A CASE FOR USING CASES IN THE TEACHING CULTURAL COMPETENCE: DEALING WITH FRENCH VERSUS AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES

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Abstract

This paper proposes a course design to enhance one's knowledge of French culture in the context of a juxtaposition that compares how the French and Americans are similar and different in how they interpret principles associated with the democratic ideal and how those principles are applied in the political and social order. The focus of the word culture is on the values and codes of behavior that frame a mindset and not on the artifacts that are often associated with the word culture – works of literature and the fine arts. A case method approach confronts students with practical cultural dilemmas in which French and American values can be in conflict with one another. The student is urged to seek solutions and answers through a process of dialogue and negotiation that recognizes cultural values and practices as having validity within the context of the culture to which they belong and not as moral issues that are right or wrong in a transcendent sense.

KEY WORDS: cultural competence, culture with a capital or small “c”, empathy, discourse, negotiation, home culture versus target culture, dialogic and case studies approach, republicanism, exceptionalism, dirigisme, rayonnement, relèvement.

INTRODUCTION

The tragedy of September 11, 2001 is a constant reminder among other things that the study of other cultures is highly relevant and important. The rapid speed of technology may keep changing the external world in which we live; but the universe that lives within each of us through the cultural values we cling to develops differently and does not move at the same pace. At a practical level, there are enormous benefits to be reaped from cultural competence. France, as a major player in the world economy, important partner in the European community and international leader in areas like agriculture, telecommunications, fashion and pharmaceuticals, is one good example. The aim of this paper is to propose a course design called “France and the United States: Two Perspectives on Democracy and Freedom in the 21st Century”. Instruction is in English so that the course will be accessible to students who have no knowledge of the French language.

If teaching someone a second language presents difficulties, developing skill in cultural competence has its own set of challenges. The two scenarios are similar in that the learner must shift his or her mind from a context and perspective that have become so familiar and comfortable that they are difficult to reject or even overcome. At the same time, assessing the acquisition of skill in each arena is quite distinct. While we may have effective tools and strategies for testing one’s ability to speak, understand, read or write another language, measuring the acquisition of cultural knowledge is far more complex and difficult. Moreover, learning a second language does not automatically guarantee that one will accept a
culture that uses it. Even those who perform well with acquisition of another language may still continue to harbor negative stereotypes of its speakers. Many educators believe that the knowledge of a culture is not easily separable from that of its language because the two are so closely intertwined. Understandably, the absence of linguistic knowledge is a shortcoming; yet, that should not mean that one cannot achieve a solid understanding of another culture to some degree without knowing its language.

Few educators are likely to question the value of knowing another culture; but what kind of knowledge constitutes cultural competence, how to assess it and insure that it will be a lasting experience for the learner are questions that are apt to spark some lively debate. For decades, the two general approaches to the study of culture have been the humanistic model that revolves around a content-based study cultural products a people has produced (music, painting, literature, architecture, etc.). The assemblage of these artifacts is usually called “culture with a capital C” as opposed to “culture with a small c” which is a study of the collective mindset, values and perspectives that have a direct impact on opinion and conduct. These approaches cannot always be pigeonholed: for example, a culture that places a high value on intellectual achievement, an aspect of “small c”, is probably more likely to produce the artists, philosophers and writers who will create the very items that will be listed under “capital C”. Furthermore, when we speak of cultural competence, we are talking about blending both approaches. One should be familiar with the products, but should also know the process that helped bring them into existence. In brief, finding a way to teach culture effectively is a daunting task in and of itself and it becomes all the more challenging in the face of the increased pressure that the momentum toward globalization and the 21st century place upon us. Yet, we cannot escape facing that challenge.

