

UNABASHED: DEFENDING FRENCH STUDIES WITHOUT DEFENSIVENESS

Once a week, I thank my lucky stars that I am not in France—whenever I do the laundry, that is. The seemingly endless wash cycle on European machines seems intolerable, although I must admit my clothes have never come out cleaner. And so, I am often bemused rather than outraged whenever I am reminded by a snide comment that Pepe Le Pew still incarnates the French in the minds of many Americans. When this stereotype surfaces in class, I sometimes show my students photographs of the extensive *rayon de blanchisserie* from one of the *hypermarchés* and shared with them how I tend to avoid buying white clothes since I can never keep them in the same pristine condition maintained by my friend Stéphanie (who swears she could never live in the U.S. if her mother stopped sending her regular supplies of French laundry products). We end up agreeing that hygiene is a contextually and culturally defined concept and that it is perhaps better not to sully oneself by gracing “dirty” remarks about the French with a response.

It is another affair entirely, however, when it comes to more insidious incidents of French-bashing. We know that as a matter of course our students will encounter the unfortunate reality of *la francophobie*. As teachers, we tend to react by asking “What can we do about this?” even if this may not be the most productive way of framing the question. What if we asked instead “How can we offer students the tools they need to counter it?” After all, who better to answer back than our students who have devoted considerable time and energy to the study of French? I propose here a three-pronged approach aimed at enlisting our students in the cause by: (1) showing how to identify the prejudices and falsehoods and counter them with facts and statistics; (2) highlighting cultural and historical ties between the U.S. and France in our curriculum; and (3) practicing how to deflect vicious or tasteless attempts at humor with humor of a more good-natured kind.

Identifying and Countering Negative Images

Rather than simply providing a list of negative stereotypes or asking our students to brainstorm their own list, it is more effective to have them discover for themselves what lurks out there. Students can be asked to conduct brief interviews with family members, friends, acquaintances, even strangers, to glean what first comes to the minds of Americans when asked about the French. Another useful exercise is to work with a news database such as Lexis-Nexis to see what instances pop up using search terms such as “French-bashing” or simply “the

French,” “France,” etc... By sifting through and sorting the information gathered, students can begin to categorize the negative stereotypes and misconceptions. Next, it is important to prioritize: which ones seem most pervasive, inaccurate and/or damaging; which ones are more or less innocuous and therefore do not merit a serious response?

The negative image that perhaps merits correction the most is one that has been bandied about in the U.S. popular media for a number of years. It is also one of the most contemptible, injurious and ill-founded: the “surrender monkey” epithet, insinuating that the French are cowardly for having capitulated to the German occupation in World War II. A few hard statistics, hard in a double sense, suffice for students to gauge the enormity of the misinformation being perpetuated. I have found two sets of data particularly effective, the first of which is available on the French-bashing watchdog Web site [www.miquelon.org].¹ “112 Gripes about the French,” a document published in 1945 by the Information and Education Division of the U.S. Occupation Forces, is proof in and of itself of the endurance and deep-rootedness of some anti-French sentiments. Gripe 106 is particularly relevant: “The French got off pretty easy in the [Second World] war.” In response is a comprehensive and staggering accounting of what the war cost France in human, economic, and infrastructure losses. An equally effective tool with great visual impact is a population pyramid (*pyramide des âges*) of twentieth-century France whose outlines demarcate two severe dips for each of the World Wars. The French pyramid clearly shows how adversely the population was affected by the two World Wars, in contrast to the more even contours of U.S. population pyramids from the same period. Courage should never be measured in terms of loss of life, but armed with a few statistics, our students can silence spurious claims and show conclusively that France remembers.² Indeed, how could France forget?

The Ties that Bind: France and the U.S. --a Stormy Affair or Sibling Rivalry?

