

The Hysterical Convert and Discrimination of the French during the Iraqi War



A quaint French bakery sits in a strip mall on the southwest side of town. Far from the neon and glitz, a friendly sign reading “Bonjour Bakery and Deli” welcomes the common passerby into a pleasant boulangerie-pâtisserie. The walls are covered with colorful photographs of the French Riviera. The morning paper is available to read at any one of several small wooden tables. The shelves are filled with fresh baguettes, sweet smelling French rolls, and assorted juices, but the real treasures lie behind a glass case at the counter. Delectable pastries, baked daily, are readily displayed here. Raspberry tarts, chocolate croissants, raisin danishes, cream filled éclairs . . . my mouth waters recalling these delicious French indulgences. There is also a menu offering, among other things, freshly made chicken salad sandwiches served on homemade baguettes.

I awoke slowly one Friday afternoon, the start of my three-day weekend, and found my boyfriend already up and dressing for the day.

“Hurry up and shower,” he smiled. “I want to get to the bakery before everything’s all picked over.”

I pushed back white cotton sheets and rolled out of bed.

We drove the short distance to “Bonjour” with our windows down, enjoying the early spring weather. Despite the current political madness—the weakly justified war overseas—we shared a light-hearted conversation about our newly planted garden and a poem I had written for my poetry class. We pulled into the strip mall that was home to the bakery and were greeted by an unexpected scene. The entire glass storefront of the bakery had been shattered. Piles of glass covered the ground and I watched as two older men appeared with a ladder to clear the remaining shards still dangling from the wooden frame.

We stepped inside and approached the counter.

“Someone smashed your window?” I asked the woman with short hair. I was still somewhat suspended in disbelief.

“Yeah. This is the second time it’s happened in two weeks.”

I turned back towards the open space that had once provided a Windex-streaked view of the parking lot and noticed a sign that had fallen from its place. It had an American flag on it, accompanied by the words ‘We support our troops’.

“Did you put that sign up after the first time?” I asked the woman.

“Nope. The sign’s been up for over a month.”

“And they still smashed your window?”

She nodded.

I looked to my boyfriend, whose eyes were wild, as he sucked down some sort of pity and rage.

“People are ignorant,” was all he said.

We stared at the scene for several more moments before distracting ourselves with the pastry selection. The glass case was unusually full for this time of day; it appeared virtually untouched. I wondered how the business of this small shop had been affected since the war began, but I didn’t want to bring it up. I was already feeling a deep sort of sadness and a small bit of disappointment in humanity. A dramatic statement maybe, but I did have to fight back tears as I watched one of the old men sweep up the shattered remains of the window.

The woman behind the counter made a phone call and arranged for the replacement of the glass storefront. Her attitude was astonishing. She wasn’t bitter or dramatically angry at all. She was matter of fact, down to business—and further, she said nothing to equate the situation with politics.

“I guess some kids just have nothing better to do,” were her words into the phone.

A nice thought on her end, but I doubt it. With twelve other storefronts to choose from, I find it more than a coincidence that “Bonjour” was the sole target, twice in a row, especially considering the current political situation; and even if it was just some kids, something had to influence their repeated choice to vandalize this *French* bakery.

We sat quietly at a table eating our croissants and drinking our juice, our minds tangled with a mess of frustrations.

One of the men that had been sweeping the glass disappeared into the back of the bakery to dispose of a bag of garbage. The remaining man continued to clear loose shards from the frame. Standing atop the ladder with an outstretched arm, he mumbled to himself, “I can’t reach up there.” His attention was diverted from the task at hand when two ladies approached the bakery. He climbed down from the ladder and opened the door for them, wishing them a good afternoon, before climbing back up and resuming the strenuous chore of reaching and removing.

Since the start of the recent war in Iraq, and France's opposition of it, an unjustified "anti all things French" sentiment has possessed a large majority of fanatics throughout the country. In this paper, I wish to relate the abrupt passionate mindset of the fanatics to Anthony Wallace's idea of hysterical conversion and the mass follower. More specifically, I will focus on the fanatics' impulsive discrimination against the French. But before an adequate evaluation of the convert and fanatic can be made, I feel it necessary to first compare Wallace's revitalization movement to the current political situation involving America and Iraq.

Wallace defines a revitalization movement as "a deliberate and organized attempt by some members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture by rapid acceptance of a pattern of multiple innovations" (*Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion* pg 348). He goes on to suggest several forces that may push the system beyond its limits of equilibrium, leading to a revitalization movement. These forces include epidemic disease, internal conflict among interest groups, a position of perceived subordination and inferiority with respect to an adjacent society, and wars. "Under conditions of disorganization, the system, from the standpoint of at least some of its members, is unable to make possible the reliable satisfaction of certain values that are held to be essential to continued well-being and self-respect" (pg 348). What I find most interesting in this comparison is that when Wallace describes some members of the group needing change and therefore initiating a movement, he is referring to members *within* Society 'A' requiring a movement *for* Society 'A'. In the case of the recent 'freedom' movement in Iraq, this was not fully the case. An outside society, Society 'B' (the United States), made the decision that a movement was necessary for Society 'A' (Iraq). The outside society even went so far as to enforce the 'needed' movement by means of military action.