The task is not an easy one because of the paradoxes and anomalies of human nature. Conjecture and the formation of opinion play a major role in the human thought process. Many persons, including those who are well educated, have a proclivity to harbor stereotypes about others that often combine myth with reality and that tend to remain fixed, embedded and difficult to eradicate, on the one hand, or that may be radically altered and even disappear because of a positive experience, on the other. Hence, taking a course to learn another culture does not always automatically produce the results one desires. In fact, some foreign language educators believe that placing a constant emphasis on cultural differences can create an adversarial atmosphere that evokes a “us versus them” attitude that often serves to reinforce or generate hostility toward the target culture. The situation can certainly arise if the learner refuses to approach the subject with an open mind and the unveiled truth is that some, for whatever reasons they may have, will not view a foreign culture objectively. In the final analysis, cultural competence cannot come about unless learners display a willingness to allow the perspectives, values and modes of behavior of another culture to be scrutinized and assessed objectively without applying stereotypes. Therefore, how objective we are depends on our ability to suspend customary judgment by assessing another culture on its own terms and not our own.

**SOME PAST RESEARCH ON CULTURAL COMPETENCE**

The acquisition of competence in language and cultural have been seen as being closely intertwined by a number of researchers over the past few decades. In their book on the teaching of French culture, Ross Steele and Andrew Suozzo examine the theories of several scholars. Gail Robinson is concerned with empathy as a point of departure. Studying a language does not in itself create a positive attitude toward the culture. The personal involvement of the students and instructor is essential; a central part of her theory is that another culture is not acquired by compartmentalizing it separately from one’s own. Instead, a person’s home culture is in constant interaction with the one being acquired. Empathy is necessary from the incipient stage because, without it, presentations of cultural differences will be self-defeating in that they will simply reinforce pre-existing negative stereotypes. It is better to focus on similarities to counteract that natural tendency. Claire Kramsch, like Robinson, sees the teaching of language and culture as linked; learning culture is not a separate skill reading or speaking. She fosters the teaching of “discourse” instead of “grammar” because it embraces the cultural dimension of language inasmuch as discourse captures contextual and individual variations. Through discourse, students learn to interpret and recreate their home culture and to interpret manifestations of the target culture through negotiation with those of the home culture rather than a docile acceptance of those manifestations. Negotiation is important because culture is evasive in that its meanings are not stable. Therefore,
negotiation and working with a case-oriented methodology where one is constantly in the process of comparison, interpretation and evaluation of the elements of one’s own culture along with those of the target culture are of paramount importance. With a case method, the learner strives to make compromises that will promote better understanding of both the commonalities and differences between the two cultures. Michael Byram also argues for the inseparability of language and culture and, like Robinson, speaks of empathy, a quality that places the learner in an active mode as opposed to tolerance which is more a passive willingness to accept those who differ from us. Like Kramsch, he stresses the role of negotiation which helps the student to deal with the differences between the home and target cultures, an activity that involves empathetic engagement. The goal is not simple replication of the target culture but an assimilation that will allow the student to become a mediator between the two cultures. Seemingly, in Byram’s view this is a delicate operation because overemphasizing differences creates an adversarial dichotomy that, in turn, can lead to feelings of superiority and condescension – perhaps even outright rejection of the target culture. Key elements of the strategy are that one should not expect students to accept everything they learn about the target culture and that, in the process of understanding another culture, they achieve a clearer understanding of their own. Thus, the home and target cultures are inextricably linked and this union of the two seemingly generates the process of negotiation.

A more recent study by Todd W. Reeser appeared in 2003 in the French Review, the journal of the American Association of Teachers of French; it follows the same line of thinking described above in that the learner engages in dialogue simultaneously with the home culture and the target one. According to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) guidelines, the prime goal of studying culture is to: “examine relations [italics added] between two sets of cultural elements – how a culture sees the world in the abstract . . . and the tangible and intangible aspects of a culture produced by (and in turn producing) that worldview” (p. 772). While approaches to teaching culture may differ, what is of major importance is the role dialogue plays because it requires students to focus attention on relations between two items, for example, an abstract perception and how that perception is played out in practice. As an example, in their book on French culture, Wylie and Brière discuss the opposing views of French and Americans on human nature. French children learn from an early age that human nature is paradoxical: it can be civilized or savage because human beings are capable of the best or the worst in their behavior. Every French child knows the fable of the fox and the crow by La Fontaine, a famous writer from the 17th century. One day a fox is walking through the woods looking for food when he suddenly spots a crow on a high branch of a tree with a piece of cheese in its beak. Since it is too high for the fox to jump and reach it, he begins to flatter the crow’s beautiful singing voice. The gullible bird falls for the trick, begins to sing and loses the cheese when it becomes the victim of its own pride as the clever fox runs off with the booty. The obvious lesson is that one must always be on one’s guard for crafty people with selfish motives. As a rule, Americans do not hold such a dualistic view because they tend to see good and evil as separate entities that do not overlap and are, therefore, usually more optimistic. They are disturbed if they do not see good conquer evil in the end, an idea that has been one of the staples of the American movie. The French tend more to see good and evil as mixed, not clearly distinguishable and that can coexist in the same person or act.

