

Renaissance
philosophy

(chapter 3)

Private Space

Montignac is a sleepy town in the southwest corner of the country and the picture postcard of a French *commune*. It boasts a fourteenth-century castle, ancient houses with red tile roofs, and a surprisingly dense urban life for a population of three thousand. Smack in the middle of *le Périgord*, the *pays* west of Bordeaux renowned for *foie gras*, *confit*, and *cassoulet*, it is the closest town to the prehistoric site of Lascaux, a cave where twenty-two-thousand-year-old paintings of horses, buffalo, and deer cover the walls. But we will remember the town for a lesson we learned about privacy there.

In the company of Jean-Benoît's parents, we were wandering the streets in the upper reaches of the town, grumbling because we hadn't been able to visit the town's castle, which was private property. Walking back to the town's center, Julie and her mother-in-law stopped to inspect a tree that had two dozen CDs hanging from its branches. On closer inspection, we saw that it was a fruit tree and the CDs were there to scare away birds. Whether the plum-size fruits were figs or quinces, we didn't know, but before we could decide, the owner of the garden emerged from a grove of bamboo and banana trees in the back of the yard.

Without introducing himself, he settled the question of the fruit. It was indeed a fig tree. We told him we were surprised to find figs growing in France in October, and the conversation got rolling. The man told us the

history of the village, explained the contents of his garden, and mentioned that he had built his house himself. He even gave us some juicy details about local politics. ("There are lots of Dutch who buy houses here," he said, "but locals don't like them because they never spend their money at local restaurants.") We asked him about the famous Lascaux caves, and he told us it was a childhood friend of his who had discovered them in 1940. After listening to us rave about the figs, he went inside to get us a jar of his wife's homemade fig jam. His wife came back with him, and the six of us chatted for half an hour over the wooden fence, at which point he invited us inside for *l'apéro* (a drink).

The man was a perfect casual host. He was not finicky about his own appearance—we had caught him gardening, after all—and graciously presented us with a platter of peanuts, pretzels, and *pastis*. He had traveled a lot and was curious to find out what we thought of France and the French.

We had been in the country long enough by this time to know some rules about conversation. Questions North Americans consider polite, to the point of being banal, are sometimes considered rude in France—especially, "What do you do?" or, "What's your name?" We had learned that you should extract names and occupations indirectly by talking about other things like politics, culture, arts, or anything related to food. So when it was time to leave, we got ready to say, "We are very sorry to end this conversation and hope we can pursue it on another occasion," a technique that had often produced the desired result. There are other ways to get people's names. Though it sounds precious and formal to North American ears, you can ask, "What should I do to have the pleasure of speaking to you again?"

Though he'd traveled in France before, Jean-Benoît's father, a businessman, had no idea there were different rules of conversation about being too direct in these circumstances.

As he shook hands with our host before leaving, he asked, "So, what's your name?"

There was an awkward pause. Our host looked puzzled—not shocked, just perplexed, as if he didn't see the point. He pulled out a card and handed it to Jean-Benoît's father.

Mr. H.L. Brossard, *pour vous servir* (at your service).

Mr. Brossard and Jean-Benoît's father, both kind men, would not have admitted they had actually rubbed each other the wrong way. Mr. Brossard had given us a tour of his garden, taken us into his home, opened up his bar for us, and showed us pictures of his children without telling us his name. Mr. Nadeau had listened all the while wondering why our host didn't have the good manners to introduce himself. We'd been through this ourselves when we were visiting the Beaujolais (the *pays* north of Lyon) with parents of a close friend. A sports physician we met invited us into his renovated thirteenth-century castle and even took us to a private wine tasting in his village, but never told us his name or asked ours. (We slyly read it on an envelope on the dining room table). Another time, a friendly couple we met in a neighborhood restaurant in Paris actually offered us the use of their car if we ever needed it, but never told us who they were.

This reticence to offer names may be one reason the French are so often accused of being aloof. Yet these incidents had nothing to do with lack of hospitality. Perfect strangers had invited us into their homes, spent entire afternoons entertaining us, and offered us the use of their cars. The misunderstanding over introductions comes from different notions of privacy. Americans and the French simply have entirely different ideas about what information you share with strangers, and what information you don't share. Conflicting notions of privacy make the behavior of one seem inappropriate to the other.

By privacy, we don't mean the issue of legally protecting personal information. We're not even talking about ideas of personal space, though the French are clearly less finicky than North Americans are about physical proximity to strangers. By privacy here we mean each culture's intuitive sense of what's intimate, and what's public. For instance, North Americans freely discuss names and occupations in public, but these things are considered extremely private matters in France. The French freely kiss and argue in public, while North Americans consider it more appropriate to do these things in private. And that's just the beginning.

We tend to think of communication as verbal, but a lot of it (anthropologists say, most) is actually nonverbal. Even before we open our mouths,

others assess dozens of things about us. In a split second they determine whether we are dangerous or not, put us in categories, and decide whether they want to speak to us, even before a word has been uttered. Privacy is a part of this nonverbal system of communication. Or as author Polly Platt so aptly describes it in *French or Foe?*, her guidebook to French manners and more, people walk around inside a series of concentric bubbles that define what's public, what's private, what's personal, and what's intimate. Each of these bubbles can be penetrated without creating hostility if you know the codes. But if you don't know the codes, there will be trouble, and words won't save you.

Such difficulties have nothing to do with language: Jean-Benoît is perfectly fluent in French, but he still got hostile reactions from the French when he inadvertently entered the private sphere without knowing it. For a long time, when the French acted snobby, hostile, or aloof with us, we thought we were just dealing with some difficult individual characters. But eventually we understood how we were bursting privacy bubbles without knowing it. And after we understood that, we could see how different ideas of privacy explained a lot of things about the French, from the way they relate to one another and to strangers, to their attitude about money, their world view, and even their notions of political accountability.