Within Wallace's period of revitalization, there are six distinct steps that lead to the acceptance of a new and steady state. The first of these is the formulation of a code. An individual (Bush), or group of individuals (the U.S. government), construct a new utopian image of sociocultural organization (democracy in Iraq). This ideal is what Wallace calls the "goal culture". Contrasted with the goal culture is the existing culture, "which is presented as inadequate or evil in certain respects" (pg 350). The creation of the code involving both these cultures constitutes a reformulation of the code formulator's own maze and often fills him with a renewed confidence in the future.

The next step in the transformation process is communication between the formulators of the code and the mass of people they wish to make converts. In the case of the Iraqi war, there were several different populations the Bush administration needed to direct its rhetoric towards. The Iraqi people needed to be convinced that the military action on their homeland was for the sake of their own freedom. American citizens also needed to feel that the war in Iraq was morally justified. Here, Bush focused on the protection of America's own safety, as well as the liberation of a repressed people. These promises and persuasions are not uncommon during revitalization movements. Wallace cites that formulators of the code often preach the code to the masses in an evangelistic spirit, with promises of cultural salvation and much benefit to the target population. (pg 350)

During communication of the code, the third step is already well underway: organization. The code attracts converts. The motivations of these followers as well as the psychodynamics of their conversion experiences are usually quite diversified. As the group of converts expands, Wallace observes that it differentiates into two parts—a set of disciples and a set of mass followers. “The disciples increasingly become the executive organization, responsible for administering the evangelistic program, protecting the formulator, combating heresy, and so on” (pg 351). Wallace also notes that the “tri-cornered” relationship between the formulators, disciples, and mass followers is given an authoritarian structure due to the charismatic quality of the formulator's image. The formulator is regarded as a man to whom, from some source of wisdom unavailable to the mass, a superior knowledge and authority has been given. This justifies his claim to unquestioned belief and obedience from his followers. (pg 351) A more thorough investigation into these particular ideas follows shortly.

The remaining three steps in the revitalization process are adaptation, cultural transformation, and routinization—none of which have yet fully developed in regards to Bush and the Iraqi movement. Therefore, instead of providing a detailed breakdown of the final steps, I'd like to direct attention towards the idea of hysterical conversion and mazeway resynthesis—the two psychological mechanisms of particular importance when concerning revitalization movements.

As opposed to hysterical conversion, leaders and prophets are more likely to experience what Wallace calls a “mazeway resynthesis”. In a number of cultures, the formulator creates the new code during a hallucinatory trance. One of the unique aspects of this particular process is the emotionally central nature of the subject matter. Often new religious codes are formed during a drug-induced resynthesis. Wallace suspects that such dramatic resyntheses depend on a special biochemical milieu. However, comparable resyntheses are also accomplished more slowly, without the aid of drugs. These resyntheses involve the recombination of preexisting configurations that produce a permanent alteration of mazeway. “The new stable cognitive configuration is constructed out of materials of earlier configurations, which once rearranged, cannot readily reassemble into the older forms” (pg 352).

The hysterical conversion is more typical of the mass follower who is repeatedly subjected to suggestion by a charismatic leader and an excited crowd. Referring back once again to the current events, hysterical converts could be seen all over America at the start of the war in Iraq. Thousands of people, often ignorant of the facts, rushed towards one extreme or the other, obsessive in their beliefs and stubborn in their convictions. The behavior of these converts was not changed because of a radical resynthesis, but because of the adoption, under suggestion, of an additional social personality that temporarily replaced, but did not destroy, the earlier. These converts remain, in a sense, cases of multiple personalities. They are liable, if removed from reinforcing symbols such as flags, statues, speeches, and rallies, to lapse into earlier social personalities. (pg 352) Thus, the difference between the resynthesized person and the converted one does not lie in the nature of the code to which they subscribe, but rather in the blandness and readiness of the hysterical convert to revert, as compared to the intense stability of the resynthesized prophet. (pg 353)

All this forms an image of an awfully inconsistent and easily swayed convert—an accurate portrayal, in my opinion. Americans with very little knowledge of Iraq, the Bush administration, and French politics, quickly decided that war was the answer, Bush’s motivations were utterly compassionate, and everything French was a symbol of treason against the United States. Just as frivolously, the hippies emerged from their communes chanting old remonstrations with two fingers in the air. But, despite how meaningful or not meaningful their marches may have been, I can’t bring myself to

equate peaceful protestors with ignorant fanatics actually discriminating against an entire group of people because of a political decision made by one man. Unfortunately, this is the case with the current detestation of the French.