Students need training in the active interpretation of culture through a dialogic approach and teachers need to focus not just on presenting cultural data but also on an active interpretation on the student’s part. The practical dilemma is how do the students interpret and analyze a target culture on its own terms if they don’t understand it to begin with and how do they avoid using the perspectives of the home culture to make these judgments? Reese believes this can be achieved through case studies done by the student with instructor guidance (pp. 774-76). That model will be the point of departure for the course this paper proposes.

“FRANCE AND THE UNITED STATES: TWO PERSPECTIVES ON DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM IN THE 21ST CENTURY”

REQUIRED READING MATERIAL

The reading material provides the perspectives that are endemic to the target culture, a detailed description of the products and practices that evolve from them and an analysis of the social, political,
and economic institutions that are in place and have become a part of day to day life for the French population. There are two segments. The first has been adapted from two main sources: Wylie, Laurence and Brière, Jean-François, *Les Français*, third edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001) and Edmiston, William F. and Duménil, Annie, *La France contemporaine*, third edition (Boston: Thomson Heine, 2005). This material is arranged under five topics that are presented on line in Blackboard. The length of each assignment is about 12 pages. The second component is made up of selections from Howarth, David and Varouxakis, Georgios, *Contemporary France. An Introduction to French Politics and Society* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), a text the students must secure. These readings intersect with those from the first source, but present a detailed analysis and commentary by authors who are political scientists. Students are assessed differently for each group of readings. For the five topics in the on line readings, a total of four 700-750 word papers that aim to solve a problem or case is required over the course of the semester at the rate of one paper approximately every three to four weeks. The readings from the other text are tested in the final exam and can be approached a bit later in the semester – the third or fourth week – after the student has gained some familiarity with the subject from the on line readings.

**CONTENT OF THE FIVE TOPICS POSTED IN BLACKBOARD**

[approximately 60 pages]

**Topic 1: Values and Perspectives of the Individual**

- Differences between French and Americans: Stereotypes, French Perspectives on Space, Time and Human Nature
- French Perspectives on Space
- French Perspectives on Time
- French Perspectives on Human Nature
- Physical Aspects: The Human Body

The aim is to show that, despite a number of similarities between the two cultures, both Americans and French, harbor stereotypes of each other that can be a mixture of fact and fiction or that grossly oversimplify complex matters. One example is how the French value space differently from Americans. Homes are designed differently from their American counterparts and the outdoor space of parks and cafes forms an integral part of social life. The French are less adventurous than Americans in the exploration of unknown space; they prefer to be able to relate more directly to the space they find themselves in. An important difference with respect to time is that the French pay a great deal of attention to the past for the simple reason that they are surrounded by buildings and monuments that constantly recapture it. The subject of human nature is a complex one. While Americans tend to give people the benefit of the doubt, the French tend to be more circumspect and cautious in their dealings. Their view of human nature is that it is dualistic and paradoxical; it contains both good and evil and the separation between the two is not always clear and distinct. This thinking reflects the views of the 17th century philosopher Pascal who stressed that human nature is capable of both greatness and monstrosity. Bodily movements of the French tend to be rigid and formal compared to the relaxed and casual manner of Americans. For the French, gestures and physical movements play an important role in conversation. In general, there are fewer inhibitions regarding nudity compared to American culture.

