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**EXPLORING DIFFERENCES  
BETWEEN THE FRENCH AND AMERICANS**

by

**Pascal BAUDRY**

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Review by Sylvie Chevrier  
Translation by Julie Johnson

**Overview**

Drawing from his rich experience, Pascal Baudry offers vivid portraits of the French and American cultures. His approach, which draws on psychoanalysis, suggests that everything begins with the mother-child relationship as expressed, for example, at the playground. As these relations are respectively woven on opposite sides of the Atlantic, they give rise to two contrasting sets of social norms. The particularities of these two cultures can be seen in the difference between an implicit culture and an explicit culture, between obsession with belonging and obsession with action, between the preeminence of relationships and preeminence of the law, between respective ways of perceiving reality. Understanding these differences makes it possible to better understand the love-hate relationship that has long bound these two nations.

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## **PRESENTATION by Pascal BAUDRY**

I discovered intercultural issues by marrying an American woman. It is a classic scenario : we take our own culture as a given until a cross-cultural experience makes us realize that we cannot take it all for granted. That is when we begin to question the assumptions underpinning our own culture and someone else's. It is a painful experience riddled with pitfalls.

### **Personal Path**

My children were born in France and were respectively three and six years old when we immigrated to the United States. As immigrants, they were destined to become little Americans, cutting ties with their own culture of origin. Seeing my children grow up differently than I had envisioned got me interested in the process by which a young immigrant is acculturated. Meanwhile, I was working as an executive at Renault's North-American subsidiary, American Motors, which employed 2,400 people from fifty-three different countries. When the subsidiary was sold I settled in California, where I developed Learning Expeditions. Some three hundred groups of French executives and managers have since taken part in these seminars. While many of the participants are already quite familiar with the United States, they have their own way of seeing things and do not think and behave like their American counterparts. The purpose of their visit is to work on strategy and management issues, but their "French" reactions offer opportunities to explore cross-cultural issues between the French and Americans. I gradually posted my observations on the Web and solicited the reactions of on-line readers, which enabled me to deepen my understanding and elucidate contradictions. My book *Français et Américains, l'autre rive* (Village Mondial, 2003, accessible free of charge at [www.pbaudry.com](http://www.pbaudry.com)) is the fruit of this dialog with readers. About 55,000 copies have already been downloaded and I am currently working on a second edition based on the some 3,500 emailed comments I have received. Separately, I am developing a cartoon.

### **Grappling with Cultural Differences**

Encountering another culture leads to different degrees of intercultural enlightenment. The first degree is that of ignorance—remaining oblivious to differences. It is the attitude exemplified by EuroDisney designing, in France, an amusement park where alcohol is prohibited, and by French people making handshake contracts in the United States without involving an attorney. The second degree is that of constant criticism or praise. Differences are noted and elicit a regressive reaction. The third degree is when we attempt to explain the other culture in light of our own. We have good intentions, but are ill equipped. The fourth degree corresponds to an effort to understand the other culture from the inside. In time, we penetrate that culture through a kind of osmosis. This involves being willing to question ourselves, which means being vulnerable and having the courage to be overtaken by other values. This is the stage at which people begin to "get" the humor of the other culture, but also when they experience a conflict in values. The fifth degree is the ability to see and appreciate one's own culture from the outside. Similar to the fields of personal development and organizational development, "cultural development" could constitute a field that aims to expand possible cultural options in the same way that children of mixed couples experience broader options. At the sixth degree, having better understood ourselves and others, we can more effectively communicate in an intercultural context. The seventh degree is when we change a culture, be it the culture of a nation, a profession or a company.

### **On Methodology**

In comparing France and the United States, one immediately runs the risk of over-generalizing. But there exists an intuitive, proper distance at which cultural differences come into focus. My presentation will be as much about French people in Brittany as in Alsace, Corsica or Lille, and respectively as much about Alaskans as Midwesterners, New York Jews or other Americans.

A great diversity of behaviors obviously exists on both sides, but there also exist widely shared norms. On the American side, the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) norm dominates, despite massive immigration : the norm is explained to new arrivals, which helps maintain a relatively high degree of stability in American culture. On the French side, the norm is less explicit, therefore less rigidly transmitted, and hence less stable.

