his book *L'Étudiant Étranger*, tells the following story about a summer workshop at Washington and Lee University in Virginia: He was summoned before the Student Council and chided for not saying “Hi!” as he passed other students on campus. Summoned a second time, he complained, “I've been saying ‘Hi!’ — even to strangers.”

“Yes, but you haven't been smiling.”

Monsieur Labro was encountering two problems: First, in his affiliative country, one does not greet or even acknowledge people on the street who are not part of one's group. Second, the smile. To a French person, according to Platt, a smile can mean any of the following: you are making fun of me; you are hypocritical (that is, you don't even know me); you are stupid, an idiot; or you are flirting. The French do not expect smiles. As an example from Platt, when a survey showed French people then-President Mitterrand smiling, they did not recognize him!

In contrast, Americans see a smile as a friendly way of dealing with all others. For success dealing with the French, one needs to get the smile off

his face and (even harder for Americans) must stop expecting to see a smile on the French face he is encountering! Platt says there may be a twinkle in the French eye, but certainly not a smile on his face. Platt goes on to quote a French mother-in-law who told her new American daughter-in-law, “If you want to be accepted in France, don't drive a flashy car and don't smile for the first ten years.”

Platt reports that time is variable in different cultures. Societies like the American, British, and northern European ones are called monochronic, where people are bullied by their time schedule, where “the religion of punctuality equates lateness with sin.” Most of the rest of the world is called polychronic, where being alive does not necessarily equate with being on time. People come first. As an example, Platt mentions African Americans, American Indians, and Hispanic Americans as polychronics engulfed in a monochronic society. Platt sees the French as partially monochronic when it matters and polychronic when they think it doesn't matter. Context is also important: If they are asking for something, they will be on time.

Louis-Bernard Robitaille in *And God Created the French* (1997) points out “France loves a good dose of philosophing.” The study of philosophy is important in France, and it is on all the crucial school exams. During my Rotary stay, I visited a high school English class. The students asked me what students of the same age studied in America. I drew a daily schedule on the blackboard. Their first question was “Where are the philosophy classes?” The popularity of philosophy does not end with school because Richard Bernstein in *Fragile Glory, a Portrait of France and the French* (1990) notes that philosophy books make the best seller lists.

Carroll feels that money is viewed differently by both cultures. French people often accuse Americans of being interested only in the Almighty Dollar,



of a lack of taste typical of *nouveau riches*, of showing-off. Americans often speak of the French as being cheap and as claiming a disinterest in money — a disinterest the French repeatedly mention. Carroll feels that in America money is the great equalizer that allows Americans of humble means to strike it rich and move up in American society. She goes on to suggest that seduction is the great equalizer in French society. I disagree. I feel that intellectualism is the great French equalizer. The French educational system rewards intellect and hard work regardless of one's background. When French people get together, there seems to be a game of showing what one knows, testing what the other person knows, intellectual one-ups-manship. As Sally Adamson Taylor writes in *Culture Shock!: A Guide to Customs and Etiquette [in] France* (1996), "A person who cares nothing for art is considered uncivilized in France, no matter how rich or successful he may otherwise be."

No discussion of the French can be complete without a mention of their language. For a couple of hundred years, it was **THE** international language. They love their language and strive to protect it from *Franglais*, the addition of English words. The French Academy produces annual lists of imported words to avoid and suggests French circumlocutions to be used instead. There are national discussions and television programs about the language, and the educated strive to use it correctly.

The French try to promote the usage of French in all the countries which were formerly controlled by France, but as Platt shares from an unnamed French magazine, "The battle against the empire of English was lost long ago." The promotion of French is not based solely on nationalistic reasons, as this quote from Theodore Zeldin in *The French* (1983) shows [a prominent French scientist is speaking]: "I need to speak French, because when I speak English, I feel stupid, or like a child, unable to express myself with nuance."

Most sources I consulted recommend that tourists use at least a little French before asking for an English response from the French people, many of whom never studied English or studied it long ago. Platt claims good results have been achieved by the formula "Excusez-moi de vous deranger, Monsieur/Madame..." ("Forgive me for disturbing you, Sir/Madam ..."). Such an introductory use of French assures the French hearer that the speaker is well mannered. French people are also hesitant to use English because they assume English speakers love the correctness of their language as much as French people do.

One reason that Americans often have an unpleasant encounter in France is that they assume, just because France is also a modern country, things will be the same as at home. French banks are not the same, and experiences using them will not be the same. As hard as this is for Americans to believe, in affiliative France the bank clerk's main concern is his group: the other employees, his family and friends. With clerks, with shopkeepers, with ticket agents, all one can do is try to build a relationship over time. Needless to say, tourists on an itinerary have little chance of building a relationship.

France's governmental offices are full of pettifogging *fonctionnaires* who are employed for life. Even the French dread dealing with them. In *Paris to the Moon* (2000), Adam Gopnik's about-to-deliver wife would not be admitted to the hospital until he took a taxi to their apartment and got a missing document. Platt recommends that in dealing with French *fonctionnaires*, all one can do is show respect. If one can seek their advice and turn them from "them" to "us," the ordeal may be lessened.

Americans' assumption that things will be the same in another culture shows a great deal about the lack of American cultural education.

Platt shares some other cultural differences:

American personal space, the empty

bubble we need around us, is much larger than the French need. In lines, Americans often feel assaulted by the closeness of the French. There is no such intended offense.

The French turn on lights to only the minimum extent necessary and set their hall lights on timers to avoid wasting electricity, which is expensive in France. One French *au pair* is quoted as asking her American employer whether she had to leave lights on when she left a room.