**Topic 2: The Individual and Society**

- Marriage, Family, Social Changes
- Rearing Children
- Aspects of Social Life: Privacy and Individualism
- Demography and Government
- The French Family in Crisis
- Population
Life in France in 1950 was similar to what it was like in 1880, but much has changed since 1960. Family life has had two important characteristics that still prevail despite some recent modifications: the preservation of stability from generation to generation and an emphasis on the interest of the group as a whole rather than that of the individuals who make it up. The secularization introduced by the Revolution has changed family life. In earlier times, marriage was primarily a religious affair and the authority and influence of the Church were widespread and profound. Today, French law requires only a civil marriage ceremony and makes a religious one optional. Rearing children has always been a key element in family life. The French family is an intimate circle that does not have a broad network of friendships and associations Americans are used to and remains as a chief source of identity, confidence and protection from the dangers of the outside world.. Attitudes in the raising of children are less rigid than they used to be in the sense that the interests of the group and the individual go hand in hand; however, the notion that the former supersedes the latter has not disappeared. The aim in rearing children is to teach them to become responsible adults and citizens and to preserve their individualism. Americans may see French children as miniature adults. Unlike Americans, the French do not allow children to learn on their own through self-discovery or a process of trial and error. French parents exercise authority and the power of persuasion while Americans tend to make the child a partner in the process of upbringing. For Americans, how one chooses to raise a child is a personal affair. Americans do not feel the same responsibility to society as the French. The French also make a sharper distinction between one’s public and private life than Americans and do not expose their inner selves as readily. They are much more reserved with people they do not know and may strike Americans as cold and unfriendly. The French concept of friendship is more formal and demanding than the American definition. Matters that affect family and population like the birth rate are of grave concern to the government. Americans, with so much open land at their disposal, worry less about such matters. In recent years, family life has changed immensely with an increase in divorce rates, single parent and blended families and couples living in a free union without marrying. The population has shifted from mainly rural to mainly urban since the Industrial Revolution. Unlike some other countries, France does not have regions that are unpopulated or over populated, although a very high percentage of the population lives in the region of Paris, the capital.

**Topic 3: The Individual and the State**

- Historical Background: Origins to the Fifth Republic
- Components of the State: The National Assembly, Senate, President of the Republic, Prime Minister, Constitutional Council
- The Left and the Right: French Political Parties
- Government, Administration and Politics
- The Meaning of “Etat”
- Paris
- Law, Justice, Police
- Immigration

This reading presents an overview of pre-modern France from its origins up to the Revolution (1789) and post-modern France from the First Republic (1792-99) up to the current Fifth Republic created by Charles de Gaulle in 1958. Students learn the powers and duties of the five units or offices that make up the Fifth Republic. They also read about a number of other key points that belong to the political and social system and are listed above in bullet form. Differences between French and American concepts and implementation of these areas are highlighted and discussed.

**Topic 4: Social Protection for the French Citizen**

- The Health Care System
- Family Benefits and Allocations
- Senior Citizens and Retirees
- Education
This section presents a history of social protection from its origins at the end of the 19th century and the details of coverage for sickness, maternity, accidents at work, disability and death. Included is an examination of various types of family allocations for children, pregnant women, senior citizens and retirees. The system of cost sharing by employee, employer and the State is described. Among the ideas covered in education and the French school system are: the creation of free public education after the Revolution and the role of church schools before it; important laws that affected education during the 19th century: the Guizot law, the Falloux law and the Ferry laws; the separation of Church and State in 1905 and the issue of support for private schools; the Debré law of 1959, the Savary proposal of 1984 and its consequences; the organization of schools in France and the importance of centralization; the nature of instruction from early childhood to the baccalauréat; education in the university and grandes écoles; a contrastive analysis of French and American education; the Haby law of 1975; academic demands on students, competition, the teaching profession, student life, problems related to elitism, egalitarianism and the needs of minorities in education.

