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French Studies: *Plus de souvenirs que d'avenir?*

by Ronald W. Tobin

Since France and the French language are demonstrably prominent in a variety of significant global initiatives, I believe that there is widespread agreement about the important role that France continues to play in the world. It brings strengths to international affairs and serves as a counterpoise to what Claude Hagège, in his recent book *Contre la pensée unique*, sees as the unhealthy predominance of English and its commercial values. Finally, and most significant to North-American francophones and francophiles, a strong program of French studies contributes to our linguistic, cultural, and literary enlightenment.

Consequently, unless all of us decide to chant a professional *dies irae*—that the study of French “a plus de souvenirs que d’avenir,”—we should strategize our efforts, supported by all the tools that the American Association of Teachers of French has put at our disposal, and with the collaboration of hopefully better funded and more aggressive Services culturels, to positively effect the perception of France and the French across the United States. For, it seems to me, a number of myths about France have been allowed to float relatively freely in the larger American culture, challenged only occasionally and without lasting impact. If successful, we can effect a modest culture shift that will be beneficial to the global understanding of our compatriots and will—since virtue is rarely its own reward—allow us to recruit more students into the study of French in particular

and foreign language in general. I will begin by briefly situating my multi-pronged proposal within the context of changes in American higher education over the past fifty years.

The traditional imperatives of education in the United States have always been three: access, quality, and cost. Right now, as everyone knows, cost is driving the others and undermining both access (and the need for a diverse student population) and quality, which, in educational circles, is usually defined as the degree of excellence of a program or performance.

Clearly, our goals have changed and have encountered major obstacles. It used to be that every institution of higher learning prided itself on its first priority being the “drive for excellence.” Then, about thirty years ago, we became aware of the quality of diversity and sought to improve that aspect of education. Previous to the 1980s, cost was not a threat to public higher education since fees at the University of California, for example, were minimal.¹ Student financial aid was generous and few were denied access to a quality education for monetary reasons. The specializations that students pursued were spread across all the disciplines but were heaviest in the Humanities, dominated by large departments of English, History, and French, which was evidently the most popular second language taught across the country.

Several decades later the scene has changed dramatically owing largely to the new attitude toward higher education; that is, the social compact has been broken. Where once the citizenry supported education as a social benefit to the community, it now more often views a college education as a private investment. This has contributed to two notable consequences: funding for public education has plummeted and student majors and career

choices have shifted to apparently more profitable pursuits, like business, science, and engineering.

Those of us in French and francophone studies may well think of ourselves at this point as being in the same position as the Catholic Church in the debate over *Le Tartuffe*. Do we yield to the world and renounce our traditions? Or do we maintain our practices and hope that the world will find them sufficiently attractive and come to us? Can we be, as the Jesuit motto goes, in the world but not of the world? The answer, I believe, is that we need not choose. Rather, we ought to review a number of our practices and look to improve them so that we are more attractive while still maintaining high standards. In so doing, we will highlight French as a quality liberal arts degree that opens doors to international careers, professions that require careful writing (like the law), those whose practitioners might need to operate in foreign countries (e.g., medicine), and all forms of the arts.

The Image Question

Let me start by making a point about access, which depends, in this instance, upon image. France is still largely viewed in the United States as the country of cuisine and couture, and not as the home of advanced technology in bioscience, extraordinary engineering feats in transportation, more high speed domestic computing per capita than any country, and more Nobel Prizes for Literature than any other nation. After all, the *geste fondateur* of French culture was the creation of the Académie française.

Over the centuries France has taught us that thought is not collective. However, action is. While I am aware that French sections have reached out to other departments whose majors might be interested in doing a double major or a minor in French, I am

proposing that we exchange information on successful practices, and collaborate on a campaign that would explode stereotypes and would be aimed first at the secondary level and then at students beginning the study of French in college. In so doing, we can solicit even more interest in studying in France and francophone countries and, as a significant consequence, have our future leaders confront the *reality* of the countries. This campaign could be pursued on the national level by coordinating the efforts of the AATF and the Services culturels, which has created a Task Force for the promotion of French in the United States. On a local level, members of the professorial staff at colleges and universities could be asked to make brief presentations in the sections of beginning and intermediate language on the values of studying French and also by going into the local secondary schools to speak on why French matters.²

School Visit

In March 2012 I undertook the first of what I intend to be a series of “pastoral visits” into local high schools by giving a presentation on “Why Study French?” I first showed the DVD produced by the AATF on “Le Français m’ouvre le monde.” Afterwards, in a Power Point mode, I expanded on most of the DVD’s topics from History to Sports, leaving the lion’s share of my time for Science and Technology because few realize that French science dominates the European continent. Among the topics I covered were the following:

