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French culture

Bleak chic

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ONE of the most perplexing questions of the early 21st century is this: how can the French, who invented *joie de vivre*, the three-tier cheese trolley and Dior's jaunty New Look, be so resolutely miserable? To outsiders, the world's favourite tourist destination embodies the triumph of pleasure over desk-slavery, slow food over fast, the life of the *flâneur* over that of the frenetic. Yet polls suggest that the French are more depressed than Ugandans or Uzbekistanis, and more pessimistic about their country's future than Albanians or Iraqis. A global barometer of hope and happiness puts the French second to bottom of a 54-country world ranking, behind austerity-battered Italians, Greeks and Spaniards, and ahead only of Portugal.

Happiness is of course a slippery concept. Asked if they are happy, people everywhere are more than likely to say yes; far fewer say that they laugh much. Gallup, a pollster, has devised a global "positive experience index", based on whether respondents report that they laughed and smiled a lot or did something enjoyable the previous day. By such measures, France does better than the world average. But take out war-torn or poor countries, and measure the French against fellow rich nations, and they still turn out to be unhappier than their peers. The French report fewer "happy experiences" than those in America, Britain, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Canada, Norway, the Netherlands, Austria and Belgium. The land of the *bon vivant* is an unhappy outlier.

Claudia Senik, a French economist at the Paris School of Economics, calls this the "French unhappiness puzzle". In a 2013 study, she found that the French were not only unhappier than their level of wealth and unemployment would suggest, but also more discontented than French-speaking people in Belgium and Canada (so language is not the reason), and more miserable when they emigrated compared with non-French expatriates in the same place (so

they take their gloom with them). “Unhappiness seems to be more than about life in France,” Ms Senik concluded. “It is something about being French.”

Naturally, Ms Senik’s findings caused a stir in France, prompting Maureen Dowd, a *New York Times* writer who was visiting Paris at the time, to report that “*joie de vivre* has given way to gaze de navel”. *Le Monde* ran three pages under the title “Liberté, Égalité, Morosité”, in a bid to decode its fellow countrymen’s “persistent melancholy”. France, it turns out, has the highest suicide rate in western Europe after Belgium and Switzerland. An American psychiatric study showed that, among ten rich countries, the French were the most likely to have a “major depressive episode” at some point in their life. Even the French language seems to be particularly well stocked—*morosité*, *tristesse*, *malheur*, *chagrin*, *malaise*, *ennui*, *mélancolie*, *anomie*, *désespoir*—with negativity. Can there really be something about being French that makes for so much gloom?

Fifty shades of noir

Two periods in France’s recent history have contributed most to the rich seam of misery in its culture—one after the revolution, the other after the second world war. In the quarter-century from the fall of the *ancien régime* in 1789 to 1814, France overthrew a monarchy, endured the Terror, and lost an empire. After this period the Romantic movement, from Baudelaire to Chopin, expressed a melancholy infused with nostalgia and ambivalence towards a society dominated by rationalist thought and bourgeois values.

In “René”, a novel published in 1802, Chateaubriand introduced to the world the tortured French youth, whose “wretched, barren, and disenchanted” existence embodied what the writer called the *mal du siècle*. In his memoirs, Chateaubriand recognised that he had set more of a trend than he had bargained for:

> If René did not exist, I would not write it again…all we hear nowadays are pitiful and disjointed phrases; the only subject is gales and storms, and unknown ills moaned out to the clouds and to the night. There’s not a fop who has just left college who hasn’t dreamt he was the most unfortunate of men; there’s not a milksop who hasn’t exhausted all life has to offer by the age of sixteen; who hasn’t believed himself tormented by his own genius; who, in the abyss of his thoughts, hasn’t given himself over to the “wave of passions”; who hasn’t struck his pale and dishevelled brow and astonished mankind with a sorrow whose name neither he, nor it, knows.

Romantic miserabilism was experienced as a form of pleasure. “Melancholy”, wrote Victor

Hugo, “is the happiness of being sad.” It was treated as a noble state, a higher aesthetic condition. “I do not pretend that joy cannot be allied with beauty,” wrote Baudelaire in his diary. “But I do say that joy is one of its most vulgar ornaments; whereas melancholy is, as it were, its illustrious companion.” Much of this tradition is firmly fixed in today’s French mind. Hugo’s poem “Melancholia” is required reading for French *lycée* students, as is Alfred de Musset’s “La Nuit de Mai”, whose narrator laments that “Nothing makes us so great as great sorrow.”

The strange beauty of melancholy finds some echo in mid-20th-century France, which produced a second wave of miserabilism. Françoise Sagan’s “Bonjour Tristesse”, published in 1954, for instance, opens with the 17-year-old Cécile’s lament:

> A strange melancholy pervades me to which I hesitate to give the grave and beautiful name of sorrow. The idea of sorrow has always appealed to me, but now I am almost ashamed of its complete egoism. I have known boredom, regret, and occasionally remorse, but never sorrow. Today it envelops me like a silken web, enervating and soft, and sets me apart from everybody else.