In France, a knock is not permission to enter a room or an office, but an announcement that one is entering. As a consequence, many American exchange students have felt their privacy was violated by their French hosts. Also, in French homes, doors are kept closed, especially *les toilettes*.

In the two cultures, conversation is viewed differently. Americans complain about rude French people interrupting the conversation. French people complain about Americans hogging the conversation. What the French want is a lively repartee. Just a few words injected can be a French person's contribution as the discussion keeps rolling. Although none of my sources directly addressed the subject, I feel the French abhor boredom. And so, they want a discussion that is dynamic. Therefore, any monologue is a mistake. What Americans would call interruptions could be funny asides that add to the liveliness of the conversation.

French and Americans view friendship differently. Friends help each other in both cultures. According to Carroll, in France a friend is expected to **offer** to help, but in America a friend is expected to **ask for** help if he needs it.

Gathering information or getting directions is different. A French person prefers to ask another person (affiliative). An American prefers to consult a map (self-sufficient).

*Liberté, fraternité, égalité*, the French motto, offers an explanation for some unique French characteristics.



*Liberté* may reflect the well-known French individualism and explain some of the following freedoms: to allow dogs to mess up the sidewalk; to take dogs into restaurants; to pee anywhere; to smoke anywhere; to drive suicidally without seat belts; to love romantically — like Eloise and Abelard; to break the rules.

*Fraternité* may be reflected in their affiliative nature — their use of “Monsieur” or “Madame” everywhere. *Egalité* may cause the lack of service in stores, etc., yet is ironic in light of rampant prejudice.

There is a moral chasm separating France and America. The French see America as puritanical (and hypocritical). In France, sexual indiscretion between or among consenting adults is an oxymoron. France is the land in which Oscar Wilde ended his days. (Ah, there’s another Torch Club paper).

“Seduction” does not have its sexual connotation in France. Politicians seduce their opposition. The word “Non” may really mean “Persuade me.”

France has a love-hate relationship with the United States. According to the *International Herald Tribune*, the retiring American ambassador in Paris, when charged with the accusation that the French don’t like the Americans, replied, “That’s not completely true.” As Joseph Fenby in *France on the Brink: A Great Civilization Faces the New Century* (1999) writes: “More than most nations, France lives with its traditions — but they are no longer a suitable guide for the twenty-first century.” And so, the French see America in the internationally dominant position France used to hold. They call the world-wide homogenization process “Americanization.”

In France, there are a number of codes and rituals to follow. The French are the people who gave English the words etiquette, protocol, style, and faux pas. The goal of child rearing is to produce a well-bred person who reflects well on his family. Consider the

following from Carroll and also Platt:

“*Bonjour*” must have “*Monsieur*” or “*Madame*” added. This greeting must be given on entering a shop. “*Au revoir*” must have the same titles of respect added on leaving the shop.

Robitaille warns, “The handshake is another nightmare.” Hands must be shaken (in the one-shake French manner — no hearty American pumping) in greeting and in departure with **all** in the group you meet.

Passing through a doorway is a serious matter. Age and position need to be allowed to proceed first. Women and children pass before those without.

At a business luncheon, business must not be discussed until dessert arrives.

A second helping of the cheese course will not be offered and should not be requested. The cheese should be cut to maintain its shape: the tip of the brie does not get cut off.

Being loud in public or in a restaurant is unacceptable.

Standing in line is a moral principal with the British and Americans. In France, it is not a matter of morality.

Unlike in America where waiters are often between other jobs, they are professionals in France. Treat them professionally, ask their advice, and you will receive consummate service. Waiters often feel frustrated that because of a language problem they are unable to offer the professional service they would like.

The French are passionate animal lovers. Walking a dog is often an ice-breaker.

But knowing the codes is not enough. To be respected in France, one must also know the culture and history, art, food, and cuisine. Acceptable dinner table conversation can be based on any of these topics.

We will always remember one particular incident when Americans were treated coldly and almost ignored: In a great Parisian three-star restaurant, the Americans at the next table asked the maitre d’ whether the soup was fresh

or canned!

When the French generalize about “the Anglo-Saxon” world, according to Robitaille, they are including England and its cultural satellite, the United States! That’s right! An American could be offended at not being treated as a separate entity, but worse is the relative low regard the French have for the British people. (Surely a possible future Torch Club paper.)

At least for me, and I hope for you studying another culture has taught me much about my own culture and made me alert to the way I am a part of the problem of intercultural misunderstandings. Writing this paper has better prepared me for meeting French people here and abroad and for traveling not just in France, but as I think of our differences, everywhere. Apologies to the wonderful French people for any generalizations which may not suit a country with 55 million political parties!

## References

Bernstein, Richard. *Fragile Glory: A Portrait of France and the French*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.

Carroll, Raymonde. *Cultural Misunderstandings, The French American Experience*. Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Fenby, Jonathan. *France on the Brink: A Great Civilization Faces the New Century*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1999.

Gopnik, Adam. *Paris to the Moon*. New York: Random House, 2000.

Platt, Polly. *French or Foe?* Cincinnati, Ohio: C.J. Krehbiel Co. 1996.

Robitaille, Louis-Bernard. *And God Created the French*. Montreal: Robert Davies Multimedia Publishing, 1997.

Taylor, Sally Adamson. *Cultural Shock! A Guide to Customs and Etiquette [in] France*. Portland, Oregon: Grsaphic Arts Center Publishing Co. 1996.

Zeldin, Theodore. *The French*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.