**Topic 5: Economy, Work, Leisure and Religion**

- Historical Background on the Industrial Revolution
- Labor Unions and Differences in French and American Concepts
- Capitalism and the Policy of Dirigisme in France
- France and the European Union
- Leisure and Vacation
- Religions in France
- Differences between France and America

Basic data and past trends related to work and the economy are elaborated from the Industrial Revolution to the present day. Important labor laws dating from the 19th and the 20th centuries such as the Waldeck-Rousseau law (1884) and the Auroux laws (1982) are described. There is an overview of the effect of the moral tradition on the economy and French perspectives on capitalism and competition including an analysis of the interventionist strategy called dirigisme; the changes after World War I and the Thirty Glorious Years (1945 to 1975); France and the European Union; French views and practices with respect to leisure time and vacation. The major religions of France: Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, Judaism and the development of anti-Semitism particularly from the time of the Dreyfus affair in the late 19th century are studied along with differences between France and America related to religion.

**ASSIGNED READINGS FROM HOWARTH, DAVID AND VAROUXAKIS, GEORGIOS, CONTEMPORARY FRANCE. AN INTRODUCTION TO FRENCH POLITICS AND SOCIETY**

[approximately 80 to 90 pages]

**Chapter 1:** Continuity and Change: The Ever-Lasting Past, The French and their past, French Republicanism


**Chapter 3:** The Surprisingly Stable Fifth Republic: De Gaulle, Political Conditions of Stability, The Enarques: The French Elite
Chapter 4: Political Forces and Representation, Political Parties, Representation Issues, Reforms of 1999, Under-representation of Minorities


Chapter 6: Intellectual Life: The Emergence and Roles of the *Intelectuels*, 1945-68: The *intellectuel engagé* and the *compagnon de route*, Marxism and Sovietophilia, Dissenting Voices and Leading Figures among the Intellectuals: Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Raymond Aron, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, the Intellectuals and the Media

Chapter 7: Education, Youth and Popular Culture, Universities, *Grandes Écoles*, Current Attitudes of French Youth, Developments in Pop Culture, Yamakasi

Chapter 8: French Economic and Social Policy in an Era of Growing European and International Constraints, *Dirigisme*, Social Security under Pressure

THE ROLE OF THE CASE METHOD

Reeser supports the notion of using case studies because it provides a way of allowing the students to do a dialogic analysis and interpretation of the target culture instead of having it done for them (p. 775). However, as a point of departure, they need to learn some of the perspectives of the target culture before they can begin that process. That need would be met by the online readings. Ideally, Reeser feels that a strategy should be developed for the students to arrive at cultural perspectives on their own by assembling what he calls a “cultural corpus” – for example, a collection of authentic documents – but this is a problem because the students “lack models of cultural theorizing [and] need to be shown how to think about and articulate perspectives of a culture before they can begin to evaluate the relationship between practices/products and perspectives (p.776)”. For example, using a work like Raymonde Carroll’s *Evidences invisibles* can serve as a starting point for teaching the French perspective on child rearing and understanding why French children look like miniature adults when viewed through the lens of the American perspective. Students can then take case studies related to child-rearing, for example, the opening chapter of Saint-Exupéry’s *Le Petit Prince* which presents adult/child differences, and use them to test Carroll’s theories against the text and to show in what ways her perspectives are and are not valid because a dialogue between a perspective and a product implies that there may be links or disjunctions (p. 777). At the same time, students learn that cultural perspectives are in themselves so complex and contradictory that there are always exceptions to what appears to be the general rule. In other words, when a given perspective is placed next to a product or practice, it may show consistency or inconsistency between the two (see p. 778). The value and goal of the dialogic methodology is that students are constantly involved, in an active way, in applying negotiation and compromise in the process of learning a target culture.

ASSORTED SAMPLE APPLICATIONS

The case method described above will take concrete form in the four papers required in conjunction with the five topics presented in the online readings. This task-based activity will give the student an opportunity to take the information learned in the assigned readings from the five topics and demonstrate an understanding of French versus American perspectives and the products and practices they generate. A key objective is to direct the student toward seeking compromise and accept the fact that understanding cultural differences is not a matter of choosing a right or wrong way but learning to recognize what is different from the home culture and accept it on its own terms. Hence, empathy and negotiation will come into play. This activity should be given considerable weight in the assessment
process, because of its importance in developing cultural competence, and should probably count for at least half of the final grade. The remaining 50% can be assigned to the final exam and class participation.