Yet the *ennui* that marked this second period had less to do with nostalgia than nausea. In “L’Etranger”, Albert Camus’s protagonist, Mersault, is perhaps the world’s best-known embodiment of anguish in the face of the unknowable meaning of existence, or the absurd. Post-war French theatre developed the absurd, through the plays of Camus, Jean Anouilh and the Franco-Romanian Eugène Ionescu. Samuel Beckett, an Irishman, wrote “Waiting for Godot” in French. On a chilly winter’s evening in 1953 on Paris’s left bank, two years before the play went on to unsettle English-speaking audiences, it was first staged at the 75-seat Théâtre de Babylone, and struck a chord with post-war Paris.

The left-bank literary clique led by Sartre…adopted *ennui* as a way of life as well as a philosophy

Neither Camus nor his contemporary, Jean-Paul Sartre, was ultimately a pessimist. But it is the torment of existentialism, rather than its conclusions, that captured the imagination. Indeed, the left-bank literary clique led by Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, which gravitated to the cafés of Saint-Germain-des-Près, adopted *ennui* as a way of life as well as a philosophy. When Sartre handed the original manuscript of “Nausea” to Gallimard, his publisher, he entitled his novel “Melancholia”.

Perhaps the best exemplar of miserabilism among contemporary French fiction writers is Michel Houellebecq, the controversial Goncourt-prize-winning novelist, in such nihilist works as “Whatever” or “Atomised”. His characters invariably lead empty, often sordid, always disillusioned lives. “In the end,” writes Mr Houellebecq in “The Elementary Particles”, “there’s

just the cold, the silence and the loneliness. In the end, there's only death."

There have, of course, been periods during which the gloom lifted. It was after the double shock of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 and the bloody Paris Commune, after all, that the Impressionists took their tubes of paint and brushes outdoors, delighting in light and colour. Despite a measure of *fin-de-siècle* anxiety, the *belle époque* was a moment of breezy certainty. Gustave Eiffel unveiled his wrought-iron tower in 1889. By 1900 the City of Lights drew 51m visitors to its universal exhibition, under the theme of "Paris, capital of the civilised world", and Matisse, Derain and other *fauves* had started to capture exuberant colour and warmth on canvas. Yet miserabilism seems to have a greater hold on the French mind today.

I doubt, therefore I am

One reason could be the French appetite for brutal self-criticism. From Descartes onwards, doubt is the first philosophical reflex. "The rationalist tradition makes us sceptical; we exist through criticism," argues Monique Canto-Sperber, a philosopher and director of Paris Sciences et Lettres, an elite university. "We treat those too full of hope as naive." In "Candide, or The Optimist", published in 1759, Voltaire mocks the folly of looking on the bright side in the face of unimaginable horrors. "Optimism", says a disabused Candide in the novel, "is the madness of insisting that all is well when we are miserable." When a French magazine recently tried to decode today's national pessimism, it concluded: "It's Voltaire's fault". "We find it more chic and more spiritual to doubt everything."

Up to a point, this is an affectation of the elite. "It is in a certain Parisian milieu that there are intellectuals who are grumpy by trade," argues Jack Lang, the Socialist former culture minister: "There is a gap with the rest of French society." Yet France cherishes public intellectuals, so their influence spreads wide. It is a talking, thinking culture. Its films value dialogue over plot; its talk-shows are interminable. The French, wrote a helpful official guide for British servicemen heading to France for the 1944 liberation offensive, "enjoy an intellectual argument more than we do. You will often think that two Frenchmen are having a violent quarrel when they are

simply arguing some abstract point."

The country treats its philosophers like national treasures, even celebrities, splashing photographs of them across the pages of glossy magazines. And it ensures that the canon of French thought is fed to the whole country. All pupils taking the school-leaving *baccalauréat* exam must study philosophy, and teenagers are examined on such cheery essay questions as "Is man condemned to self-delusion?" or "Do we have an obligation to seek truth?". So if French intellectuals are predominantly critical pessimists, miserabilism may in part be the consequence of holding them in such esteem. Were Americans to pay more attention to the writings of Noam Chomsky and Jared Diamond, perhaps they would be gloomy too.

This critical reflex reaches right into the classroom, generating a further source of negativity. In French schools, for example, the tradition is for teachers to grade harshly, and praise with excessive moderation. Under a nationwide system that awards marks out of 20, a pupil doing a *dictée* has points (or even half-points) deducted for every error; so a child swiftly ends up with zero. The idea is that all children can always do better. The result is a lack of what the French, borrowing English syntax, call "*la positive attitude*".

Fully 75% of French pupils worry that they will get bad grades in maths tests, according to an OECD study, nudging stressed-out South Korean levels (78%). A recent government-commissioned report on a small pilot experiment in some French secondary schools, where Cartesian grading had been shelved in favour of a more encouraging system, noted with some surprise that weaker pupils were absent from school less often, more confident in the classroom, and "less stressed when faced with failure".

If the French are life's critics, they are at the same time idealists, and these two make unhappy bedfellows. Thanks to the philosophers of the Enlightenment and the 1789 revolution, the concept of progress towards an ideal society has, despite periodic turmoil and bloodshed, been a powerful narrative in the French mind. The best embodiment of this is the French declaration of human rights. Unlike the American declaration of independence in 1776, which guaranteed the rights of all Americans, the French version 13 years later guaranteed the rights of all mankind.