Discussion of cultures also raises the issue of their evolution. French culture is certainly evolving under the influence of American culture. Cultural analysis requires a time frame.

Lastly, my approach arises more from projection and subjective trial and error than from science, the reactions of a large number of Web readers helping provide some measure of objectivity. It is largely based on hypotheses and intuitions, drawing from psychoanalysis and many other disciplines.

### **French and American Norms**

French and American norms differ in many ways.

#### *Explicit culture and implicit culture*

While American culture is explicit, French culture is implicit.

In the United States, the physical map equals the territory. What you say is what you mean. Furthermore, it is a binary culture. Either it's yes or it's no. Something is either known, or unknown. What is known is embodied, for example, in processes and modules that have been proven somewhere by someone. Situations are analyzed in light of modules that have already proven effective. This mechanism enables selection of effective processes and high learning. The binary model is taught in school. Decision trees are built to solve problems. Along the way, things are measured and options evaluated in relation to thresholds. It is a quantitative, digital culture in which people have a highly developed memory for statistics, sports scores for instance.

In France, the gap between what is said and what is meant is not a matter of error or approximation. It holds meaning when one considers the content, addressee, speaker, timing of the message, and so on. In this contextual culture, relationships and history are keys to interpretation. Since implicitness increases the risk of misunderstandings and arguments, the many allusions, historical references, and everything that contributes to creating connection are important.

#### *Group culture, individual culture*

Observe mothers and their children at a playground. An American mother will encourage her child to go play, saying "Go, have fun !" When the child has a problem, she will comfort him, explain what happened, indicate what to do next time, reassure him with a "You can do it," then send him off again with another "Go, have fun !"

A French mother will start by setting boundaries : "Don't go over there, you'll get dirty. When the child has a problem, she makes attributions : "You always do that," "You are just like your father," "You never listen to what you are told," etc. Then she will set new limits, saying "Don't go back over there," or "Ok, that's enough, let's go home now." These processes create different cleavages. In the United States, the break is between the mother on one side and the child and the reality he is confronting on the other. The American scenario generates a strong sense of self and learning experiences beyond the maternal embrace. The French version establishes a break between the mother and child on one side, and a reality perceived as hostile and dangerous on the other.

Each scenario has its drawbacks. The command "Go" creates a violent separation. The apron strings may be cut before the child is ready : behind "You can do it" the child hears "You must

*do it.*” As a result, American children, pushed from the nest very early, continually seek assurance that they are really loved, and American adults always harbor a lingering doubt whether they are. In this regard, it is significant to note that when the U.S. army entered Baghdad, Donald Rumsfeld declared that Americans needed to win not only the minds of the Iraqi people, but also their *hearts* ! Yet around this little core of indomitable doubt, Americans develop a strong self that does not feel threatened by others and by social life in general – a “can do” attitude.

In France, children too long held back by apron strings are destined to fret over whether they are able to go it alone. As children, then as adults, they do not necessarily want to be truly on their own. But they wonder : if they were, could they handle it ? This anxiety leads to alternating periods of predictability, continuity, outbursts and sudden rebellions, such as strikes. Children are essentially defined by the recurrent message that they are incapable. Forever doubting their abilities and constantly criticized by those around them (to the tune of more than 100,000 times during their youth), they develop a protective shell against external criticism. The difference between Americans and the French can be likened to the difference between a mango, with its large pit and thin skin, and a coconut, with its hard outer shell but fluid center.

Foreigners are struck by the fact that people in France don’t smile. And it is true : among strangers, people have their armor up ! Yet what the French really want is to get beyond those protective shells. They aspire to very strong relationships in which they can mutually let down their guard. These relationships are at the origin of clans, with clan rivalry serving to reinforce the internal bonds of each warring faction.

By contrast, in the United States, people have a more permeable outer skin, which makes it easier to make friends. But those friendships do not mean you have a core connection. They don’t reach deep down. In France, one navigates a complex path from strict separation to life-long connection. It’s all or nothing. Marriage (and hence divorce), for instance, are conceived very differently in the United States and in France : respectively as a contractual partnership and as definitively becoming a part of each other.