- **Write a contrastive case study that analyzes the similarities and differences between the Martin family in New York and the Moreau family in Paris.** Give four or five specific examples of how American and French perspectives on space, time, human nature and physicality have direct impacts on how the members of each family think and behave. Give three concrete examples of how each family would experience obstacles, difficulties and cultural clashes if it were required to make a move to New York or Paris and adjust to a new set of cultural practices. What adjustments would each person have to make in differences regarding, the privacy of home life, the workplace, socializing with others and performing one’s daily routine?

- **French and American attitudes and practices on childrearing have significant differences.** Two prominent French female thinkers have written recently on this subject. In her book called *Evidences invisibles*, the sociologist Raymonde Carroll stresses that raising children is a group effort that has consequences for society as a whole; it reflects the collective solidarity. For Americans, child rearing is the personal business of the parents. Americans may also come away with the impression that French children act more like miniature adults than children. On the other hand, the French child psychologist Françoise Dalto follows a model that is closer to the American method of childrearing, one that shows greater respect for the child’s status and existence on its own terms as a child. Construct two sets of persuasive arguments that give compelling reasons to defend the merits of each method and appreciate each as a manifestation of the culture in which it is found. The point is not to show that one model is preferable or superior to the other, but that each has merits within the framework of its culture.

- **Describe four practices from the American and French systems of government that show how both support democratic ideals like freedom, tolerance, respect for the individual and the public welfare, the solidarity of the community, the practice of power and majority rule in different ways.** In considering how the two countries practice law and administer justice, what are the merits and disadvantages of each system? For example, is the Anglo-Saxon system of precedent better than the Roman system of moral abstracts? Do you think judgment by one’s peers in the form of a jury that must agree unanimously is preferable to the French system that relies on a group of professional magistrates and jurors in which only a majority of eight is needed to reach a verdict?

- **Construct a case that gives four or five persuasive arguments to show that while the educational systems of France and America are based on different perspectives and practices, one is not necessarily superior to the other and each has its own merits and advantages.** Consider the flaws of each system inasmuch as it claims to foster equality and promote egalitarianism by giving equal opportunity to all but, at the same time, often ends up by promoting elitism. In America, the best schools are often inaccessible to those who cannot afford them. The French system is also besieged by the same problem in that a small number of elite have the lion’s share of success while a large number of youngsters from working class and immigrant families are underserved by the system. Consider as well the advantages and pitfalls of the French system, which is centralized and uniform versus the American model, which is under local control and produces highs and lows in academic quality from place to place.

- **The United States and France practice capitalism and free market principles, but each country does it differently.** As with the French family which places the interest of the group above that of any individual member, French government gives a high priority to the general welfare. While American capitalism tends to follow a laissez-faire policy, the French favor an interventionist approach called *dirigisme*. The government is expected to take a paternalistic attitude toward its citizens and the population expects the government to follow that model. That is why France has a “cradle to grave” system of benefits. Study the process whereby each of these philosophies comes about and construct a set of persuasive arguments to justify each.

**CONCLUSION**

**CONFRONTING THE CONTRADICTIONS OF FRENCH CULTURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

To be sure, since every culture is unique, learning and accepting it presents a challenge to anyone from a different culture. In the case of France, the process is rather complex because of factors that have
been in play for a couple of centuries. First is the phenomenon called "l'exception française" (the French exception), the notion that France is unique, both within the framework of Western European countries and when compared to Anglo-American civilization. There is also the question of multiculturalism which is not viewed by the French in the same way as by Americans. The three words that form the motto of the French Revolution: “liberté, égalité, fraternité”, often carry connotations that differ from the American concept.