Well into our semester-long romp through the French Republics, it occurred to me that I was the only one consistently reflecting on the connections between France’s struggles to establish, develop and maintain a democracy and similar struggles in the U.S. Somehow nothing I did registered with my students—even overt comparisons failed to generate a strong response. We had read pages from French high school textbooks (the *Histoire-Géo*

series) to supplement our history text and the students had gotten quite adept at noting the textbooks’ pedagogical strategies aimed at transforming pupils into upstanding French citizens. They simply failed to see what it all had to do with them. So, as a warm-up to class one day, I asked students to write *je* and then *allégeance* on a piece of paper and to continue to write down in French all of the nouns from the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance as they recited it silently in their heads. They continued scribbling--*le drapeau...les États...Amérique...--*and as they reached *la République*, a succession of audible gasps could be heard. We laughed, and they admitted that they did not generally think of the U.S. in terms of its status as a republic. We then discussed whether the Pledge of Allegiance could be recited by the French, and they were quick to see that only the words “under God” would have to be removed. We were easily able to ascertain that this key phrase was, in fact, a 1954 Cold War era addition to the original 1892 text, since, coincidentally, the Pledge of Allegiance was in the news at the time due to the Michael Newdow court case in California.³ This discussion offered us an opening to explore more fully and more engagingly mutual influences in French and American society, history, and political thought.

Highlighting these ties is essential, not simply in order to promote tolerance, but just as importantly because our two Republics cannot be studied properly in isolation from one another. As language teachers we have the privilege and the mandate to help foster a broader, well-rounded understanding of the world, as eloquently argued in our National Standards (most specifically in the Connections and Comparisons standards). There are many opportunities to highlight French-American ties in our curriculum; each day the news seems to offer up a fresh parallel.⁴ The following are just a few of the many available resources that lend themselves well to the French classroom. A thought-provoking and fairly accessible reading that compares and contrasts the French and the U.S. Republics can be found in the opening pages of Régis Debray’s *La République expliquée à ma fille*.⁵ Recent letters, interviews, and speeches of French diplomats in the U.S. often focus on Franco-American relations and can be found easily through Internet searches. The AATF state-specific advocacy Web sites launched by Robert (“Tennessee Bob”) Peckham take as their starting point the inseparable nature of relations between the U.S. and France. Indeed, the most apt metaphor to describe these relations is not the oft-quoted “love-hate rela-

tionship,” since no divorce is possible. Rather, it is a sibling relationship with all of the concomitant rivalry. We are sometimes hard on one another because we know we can never sever the ties that bind us together.

Rira bien qui rira le dernier

In sibling relationships, just as in all relationships, having a sense of humor is essential. After all, if you can't get used to good-natured ribbing, you can't really function fully in society. Levity is the key: we have to lighten up if we are to deflect or defuse negativity without becoming defensive. A good antidote to tired clichés and stereotypes is to turn them on their heads in a humorous fashion.⁶ A case in point is Garry Trudeau's Doonesbury cartoon lampooning the "Freedom fries" hysteria in 2003. The cartoon, written half in English and half in French, is available with English translations on the official Doonesbury Web site, but it was originally published without glossing. An in-joke for speakers of French, it is therefore doubly fun to our students who enjoy being in-the-know. This and other examples of humorous responses to French-bashing can inspire our students to create their own responses.

Let me propose a few suggestions for activities that we can assign to promote greater tolerance through humor. Students can write mock news stories exploiting anti-French hyperbole, drawing on models taken from satirical news sources including periodicals like *The Onion* or *L'Anti-Américain* (a tongue-in-cheek monthly recently launched in France) or TV news parodies like *Saturday Night Live's* "Weekend Update" or *Les Guignols de l'Info*.⁷ Students can also create humorous pro-French bumper stickers or even publicity campaign slogans for specific French products sold in the U.S. or for companies with French ties. Finally, students can be assigned to write jokes using standard formats such as limericks, knock-knock jokes, or even the hackneyed, but persevering genre of the "light-bulb" joke. For example, in response to the question "How many Americans does it take to unscrew a French light bulb?," one might answer unabashedly: "Not to worry. Despite the occasional flicker, French thought has managed to burn steadily in the U.S. since before the discovery of electricity, in fact, since *le Siècle des Lumières*.

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NOTES

¹ This Web site has also compiled a running list of offensive remarks by comedians and commentators and offers a wealth of relevant historical information as a counterweight.

² Under the rubric "France Remembers" on the [www.miquelon.org] Web site are several photographs that bear witness to France's enduring gratitude toward the U.S. for its role in the liberation.

³ Newdow challenged the constitutionality of the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance.

⁴ A very recent and interesting example is the proposed legislation to require that school children in France study "La Marseillaise."

⁵ This volume is part of the series that includes Tahar Ben Jelloun's similarly titled books on racism and Islam.

⁶ As Mireille Rosello makes clear, replacing a misconception with a better alternative is a more effective strategy than attacking it head on.

⁷ An amusing example is: "Spaghetti-Os Discontinued As Franco-American Relations Break Down."

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