Up until my personal experience with the neighborhood French bakery, I'd only heard in the distance of such acts of senseless revulsion. But, like most things, once I became aware of the tangible reality of the situation, more and more incidents seemed to surface all around me. I spoke with my French professor one morning about the personal effects the current political condition had on her life. She explained that she had recently visited the DMV to renew her license, and had sat down next to a middle-aged woman waiting to do the same. The two immediately struck up an agreeable conversation, stemming from small talk about the weather and current films. At some point, far into the conversation, the woman casually asked my French professor about her barely noticeable accent. At the mention of my professor's birthplace, the woman stood up with a look of disgust and walked away declaring quite loudly, "she's French."

Another similarly jarring incident occurred while I waited in line at the post office. The woman in front of me stood at the counter with a large parcel, receiving a quote on how much it would cost to send it across the country to New York City. The postal worker took note of the zip code as well as the noticeably French name the package was addressed to.

"This is going to a René Binoche?" The worker asked uncomfortably.

"Yes." The woman was confused.

The worker lowered his voice.

"That's a French name, isn't it?"

"Well, yes it is."

"I'd make sure to insure this package ma'am. I'm not sure it's gonna make it all the way to your friend."

These incidents—shattered windows, bold-faced discrimination, the installation of fear into an innocent's everyday activities—these are true acts of terror. And they are performed by Americans who sincerely believe that what they do, they do out of love for their country. These hysterical converts, proud to call themselves patriotic, mindlessly

convert back and forth to different mindsets based on the direction that one 'all knowing' finger is pointing. So I suppose I can't really blame them. After all, monkey see, monkey do. But why is the top monkey . . . a monkey? Why were the government buildings the first places to change "French fries" to "freedom fries"? —such a childish statement, with no consequence other than instigation of wide spread prejudice. Why are intelligent, respected men stomping on French toast and scowling at French poodles? Certainly somebody "at the top" must recognize that an isolated political decision need not lead to the encouraged extermination of an entire culture.

Yet French wines continue to flow down city gutters. Enthusiastic crowds cheer as bulldozers plow over French perfumes. Lists of French restaurants and French related companies are printed in newspapers and read over public airways with one word preceding them all: boycott.

A great irony in this current state of affairs lies in the fact that so many of these anti-France, pro-America fanatics are actually hurting American business because of their actions. Remember the French bakery? It is completely American owned and operated—started up by a husband and wife team a couple years ago with the money from their savings account. Their only connection to France is in the style of pastries they bake and sell. But in the past four months, since Chirac's open opposition of the war, business has dropped 30%, and the storefront window has been replaced twice. That's just one example of hard-working Americans feeling the fanatical bee's sting of ignorance.

Another illustration of this self-defeating irony involves the protest of the Las Vegas Regional Transportation Commission's multi-million dollar purchase of ten "super-buses" from Iris Bus, a multinational company that assembles the vehicles in France. This past March, RTC's Older Americans with Disabilities Advisory Committee voted 13-0 to recommend that the RTC abandon the contract with Iris Bus. (*Las Vegas Review Journal*, April 1, 2003) Committee chairman Joseph Bifano, a former Chicago cop and registered lobbyist for the Fraternal Order of Police, said the committee will seek a court injunction barring the agency from fulfilling the contract—arguing that it was improperly granted and should be frozen. (*Las Vegas Sun*, April 11, 2003) A fellow committee member, Gerald Ernst, stated: "I would hate to think I was riding on a bus that was manufactured by an enemy" (*Sun*).

The buses, built for high speed, would be optically guided by a painted track paved along the street in a designated lane. Bus riders would wait at subway-like stops and board the buses through one of several doors using prepaid tickets. The buses would be able to stop near curbs at a precise distance allowing handicapped people to get on and off with more ease. All these improvements mean faster service and freed-up traffic. In terms of emissions, the buses would be the cleanest transit vehicles in the country—due to a hybrid diesel-electric engine. This obviously implies less pollution and healthier Las Vegas air. The buses are meant to link Downtown Las Vegas and Nellis Boulevard, one of the CAT bus system's busiest routes. But apparently those intent on showing their patriotism would prefer to wait in bumper-to-bumper traffic and breathe toxic exhaust fumes rather than think through their actions and make a decision that will *benefit* America.