While the system may be sympathetic to the benefits of living in a diverse multicultural society, they do not advance the interests of a particular group through affirmative action, a practice they would consider dangerous and threatening to their idea of “égalité”. All French citizens are considered equal before the law and no particular group is entitled to special privileges. The notion is founded on the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen from 1789, a text that is considered sacred. This is one of the reasons why the French feminist movement has not had the same success as its American counterpart. Yet, ironically, this passion for equality can also produce results that are the opposite; an egregious example is the elitism produced in the sector of education by the “grandes écoles”.

While the system is theoretically based on the idea of equal opportunity for all, in practice, it ends up favoring students who come from the most privileged families because they perform better on the rigorous competitive exams used to select candidates for these prestigious schools.

In an article in the work edited by Kidd and Reynolds, Brian Jenkins analyzes some of the complexities of the French political culture. The notion of French exceptionalism has deep roots: “The idea that France is somehow unique is deeply embedded in the nation’s self-image. . . . It reflects the conviction that France has an exemplary, universal role as a civilizing force, that its inspirations are those of humanity at large” (p. 112). While Americans are likely to see that attitude as an example of the arrogance they frequently assign to the French as a stereotype, paradoxically, exceptionalism is also a part of the American mystique. Even if throughout its history America has acted more out of pragmatism than ideology, it has sent a message throughout the world that it serves as a beacon and example of democracy, justice and freedom. To be sure, both French and Americans can find justification to reject the other’s claim to exceptionalism. This requires the examination of the validity of a comparative approach in teaching cultural competence out of fear that it may, in fact, produce the results that are to be avoided by reinforcing pre-existing prejudices. Clearly, the answer is achieving an understanding of the historical evolution of the concept for each of the two cultures. If French and American concepts on equality and republicanism are different, it is because the forces instrumental in producing them throughout history were not similar. The political history of 19th century France was a turbulent one with the forces that favored republic, monarchy and empire in fierce competition and producing different political systems as the century progressed. During the same period America was torn by civil war, but the democratic political system survived and remained in place.

Two other points made by Jenkins are that scholars who study other cultures are drawn more to what is distinctive or unusual rather than commonalities between societies. Secondly, the method of analysis may be different. The French who study their own country tend to use a domestic frame of reference rather than a comparative one. That is to say, they seek explanations from within and, in so doing, reinforce the idea that France is indeed exceptional and must therefore be judged on its own terms and in the light of its own history (p. 113). If one looks at the French practice of state intervention (dirigisme) as an example, one discovers that in its genesis the concept has not just been supported by the left. In fact, the notion of the heroic State has been endorsed by conservative Gaullists. Yet, whether or not, this system enhances democracy or stifles it has been a matter of debate. Some scholars have argued that a centralized and meddlesome State can undermine democracy, for example, by discouraging diversity and pluralism and by creating a culture of dependence on the State (pp. 115-116).

In another article in the work by Kidd and Reynolds, James Munro cites the humorist Pierre Daninos who indicates that France has satisfied its need for greatness in two ways. The first is rayonnement, the desire to spread France’s influence around the world, which he personifies as the “côté Napoléon” of the national personality. The second is relèvement, finding the strength and resourcefulness to fight one’s enemies, which he calls “côté Jeanne d’Arc”. Rayonnement is based on the Jacobin model of centralization that everything radiates outward from a focal point. It embodies De Gaulle’s notion of the country’s grandeur and mission civilatrice, the pride that stimulates it to spread its ideals for the betterment of humanity as a whole. Relèvement is the demonstration of courage, originality and diversity that satisfies the need for grandeur in a different way. While the spontaneity of Joan of Arc is one way to
characterize it, a more modern example would be the résistance against the Nazi occupation during World War II. These two forces require a delicate balance because they have the potential to inflate the national ego more than fulfill aims that are allegedly lofty and altruistic.