### *Perception of reality*

In the United States, the individual must interact with reality. The imperative “*Go*” means to the child both that he is able to go, and that he must. “*Have fun*” is command to perceive reality in a positive light. It’s not OK to be depressed. If you are, you go straight to your therapist. In American films, heroes confronted with an initial trauma go on to regain confidence in the positive nature of reality, and the *happy ending* is mandatory. “*You can do it*” implies that one *must* succeed. *You are* allowed to fail... once !

In France, like in Plato’s cave, reality is left at a distance and theorized about. Children remain unified with their mother and observe reality from afar. It is the bond that matters. The children’s story told in France is *La chèvre de Monsieur Seguin*;<sup>1</sup> the one told in the United States is *The Little Engine that Could*. In France, separation means danger and belonging means safety ; in the United States, separation is what allows individuals to act, to become capable.

### *Law and relationships*

Clear separation is what makes it possible for two people to conclude a contract on how a task is to be accomplished within a mutually binding legal framework. In France, connections lead people to trust each other without reference to the law. During acquisitions in the United States, too many French executives make the mistake of relying mostly on the relationship they have established with their counterparts, without performing due diligence.

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<sup>1</sup> When a goat runs away from an overly protective farm, it gets eaten by a wolf.

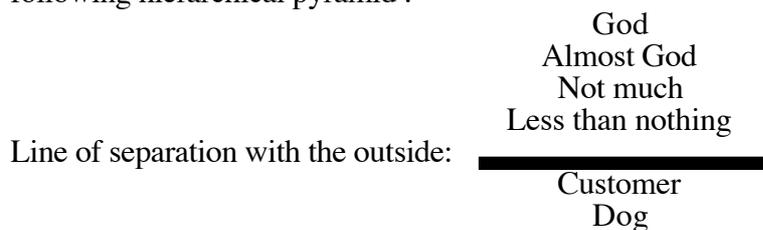
In France, two people begin by identifying what connections they may have in common, as a basis for building a relationship. They then focus on nurturing that relationship, which will provide the framework within which they will jointly accomplish a task. Laws exist, in fact there are four times more of them in France than in the United States, but they are not meant to be systematically applied ; favors and waivers are necessary for the system to function smoothly, and are provided on the basis of relationships. In the United States, the two people's allegiance is to the law. To accomplish a common task, they examine the applicable law in detail to determine what is required of them. There are no expectations beyond those precise pre-set requirements.

### *Justice*

In the United States, the Protestant tradition and the American Revolution have forged a "horizontal" view of justice : it's about the defendants, the role of the judge being to ensure due process. Common Law develops according to actual situations encountered. Like in English law, it is based on case law. It seems to me that the explosion of lawsuits in the United States represents a departure from the roots of American culture. The resulting parasitic enrichment of attorneys is not true to the spirit of American law. But the situation is difficult to challenge, given that most members of Congress are attorneys !

In France, the essence of the law is divine, immanent. The judge acts as an oracle whose role it is to reveal the law, as evidenced in the brevity of judicial orders, which seem self-evident.<sup>2</sup> The view of justice is vertical. In a way, the judicial apparatus, with its absolute principles to be applied to the lowly criminal, has replaced the Church.

In general, relationships in France are vertical. One could represent them according to the following hierarchical pyramid :<sup>3</sup>



In vertical relationships, an implicit contract implies allegiance, in return for which one receives protection. The problem of retirement pensions, for example, arises from the fact that this implicitly expected protection is disappearing.

### *Critical culture, positive culture*

American culture is positive. Firm belief in abundance and the conviction that there will be enough for everyone make it possible to envision "win-win" type relationships and even the Californian "win-win-win" version of this in which I win, you win, and the whole planet wins ! Such a culture fosters desire, desire to have as much the next guy.

French culture is critical. It is rooted in a belief of scarcity. Solutions are mutually exclusive, either-or, even neither-nor. Such a culture fosters jealousy. If the other guy loses, I can win, but not both of us at once.

