

FACTS & ARGUMENTS A Canadian in Paris ATTITUDE / Behind the hostile demeanor of your typical French waiter is nostalgia for greatness, which doesn't make his behaviour any more appealing to this expatriate

Friday, October 14, 1994

CARRIE MANDEL

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BY **CARRIE MANDEL** TAKE, for example, the Parisian cafe. On the surface it looks pleasant enough, even inviting. The quaint, wicker-backed chairs, the round, marble-top tables, the tiny espresso cups and the recollection of such intellectual forces as Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre having met and written there all make the cafe a place of sophistication and charme. Lining wide boulevards and quiet side streets, cafes are also the inevitable intersection between locals and tourists. They attract all walks of life, are almost always busy, and are indeed an important part of the city's social fabric.

No wonder, then, that visitors romanticize the Parisian cafe as an entirely positive cultural icon, easily dismissing \$6 coffees as "experiential" and slow service as a sign of a more relaxed pace of life. It takes several months before the expatriate sees the cafe for what it really is: an assortment of frustrations, all flavoured by the caractere francais.

Begin with the constants: Tables and chairs are organized horizontally, chairs facing away from the cafe's interior. The play of eye contact among patrons is rather extraordinary; one immediately feels the importance of seeing and being seen, of dressing the part, of having the right look - as the French pronounce it - in the cafe environment.

Enter the centrepiece of the cafe experience: the waiter. With little or no effort to conceal his contempt, he approaches your table and leaves like a boomerang, taking your order before you've really decided what you want. The service-sector philosophy of "the customer is king" is not only disregarded in Paris, it is reversed. Customers know they are an imposition, and feel almost apologetic while occupying a spot in the humbling cafe. They order simply, pay with exact change where possible, and above all, never complain about the service.

The Parisian waiter appears to be a gravely unhappy individual, caught, like the shadowgazers in Socrates' cave, between the desire to execute an inflexible function with dignity, and the ever-menacing awareness that this function consists in serving others. He makes it a point of honour not to serve you in the manner in which you would like to be served. Smiles are rare, friendly conversation unthinkable; for the privilege of savouring a cafe creme in his domain, the waiter makes it clear that you must conform to his timetable, his rules, his manner.

We were three at Cafe Flore one afternoon when my French friend Jean- Pierre, on receiving a stale pain au chocolat, complained to me and his American girlfriend that the waiter had served him the only bad pastry in the cafe. He proudly revealed to us his scheme to prove the waiter's ill will toward him: He would order another pain au chocolat (which would be delicious) and then confront the waiter about the discrepancy. True, the array of remaining pastries on the counter behind us looked better than fresh, but it was our suggestion - just a North American reflex, perhaps - that he simply inform the waiter that his pastry was bad and politely request another.

"Non, non," he waves us off. That would be too simple, it would never work.

With a conspiratorial wink, he briskly ordered a second pain au chocolat, which Boomerang brought, his course unfettered by the untouched pastry still on our table.

The second offering was equally stale. We laughed; Jean-Pierre paid the bill. In Paris, the customer never wins.

Hostile demeanour, though typical of the cafe waiter, actually reflects the attitude of Parisians in general. In Paris, the Gaullist nostalgia for France's greatness is still very much alive. Parisians have nurtured and continue to nurture fantasies of grandeur; their deep-rooted sense of superiority is reflected in their contempt for things foreign and their general intolerance of ethnic differences.

Yet the French are being forced to come to terms with the limit of their world influence and the inevitability of an ever-powerful American Cultural Invasion. Madonna has outshone all potential Edith Piafs, Burger King and Pizza Hut appear to seat more in one lunch hour than Fouquet's does in a week, and Jurassic Park has wider appeal than Germinal.

For the mature population, for whom "culture" is still the Malrauxian concept, American pop culture poses a serious threat, placing at stake both the intellect of the people and the soul of the nation. One has only to witness the attempt to purge France of deleterious Franglais to appreciate the extremity of the resistance. Yet the influx of things American forges on.

So Paris is undergoing a sort of identity crisis. Why take it out on Americans?

I have a theory. Unlike most Americans, Parisians identify themselves not by what they do, but by who they are. Strong cultural and family identification explains both why the French appear to place less importance on job performance than Americans do, and why, in the event of a crumbling culture, the workplace might serve as an outlet for negative energy and malaise. If the French are indeed uncomfortable about their current status in the world, it makes sense that their dissatisfaction be reflected in the workplace, where targets are impersonal and job performance relatively inconsequential. Aggressiveness in the service sector can therefore be understood as a symptom of general frustration, brought about by a context of decline as perceived by the French themselves. The American customer is implicated only insofar as his presence recalls competition between French and American cultures - a competition the French fear they are losing.

The American-as-scapegoat theory has loopholes, however, which become evident with a change in perspective. For example, the American expects that money buys the right to polite service, whereas the French dissociate rights with the act of paying, as they do income from status. Conversely, where the French perceive Americans as violent and the U.S. as crime-ridden, Americans living in Paris become sensitive to violence in the French personality, which, though covert, is no less pernicious. The French may not carry guns, but they are nonetheless armed, their weapon being their attitude. The French circumvent the body to assault the essence of their prey; dignity is their target.

The phenomenon of "confrontational service" affects everyone in Paris, but is more disarming to the expatriate, who takes personally an attitude that in fact transcends him. I have been the victim of such attacks and admit I had difficulty reminding myself of this.

Trying to enter a nightclub one evening, at which I had planned to join friends, I was turned away by an exceptionally nasty videur. Wishing to impress upon him my right to admission, I confidently explained that I had been to the club several times before. He took one long loook at me and decided that this was impossible, retorting that one needed a personal

invitation from the manager to enter the establishment. As I argued with him further, he noticed my accent and inquired as to my origins. I smiled and told him I was Canadian.

"Go home," was his response. "We don't want you here."

To this I wanted to scream. I wanted to tell him that he had just ruined yet another evening, squashed another futile search for fun in a needlessly Byzantine city. But all I could do was meekly reply that it was too bad he felt that way.

"This is Paris," he snapped defensively, "this is life."

It is Paris, but I certainly hope it's not life, and although his comment rings true to my experience, it would be unfair to say it encompasses it entirely. Paris, in flashes, is roaming the huddled, medieval labyrinth of the Marais on a balmy spring evening; it's rounding a bend and coming upon howling Medusa heads carved in magnificent, palatial doors; it's watching lovers lean over the Pont Louis Philippe and gaze dreamily at the Seine; it's the smell of coffee roasting, of croissants baking; it's operas, dancers, street performers all blending seamlessly with the beauty of every major backdrop; it's magic, an aesthetic reality like no other.

But for the North American who lives in Paris, it's also more than this - or much less. With every pleasing sensuous experience comes the concomitant awareness of profound character differences; differences the visitor may overlook, but which cannot but confound and frustrate the expatriate.

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