As stated previously, one cannot also escape the fact that a culture is inextricably linked to its language and these connections are of special importance for the French. Munro points out that France has a linguistic history of being caught between unity and fragmentation. One of the country’s most important cultural icons, the Académie française, was founded in 1635, more than a century and a half before the Revolution, to standardize the language. At the time of the Revolution, what was to become the standard French is known today was français, the dialect of the Ile-de-France region, which was spoken by a minority and was in competition with a number of other languages. In the face of so many dialects and other European languages like Occitan, Breton, Basque, Alsatian, Corsican and Catalan in use, the Revolution saw this diversity as a threat to republicanism and sought to make the standard language an emblem of national identity and pride (see pp.130-35). This synergy between the Napoleonic reflex for standardization and control and the Jeanne d’Arc reflex that recognizes and promotes pluralism and diversity is still alive today and takes many forms.10

Finally, as much as any culture is embedded in traditions it cherishes, it cannot avoid change. France will have to consider how cultural icons like dirigisme and rayonnement and will be played out in decades to come in the face of demands from the European Monetary Union (EMU), globalization and what its role will be on the both the European and international stage11.

The tradition of dirigisme, as one example, is deeply entrenched in the mindset of the French people, reaching back to earlier centuries when the monarchy and Church saw themselves as having a paternalistic obligation to care for the citizens. The proclivity for this philosophy remains strong because the belief is that the market can be too harsh on society: “Dirigisme insists on the need for active state intervention in the economy, labeled volontarisme, in order to protect citizens. Since the Second World War French dirigisme has found intellectual sustenance in Keynesianism, which advocates that the market plays a central role in the economy but, as the market is unable to guarantee full employment, the state must intervene in order to create demand and stimulate the economy” (Howarth and Varouxakis, Chapter 8, p. 159). The concept has influenced a wide spectrum of political opinion and much of the French public sees it as an obligation of the government (pp. 160-161). Lionel Jospin and his Socialist led government promoted a modification of the interventionist philosophy in the late 1990s: “Jospin’s rallying cry, the core motif of his ‘modern socialism’, was ‘modernizing’ interventionism. As applied to domestic employment and social policies it meant ‘yes to the market economy but no to the market society’ . . . [this] came principally in the guise of active intervention to create jobs and, in particular, for young people” (p. 175). At the same time, the strain that the French welfare state has placed on the economy is a problem that continues to grow (see pp. 179-181). Adapting itself to the external need for integration with the European community and the rest of the world - while maintaining its historical cleavage to a sense of grandeur - is another major challenge for the country’s future (see Chapter 9, pp. 188-208). France must continue to reinvent itself in the face of current needs and, simultaneously, preserve its cultural traditions from the past. The task is difficult, daunting and replete with paradox. Reverence for the past can undermine the need to modernize: “France sees (correctly, according to many) that the way the world is going is not her way. American-English language, American (light, mass) culture, American technology, American products and American weapons are overwhelming the planet. France, which was a great global power for centuries, cannot but feel some resentment at its diminished importance[,]”12 In an article entitled “Forget Who’ll Win in France. Change is a Loser” that appeared in the New York Times on May 6, 2007, Craig S. Smith aptly stated: “The French flirt with the idea of change, but few in the mainstream want to risk losing France’s “exceptionalism” – that warm bed of traditions and entitlements that lets so many enjoy the benefits of living here. And the benefits are great. Listen to the conversation with the waiter at the table next to you in a Parisian restaurant at lunchtime and more often than not it will involve a nuanced discussion of what is best to eat and just which wine to drink. Later, the diners will often pay with meal vouchers from their employer. . . . Second, there is something about the French that resists a change, even in times of trouble. Historians famously trace it to the Enlightenment, when France developed a republican model based on the collective will. By contrast, republican models in Britain and America stressed the primacy of economics and individualism – what the French still, with a shudder, called liberalism”.

ENDNOTES


10. See Munro pp. 135-38. A relevant example is verlan which has become emblematic of the Maghreb (North African) community in France. One reverses the order of syllables in a word so that *tomber* becomes *béton*. In monosyllables, consonants are reversed and connected with the sound “eu” so that *femme* becomes *meuf*. The very popular word *beur* applies to children born in France whose parents are North African immigrants. It is the *verlanization* of *arabe*. The word *verlan* itself is a reversal of *l’envers*.


REFERENCES