—France is a leader in medicine, especially in immunology, AIDs, and Alzheimer’s research; Jules Hoffmann won the Nobel Prize for medicine in 2011; Médecins sans frontières was founded in Paris in 1971

—the most sophisticated pure mathematicians in the world are to be found in French universities

—one of the major centers for nanotechnology research is the Minatec Center in Grenoble, a noteworthy public-private partnership

—France is preeminent in optoelectronics for illuminating the generation, conduct, and detection of light

—French engineering has produced highly visible inventions, like the Chunnel, the Airbus, the TGV trains, the Viaduct of Millau, and remarkable aerospace innovations like the Ariane rocket

—The French invented the smart card and, proportionate to the population, more French homes are connected by high-speed computing than those of any other country

—Two of the five leading developers of videogames are French firms (Activision Blizzard and Ubisoft)

—French forests are among the most environmentally protected on the planet owing to high technical competence and a long-term strategy.

I ended my presentation by urging the students to study French for a career in International Relations, as NGOs, or at the United Nations. I reminded them of the existence of the French language as a diplomatic, cultural, and literary tool on all 5 continents, and that, if you already speak another language other than English—like Spanish—, it will be easier for you to learn French.

What I learned

The presentation went well because of its visual character and because the audience seemed to appreciate the fact of a senior university professor taking time out for them. I do not think this factor can be overestimated.

The next time I will try to speak to Counselors, especially at the 8th grade level, who orient students into high school language paths. I will engage them personally or invite them to my talk on why French matters.

I will also devote more time to the French diaspora, so to speak, and especially to *francophonie*, because many students have a heritage from French-speaking areas. My point will be that France's famed ethnocentricity is both a strength and a weakness:

—a strength because it fosters a comfortable tradition of national introspection, aided by the study of literature

—a weakness because it slows the path of France's openness to the fact and the opportunities of globalization.

Yet this openness is indispensable if French studies are to thrive in the time of globalization. My theme the next time will be French in the World, or The World of French: Francophone Literature and Culture. I will recall that through literature one becomes a better citizen by thinking more deeply, and forming careful judgments on a range of discourses. As Claude Hagège points out in the book I mentioned at the outset, *Contre la pensée unique*, French is an exceptional tool for making the kinds of subtle distinctions that are useful to the citizen.

This interventionist strategy of promoting French in high schools and colleges will, I expect, have a number of positive outcomes in line with the AATF vision of the continuum between secondary and higher education. It will serve to uplift the morale of those taking and teaching French in high school. Student numbers will increase, assuring larger university enrollments. After all, if you seek to grow the tree, you had better water the roots. Then, thanks to the professorial presentations, more college students will take French beyond the lower-division and, finally, the campus will notice that the French

section has been proactive. Traditionally, language departments have never been politically savvy, unlike History, English, or Physics. A well-publicized recruitment plan would give visibility to the department.

Diversity

It would also undoubtedly address an issue that has gone unchallenged for too long: French has a diversity problem. We draw our students predominantly from women. On my campus they account for 86% of the majors in the French curriculum. I would be surprised if that is not the case at most secondary and university institutions.³ Let us be clear: without the influx of women into the Humanities in recent decades, our departments would be sad and lonely islands, indeed. Women have filled the classes, reoriented the curriculum, and inspired whole new avenues of research.⁴

However, given the reductionist image of France noted above, we are not recruiting sufficient men to infuse balance into class interaction and we are, even more important, not informing all of our students of the opportunities for combining French with other fields, particularly the sciences and engineering. To cite but one successful example:

Engineering is one of the most global of professions, yet few students majoring in the field study abroad. For [the University of Rhode Island], the solution proved to be a joint-degree program, in which students take both engineering and a foreign language before heading overseas for a year to study and work. And as a result, interest in foreign languages at the university is booming. (*Chronicle*)

Study Abroad and Development

And so, the first challenge/opportunity is image.

The next is logistical, financial, moral, and so forth, namely, how to allow more students the opportunity to go to France and francophone countries. Here are some examples selected from my own experience as the Vice Chancellor to whom the local Education Abroad Program (EAP) reported:

—Of the 4200 students that study abroad each year through the University of California Education Abroad Program, almost 1000 students come from UC Santa Barbara, that is, almost 25% of those who go abroad from the University of California. Our goal should be everyone’s goal, namely, to double the number of study abroad students, and that will require an intensive fund-raising campaign for scholarships. (The annual tuition increases make Development efforts increasingly necessary for many students at a time when donations for scholarships are not flowing at a record pace.) Yet, our experience has been that the alumni of education abroad programs are as fanatical as Al-Qaeda and will help in any way they can—if they are asked properly. Those of you who have tilled the Development soil know that the “ask” is the crucial stage of all fund-raising.