RTC General Manager, Jacob Snow, points out the repercussions of the possible cancellation of the contract. "It would cost the agency more than 17 million dollars and lead directly to the cancellation of eight to twelve bus routes. We would be left with a sizable deficit in the transit account" (*R.J.*). 10 million of the 17 million dollars were distributed from the federal government—taxpayers' money. Initially, this wasn't an issue or a concern, as the money was directed towards a beneficial cause. But once the war began and thousands of Americans converted to "super-Americans", the idea that any money should be passed from the hands of *us* to *them* led to a certain amount of repulsion. "Don't give 'em one penny of United States taxpayer money," argued Bifano. "We got to unite behind our president. We got to unite behind our leaders in Washington D.C. . . . We can't give them one penny" (*Sun*). Bifano went on to explain that in addition to the welfare of the country, WWII veterans were also on his mind as he cast his vote against purchasing the buses. "There are hundreds of veterans here who rely on public transportation. Imagine how they'd feel when they take this bus" (*Sun*).

Jacob Snow stated that he was not yet sure what the outcome of the situation would be, but he knew that no comparable buses were manufactured in the United States, and more importantly, that many U.S. employees' jobs were on the line pending the cancellation of the contract. (*R.J.*)

Andre Rochat, owner of *Andre's* French restaurant on 6th street, has received numerous death threats over the phone since the start of the war in Iraq. (*Las Vegas Sun*,

April 10, 2003) Rochat owns a total of three restaurants here in Las Vegas: *Andre's* on 6th, *Andre's* in the Monte Carlo, and *Alize* in the Palms Hotel. He is recognized as the first chef to bring authentic French cuisine to Las Vegas. Rochat notified Metro police regarding the messages left on his machine, leading to a full police investigation. He stated that he was concerned about his customers' safety, as well as his own. He also pointed out, "Hurting locals doesn't make sense" (*Sun*). Business in Rochat's restaurants has slowed dramatically over the past several months, leading to quite a few American employees losing their jobs. (*Sun*)

Alas, once again the imperceptive hysterical converts, stringent in their beliefs, have disrupted American business. Examples of these obtuse actions are as numerous as the Americans that commit them. The specific stories I've chosen to tell are few among many in the Las Vegas area alone. There are thousands of other cities with countless stories of their own to share. And it is important to note that the bigotry isn't limited to radical extremists. Hundreds of thousands of American consumers have chosen to turn away from French products and French culture since Chirac's political decision. Foreign trade companies, both American and French, have been severely affected by the sudden avoidance of French related items. All the discarded French wine, currently being enjoyed by sewer rats, was purchased through American distributors. As are French cheeses, French perfumes, French clothing and accessories, and all other French products being boycotted here in the United States. But as mentioned before, despite an initial urge to hold the masses responsible for these actions, I must recognize that they are somewhat programmed by a greater power.

During a televised interview after the infamous veto, Secretary of State Colin Powell was asked if the French would "suffer consequences for their actions."

"Yes," Powell replied curtly. (*The Charlie Rose Show*, April 22, 2003)

Earlier in March, Powell had criticized France for its threat to veto any UN resolution that effectively authorized war. "The American-French relationship will suffer," he warned. (*New York Times*, March 16, 2003) His words held true, as the U.S. backlash against France has ranged from moves to reduce the importance of the Security Council and other International bodies that sustain French prestige to blows against trans-Atlantic industrial corporations that infuse American technology into French companies. According to U.S. officials, Americans investing in the French market are already

fleeing, likely to deprive the Paris stock market of investments that account for a quarter of the total value of shares on the exchange. (*International Herald Tribune*, March 17, 2003) American companies are also refusing to buy aircraft and other large-scale manufactured goods from France. There is even a rumor that the Bush administration is now actively trying to supplant France in other world export markets.

Vice President Dick Cheney remarked that, after the veto, it became “difficult to take the French seriously” (*Times*). It is hard to ignore comments like these and their influence on American thought. Indeed, the president himself gave us all something to think about, or not, when he addressed much of the world with the words:

“You are either with *us* or with the terrorists.”

Millions of Americans took these words to heart and raised their flags proudly, without really questioning the president’s black and white vision of a much more colorful issue. But such is the way of the hysterical convert, ready and willing to adopt a new social personality based on the erratic suggestions of one ‘charismatic’ leader.

Anthony Wallace writes that a successful movement, by virtue of its ability to maintain suggestion continuously for years, is able to hold the hysterical convert indefinitely. (*Magic*, pg 353) He emphasizes that it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of hysterical conversion, mainly because the process “makes possible the rapid substitution of a new cultural gestalt for an old one”, which leads to cultural transformation of whole populations. (pg 353) I sincerely hope that with the passage of time and the reevaluation of this small epoch in history, those who chose to hurriedly discriminate and act without intimate thought will have re-converted back to the thoughtful, fair-hearted, rational people I’m sure they once were. I do not believe that the current mindset of these hysterically converted Americans will survive an undeniably greater conscious and its desire for the fulfillment of a much more stable, solid truth.

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A +
A great paper, well reasoned.
beautifully written.