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<sup>2</sup> See the excellent work by Antoine Garapon and Iannis Papadopoulos, *Juger en Amérique et en France* (Odile Jacob, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> English people have told me that this pyramid also holds for England, provided that one reverse the order of dog and customer !

## DISCUSSION

### The Two Americas

**Question :** *The profiles you describe should be more widely known. Before reading your writings, I had a theory. First, I had noted the extraordinary efficiency and extraordinary brutality of American life, in which a mere meeting between two attorneys is all it takes to lay people off the job. Also, for every one million people in France, 90 are in prison, compared to 679 per 100,000 in the United States ! Let's connect these two facts. There is the before-five-o'clock America, which you have described, and a different after-five-o'clock America, when everyone goes home, Italians to the Italian quarter, the Chinese to Chinatown, etc. Everyone feels at home in his corner deli, and that soothes the wounds of the before-five-o'clock life. Those who have no home are in prison. In France there is no gap between life before and after five-o'clock. Social life continues to flow, as you have described ; we seek common connections. I might add that in your diagram of the pyramid, God has a name : Reason. Truth exists ; it's a matter of finding it.*

**Pascal Baudry :** American society is a society of juxtapositions It is also obsessed with action ; everything must have a solution. Brutality is not perceived as such. France is obsessed with belonging.

**Q. :** *The notion of brutality is relative. In France, failure is unbearable.*

### Cultural Schizophrenia

**Q. :** *As a project manager, I've experienced situations that illustrate what you describe. In meetings, the executives speak ; managers keep their mouths shut. You have to meet with people privately because things cannot be said officially, you have to devise channels... I am also interested in city politics which, in the United States, are based on grassroots projects. In France, city projects are planned on high then handed down to the little people. Neighborhood initiatives are taken – contrary to what those in high places, businesses leaders do exist in the neighborhoods – but those initiatives don't mesh with the measures dictated from above !*

**P. B.:** The problem is that there is energy in the neighborhoods, but it is not legitimate ! This gets back to a schizophrenic image of France. It's a double-bind system like the one that the Palo Alto School has shown to exist in dysfunctional families. Parents present their children with conflicting demands : they have to succeed, and they have to fail. And the power differential between the parents and children makes it impossible for the latter to voice the contradiction and have any way out. It seems to me that this dynamic can be transposed to a whole series of relationships in French culture : the relations between elites and non-elites, between men and women, physicians and patients, teachers and students. The result is a big mess ! Double-speak is necessary for such a dysfunctional system to last very long. For example, for Catholics, there is a big emphasis on sin, but in the end it is not such a bad thing since confessions provide absolution. Protestants have no such escape. They remain accountable for their every action – the word *accountability* has no direct equivalent in French.

We might also consider how denouncement is viewed. In France, drivers flash their high-beams to warn each other when they see a cop so no one gets caught (= the siblings bond together against the parents), whereas some American trucks display an 800 number inviting anyone to call if the truck driver is observed doing something wrong ! (= children consort with parents against disobedient kids.)

**Q. :** *How do human groups function ? Through routines, membership, symbols, chance, etc. In French culture education is about acquiring knowledge. Between knowledge and the political functioning of groups, there is plenty of room for schizophrenia ! The foundation of American*

*culture is the Bible, which is centered around resolving problems through routines, membership, symbols. It lives on reality.*

### **The Place of Fathers**

**Q. :** *I would like to bring some nuance to the fact that people in the United States say what they think. I myself had been forewarned that when people say “interesting” it means they couldn’t care less ! Likewise, people avoid debating ideas. There is both avoidance and confrontation when it comes to money !*

**P. B. :** American culture carries an English legacy ; people congratulate each other easily, but can also change their opinion. In the French view, being good is a matter of human essence. One problem, in fact, is finding ways to acknowledge people, because you don’t congratulate them. Civil avoidance and confrontation don’t happen in the same contexts. Each situation has its own etiquette. To know which filter to apply, you have to determine whether you are in a context of conversation, of a task to be accomplished, or some other context. In France these moments are much more intertwined.