—We should offer more opportunities to study abroad in the summer. For budgetary reasons, UC Santa Barbara had to close its Summer Institute of French and Francophone Language and Culture in summer 2011 after 35 years of existence during which it awarded 218 Masters Degrees principally to high school teachers. Our department is now thinking about developing a new summer Institute for *undergraduates*, and perhaps a few graduate students, who want to perfect their French and learn more about culture. This new direction for the Summer Institute does not minimize the evident

need for offering serious *recyclages* to secondary teachers who are the avant-garde for any revitalization of French studies.

Let me end this particular development on the advantages of summer study by citing a passage from the Report of the Humanities Task Force at UCLA from December 2009:

Active use of the Summer Sessions would produce two immediate and direct benefits: (1) pressure would be lessened upon those language programs that are currently overburdened between September and June; (2) revenue could be generated during the summer to fund both lecturers and graduate students.

Summer is an opportunity. (Report)

Business Collaboration

We need to increase partnerships between American and French business to establish internships for work in France and for support for local cultural activities. For a couple of years I served as Director of the Beaudry Franco-American Foundation created in the late the 1970s for just such purposes. (Beaudry was first mayor of Montreal and then of Los Angeles.) The Services culturels in San Francisco hosted the meetings. The Americans were initially more enthusiastic than their French counterparts who thought that all American businessmen were sharks. However, the Americans' interest completely disappeared when François Mitterand, a Socialist, was elected President of the Republic in 1981. Yet, even in the face of a newly-elected (but more US-friendly) Socialist President, this kind of venture should be reconceptualized and implemented. I would hope that the Services culturels would take the lead in publicizing the coordinates of the

French companies located in the United States, a task that has continually escaped my best efforts.

Technology

Finally, to overcome the obstacles of time and space, we need to develop more contacts with France through technology. Any discussion of technology is a discussion of change—which we all proclaim as the object of higher learning. There are surely resources in France that we are unaware of but which would help our teaching immeasurably. Again, both the Attachés scientifiques and the Attachés culturels in the United States should be prominently involved.

If the purpose of education is to change the student, today's drive for practical, job-oriented training is deflecting us from that goal. There is a persistent and unfortunate vocationalism that characterizes the classic university these days. An increasing number of students have come to regard the university as a place principally for obtaining the credential that accords them entry to a specific occupation. What a costly mistake!

Since we know that students will change jobs several times during their lifetime, the values of a liberal arts education are more needed than ever because one has to be flexible: literacy, numeracy, a passion for the life of the mind, esthetic sensibility, openness to other perspectives and cultures as reflected in language, and very pertinently, critical thinking will all be required.⁵ We can confidently propose all of this as the ideal benefits of the study of French language and culture.

Up until fairly recently, the United States was considered missionary territory and the Vatican would send priests from Ireland to fill positions in parishes around the country. I propose that France view the United States as worthy of “missionary” activity.

I am not thinking of more priests but of more aid for increasing opportunities for the study of French by students. This would mean a shift in priorities by the Ministry of Education, but *tant mieux*. Offering support for the continuing promotion and enhancement of French studies in a relatively stable democracy would have substantial benefits for France on all levels.

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¹ Student fees (tuition) at the University of California in 1980 were \$300.

² The model for the latter kind of successful intervention is the one proposed by AATF President Ann Sunderland (“Message”). She notes that early on she consulted the Advocacy Wiki and Bob Peckham’s Advocacy Depot of the AATF.

³ This seems to be the case outside the United States too. In 2006 I gave a paper at a Paris Colloquium organized by the Centre de recherche sur l’histoire du théâtre where women constituted at least 80% of the participants. Later that same year I lectured at the Frankreich Zentrum of the University of Berlin before an audience of 40 graduate students, 39 of them women.

⁴ See, for just one example, the engaging proposal by Faith Beasley to reconceive the literary history of the French seventeenth century in *Salon*.

⁵ In *Academically Adrift*, Richard Arum and Josepa Roka make the compelling point that, in a recent survey, students who majored in the traditional liberal arts showed greater gains over time than other students in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills. Perhaps these qualities account for the listing of “French, German, Latin, and other Common Foreign Languages” as number 10 of “The 13 Most Useful College Majors (As Determined By Science).” “Useful” was defined as “majors most likely to lead to less unemployment and higher earnings, and which are in industries projected to grow in the next decade according to research from Georgetown University and data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.”

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