

Probing Question: Do we misunderstand French culture?

June 17 2011, By Melissa Beattie-Moss

Reflecting on his 1879 sojourn in France, Mark Twain -- our most quintessentially American writer -- quipped, “In Paris they simply stared when I spoke to them in French; I never did succeed in making those idiots understand their own language.”

Twain is one in a long line of Americans who have found the French to be aloof, unfriendly and rude. Is there truth in the stereotypes or do we misunderstand the French character?

“To begin with,” said Willa Silverman, professor of French and Jewish studies in College of the Liberal Arts, “both the United States and France are diverse and pluralistic societies, so the notion of ‘national character’ is something of a mythical construction. This being said, I will offer that the French, whose society had rigid hierarchies for many centuries, place a greater, if subtle, emphasis on boundaries and distance -- between public and private space; between and among social and generational groups; and between strangers and intimates.”

For example, noted Silverman, it would be unheard of in France for a server in a restaurant to introduce him/herself to patrons, or for strangers to smile and greet each other in the street, “whereas this type of breezy informality is familiar to most Americans.”

Recalling her first trip to Paris when she was 16, Silverman said, “I mistakenly used the familiar form of address -- “tu” -- in a public place with a man I did not know. Looking on, my horrified hosts chided me

about not respecting the social and gender codes regarding age and level of intimacy.”

"If we regard the French as snobby and too formal, the French often remark on Americans' oversized, even slightly aggressive friendliness and disrespect for the personal space of others," explained Silverman. Even the way we walk can reflect cultural differences, she added, pointing to "the loping gait of some Americans versus the more physically constrained walking style in France."

Generally speaking, said Silverman, another area of cultural difference centers around work and leisure. The French "appear to place a higher value on 'quality of life' than do Americans, in terms of appreciation of food, leisure time and vacation. They will even strike to maintain these benefits!" she noted.

To Americans -- citizens of a nation founded on Puritan values of hard work, self-discipline and religious morality -- the French emphasis on *joie de vivre* is easy to interpret as lazy and self-indulgent.

Cultural misunderstandings flow both ways, reminded Silverman. "The French, I believe, have misread Americans' championing of multiculturalism as an important ideal. For some French, the American desire to strive for multicultural classrooms and celebrate hyphenated identities -- such as African-American or Italian-American -- clashes with the rather extreme form of egalitarianism derived from the French Revolution, which aimed to efface all visible differences among social orders, regions, and faiths." Added Silverman, the French have, at times, misjudged us as "tyrannical champions of difference at all costs -- or conversely as naive conformists."

The concept of American naiveté is at the heart of Mark Twain's travel book -- and his bestselling work in his lifetime -- "The Innocents

Abroad," in which the author finds comic fodder in the cultural collisions between his own tour group of American "pilgrims" and the European Old World.

(Wrote Twain in his travel journals, "France has neither winter nor summer nor morals -- apart from these drawbacks it is a fine country," adding that "the objects of which Paris folks are fond" include "literature, art, medicine and adultery.")

Surely we must have some cultural common ground with the country that gave us The Statue of Liberty and French fries, n'est-ce pas? "Absolument!" said Silverman. "As inheritors of the "Atlantic revolutions" of 1776 and 1789, Americans and French share a deep commitment to democratic values and individual liberties that draw our cultures together. Moreover, the enduring popularity of American popular [culture](#) in France and the generally favorable view of the Obama administration among the French may make this a propitious moment for the waning of traditional stereotypes on both sides of the Atlantic."

Or as Twain put it, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness." Even about the French.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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