I compared French and American mothers. We should also talk about how the father fits into the picture. In France, the father is either absent or tyrannical, but does not have a legitimate, stable place. The father is a bit like the French judge, who can unpredictably be lax or extremely severe. Like in a large, schizophrenic family, one has to be prepared for sudden flip-flops.

**Q. :** *There remains an unresolved paradox: here is a culture marked by rules, by binary thinking, and thus a certain rigidity, yet also by initiative –“You can do it !”*

**P. B. :** When the mother lets her child run off, she has confidence in institutions, nature, processes... in short she trusts that there will be a Father out there to ensure an orderly arrangement of things. The father plays the role of separator ; he brings order and protection, he functions in a predictable way. In France, institutions are not reliable enough to be depended on.

**Q. :** *The apparent contradiction between freedom and rules does not exist. Freedom is exercised only in a strict context of rules.*

**Q. :** *In American society, nobody wants to associate with a loser. Is there no happy medium between the paralysis of attachment and the obligation to act ?*

### **Cultural Evolution ?**

**Q. :** *As you have shown, American culture is based both on the individual, the explicit, the contract, and on a common vision, a common morality. Is the historical balance between these two aspects, as in the legal system which combines law and good faith, jeopardized by the common good being pushed aside in favor of the individual ?*

**P. B. :** I think so. The integration historically promised to immigrants is diminishing. I am not talking about the fear of ethnic identifications evoked by the term “communitarism” in French. Why should emphasizing certain identifications mean you cannot have others as well ? In the United States, it is accepted that children exist in their own right and can thus decide to create community. It seems to me that one of the dimensions of American decline is abandonment of the educational system. There no longer exists a common moral fiber.

**Q. :** *What is the future of communities ? Communities are artificial, built around narrow interests, around social groupings who protect themselves from each other. What happens to a society in which the elderly are not willing to finance schools ?*

**P. B. :** Such internal division probably means that a model is beginning to decline.

## Repressed History

**Q. :** *I'd like to bring up what immigrants are told at school about having to leave behind their old culture. Isn't it that America already existed in people's minds before America was discovered, that those who constructed America as a nation were fleeing to build something new and wanted to break with the past ?*

**P. B.:** Americans do not take responsibility for their history. They repeat that they have no roots so they can forget about the genocide of American Indians. On seminars in Europe we have shown American executives where the pilgrims left from so they could retrace their roots. We have tried to help them shift from macho tensions to a kind of tenderness, to reconcile with a repressed part of themselves !

## United States, France and... Iraq

**Q. :** *What lessons can be learned from the war in Iraq ?*

**P. B. :** The United States is a nation that built westward, then upward. The September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks were a major symbolic blow. Schoolbooks do not mention that Great Britain destroyed the White House in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but they will not be able to ignore September 11<sup>th</sup>. On a minor French-American note, the war in Iraq shows that Americans do not understand the French insistence on voicing a contrarian opinion; and the French show little empathy for the major blow suffered by Americans – who liberated them sixty years ago.

## Franco-American Friction

**Q. :** *Can a parallel be drawn between the relationship between France and the WASP culture, and between France and perfidious Albion ?*

*From another angle, it seems to me that the Kyoto Protocol incarnates the caricature of relations between France (and more broadly Europe) and the United States. Americans were accused of being responsible for the ultimate failure of the summit because they did not sign the treaty. Yet in Europe we have done nothing. The United States budgets one billion dollars for research on development ; in France we devote just 80 million !*

**P. B.:** There are many on-going frictions between France and the United States. Americans have a hard time accepting the French as they are. Explicit, American-style management – with its highly codified processes and, in case of failure, equally codified corrective protocols – is all the rage. The French, however, consider it sufficient to be aware of this trend, demonstrate that they “get” it, and wait for it to pass. They have no real desire to change. The French do, however, rally their genius and courage in those rare instances when they sense their Motherland in peril.

**Q. :** *Why are there so many mutually strong feelings between France and the United States ?*

**P. B. :** You could see it as a big-brother/little-brother relationship... A whole host of characters could embody this relationship, but here we have two countries which, more than anything, are each the father of the other : they owe us their gestation ; we owe them our survival. Neither country would exist without the other, and our mutual relationship deserves better.

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