To this day, the ambition to inspire the world with a secular republican ideal, backed by the spread of French culture and language, stirs political leaders. "France is only itself when in pursuit of an ideal," wrote Dominique de Villepin, a former prime minister, in a deliberate echo of Charles de Gaulle's reference to the country's "exceptional destiny". It is great stuff for myth-making, as De Gaulle demonstrated so masterfully after liberation from Nazi occupation. But when reality does not quite match up to ideals, self-criticism kicks in and misery results.

Left-wing French intellectuals never quite got over the failed revolutionary promise of the May ’68 student uprising, nor their disillusion at the declining influence of French thought from the 1980s onwards. Others struggled to reconcile French values with the country’s darker moments, notably under occupation. Today, “belief in a better tomorrow has come to an end,” says Christophe Prochasson, a French historian. “There is a crisis of progress.”

Put simply, the French know that they have enjoyed a fabulous way of life, and are depressed by the thought that neither the French model, nor Europe, seems able to provide the prosperity or the national grandeur it once did. The upshot is that “we are collectively animated by a sense of doom and decline,” says Dominique Moïsi, of the French Institute of International Relations. “We have in mind this great nation of ours: the major power in Europe under Louis XIV and Napoleon I, the biggest allied standing army in the first world war. Now there’s a sense of ‘What happened to us?’.”

The pleasure of pouting

France is not alone in contemplating its diminished status. Britain had a grand past too. But the post-colonial, post-industrial British do not share the French sense of national depression, partly because they never considered their empire to be part of an effort to export a culture or a model society. And, having accidentally given the world the English language, Britain feels relaxed about its global cultural influence. The contrasting decline of French, once the language of European diplomacy, high culture and polite conversation, is felt as a national wound.

Idealistic France’s painful reckoning with decline is therefore quite different to the British approach of resigned muddling-through, argues Jean-Philippe Mathy, of the University of Illinois, in “Melancholy Politics”. It is almost, says Mr Prochasson, the historian, a form of bereavement. “There is a very profound pessimism today due to the realisation that France is becoming a country like any other, and this is difficult.”

Does it matter? Certainly, France’s high suicide rate is a serious cause for concern. Dissatisfaction also makes the French a particularly fractious people to govern, ready as they are to contest, and protest, at the slightest excuse. Confidence too is elusive in a country given to pessimism, making it harder still for politicians to persuade the French to try new ways of doing things.

“A land free from American puritanism, where the pursuit of pleasure reigns supreme”

Yet pessimism has not stopped France from enjoying itself. French hedonism has survived miserabilism—or perhaps provided a refuge from it. Even in the immediate aftermath of the 1789 revolution, the country exhibited a “thirst for pleasure”, as one contemporary newspaper

report put it: “The stream of fashion, a succession of dinners, the luxury of their splendid furniture and their mistresses, are the objects that chiefly employ the thoughts of the young men of Paris.” With firework displays, extravagant fashion, circuses and carousels, Paris at the time, for the rich at least, was all about enjoyment. During *les années folles*, upper-class American tourists took the steamer to Normandy and then the railway to Paris, drawn to France, writes Harvey Levenstein, a historian, as “a land that was free from American puritanism, where the pursuit of pleasure reigned supreme”.

Nor has miserabilism discouraged the French preoccupation with beauty and taste. France does not wear its gloom like a dreary accessory. On the contrary, its culture delights in elegance, sensuality, quality and form: the exquisite hand-stitching on the haute-couture dress; the immaculately glazed *tartes aux framboises* lined up in the *pâtisserie* window. The aesthetics of daily life, the *art de vivre*, remains a source of both grand gestures and small stolen pleasures. It is no coincidence that the two biggest luxury-goods groups in the world are French.

Modern French culture may not have supplied great writers to rival Hugo or Molière, and Paris may lack the buzz of New York or London. But it is hard to argue that negativity has stifled French creativity. Would France have brought the world existentialism had Sartre been a cheerful fellow?

The critical impulse has promoted cultural innovation. Both cinema’s New Wave and French literary theory were born of critical reconstruction of what came before. Some of France’s most creative periods have followed bleak times: the flowering of painting, literature and science after its defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, or of the avant-garde in art and fashion after the horrors of the first world war. Christian Lacroix, a French designer, points out that war and revolution in France have been times of “creative reinventions, the moment new forms of luxury come into play”.

Perhaps the French need dissatisfaction and thrive on doubt. “There is a certain pleasure taken in being unhappy: it’s part of an intellectualism of French culture,” says Ms Senik. “Malaise and *ennui* are to France what can-do is to America: a badge of honour,” wrote Roger Cohen in the *New York Times* recently. Pessimism does not preclude pleasure. All that sitting around at pavement cafés, looking fashionably discontented, can be fun. Optimism is for fools; sophisticates know better. Bleak is chic—especially when opening another bottle of Saint-Emilion and reaching for the three-tier cheese trolley.

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