One French custom that puzzled us was their habit of saying *bonjour* and *au revoir* every time they went in and came out of a store. It took us a while to figure out that those were the magic words in France for getting good service. You have to say *bonjour* when you enter a store (looking at the owner in the eyes) and *au revoir* when you leave, even if the owner isn't there—in which case, if it's a neighborhood store, another customer may answer for him. If you enter or leave without uttering the passwords the owner, his employees, and sometimes even the regulars will frown at you—when they're being polite. When we caught on to this behavior we, too, frowned at the rude customers who entered our regular haunts without presenting themselves.

In North America stores are extensions of the public space. Apart from large chains that force their employees to mechanically greet customers at

the door, traditionally, communication in North American stores is purpose-driven. No one speaks to you except to help you find what you need. But that's not the way it works in France. The French store is considered the extension of the owner's home—in many cases, it actually is. So the French tend to treat businesses as part of the private sphere. It's up to the customer to say something nice when entering and exiting the premises. Even an open newspaper counter in a train station has an "inside" and an "outside," and the cashier might not take your money until you've said *bonjour*. This explains why it is so hard to get good service in big stores in France. Employees are notoriously aloof in these stores. There's no ritual in place to regulate their interaction with customers. If there was a way of yelling *bonjour* loud enough to be heard by all in a thirty-five-thousand-square-foot space, maybe that would help. But neglecting to say *bonjour* to a clerk when entering a department did guarantee us bad service.

The *bonjour/au revoir* ritual is one way to secure goodwill from the French. Handshaking is another. Employees of companies have to go through the routine of shaking hands with everyone at the office when they come in and when they leave. The behavior was reproduced almost exactly by the members of Jean-Benoît's hiking club. Before heading out on an expedition everyone shook hands or kissed, and they did it again before leaving. Kissing as a salutation is a complicated matter because it is an act occasionally performed on almost complete strangers. It's a prudish thing that involves a mere rubbing of cheeks most of the time and very rarely extends to anything like a hug. Still, we learned that some people in Paris expected to give four kisses, while most people outside of Paris were satisfied with two—or sometimes three. A friend of ours, Paola, an architect, told us that the best way of expressing dissatisfaction with a colleague is to skip the handshaking session for a day or two. The offending party will almost certainly know something is amiss.

In all cultures, houses are the barometer that measure where the public ends and the private begins. In Amsterdam, Julie was amazed to see that the Dutch don't put curtains in their enormous front windows. She could see them eating their dinner as she walked down the street. The message

appears to be: nothing to hide. In rural Mexico, where we also traveled, many houses had no front doors, and if they did, they were open all the time, making the line between public and private pretty subtle. What a shock when you compare these countries to France. The French house is a categorical affirmation of its owners' privacy. You never see the inside of people's homes from the street. Houses in Paris actually turn their backs on the street; the facade is rarely as interesting as the inside courtyard. On the street side, windows have thick curtains or shutters that block out the world. In the countryside and suburbs, houses are often in the middle of gardens that are usually fenced in.

The window shutter in France was an ongoing source of fascination to us. In North America, window shutters are decorative planks fastened to the outsides of houses, but the French *use* them, almost religiously. In every household we visited, in every part of France, summer or winter, our hosts went through the same morning and evening ritual of opening all the windows, opening or closing the shutters, and then closing the windows. Thanks to this custom, whole streets in French cities and villages are blacked out at night. We were certainly the only apartment dwellers on our street who never drew a curtain or closed a shutter during the two-and-a-half years we lived there.

Like the *bonjour/au revoir* routine in stores, the custom of shutters puzzled us for a long time. Everywhere we stayed we asked our hosts why they opened and closed the shutters every day, and each time we got a different answer. One fellow said it was to block out light so he could sleep better, though that didn't explain why he closed the shutters on *all* openings of the entire apartment. Another person said the shutters helped him save on heating, but the little energy he saved with this extra insulation was certainly lost opening and closing all the windows of the house twice a day. Another host said shutters were a good replacement for curtains, but most French homes have shutters *and* curtains.

We concluded that the shutter reflex, like a lot of things in France, was probably an ancient atavism. Shutters did protect windows from destruction, or replace them in times of war and riot, which wasn't that long ago in France. But we did find another explanation: the traditional tax collection

scheme called *la taille* (the cut). France did not tax its nobles for many centuries. To tax city dwellers and peasants, they needed a system for evaluating what they were worth. Starting four centuries ago, the government contracted *fermiers généraux* (tax "farmers") to levy a certain amount of tax money in a given area. The tax farmers subcontracted the work out to lesser tax farmers who hired local delegates to spy on their neighbors and figure out how much they had in their houses. Rates of taxation were based on "apparent" wealth, judged at eyeshot by looking through people's windows. So the shutter was a tax evasion scheme, and even when France started taxing aristocrats after the Revolution, the reflex remained. The French are still staunchly defensive about the privacy of their homes.

Money is also considered part of the private sphere in France. Even though France is the world capital of luxury goods, the French often come across as hating money. It's not mere pretense. The French have an uneasy relation with the idea of money. They don't actually hate it, but it is considered a vulgar topic of conversation. No class in France earns more general disdain than the one that dwells on money: the *nouveaux riches*. If the French like money for money's sake, they don't advertise it.

Salaries are very rarely discussed in public in any context. When people do discuss them, they claim to earn less than they actually do. Although civil servants' salaries are theoretically public, the system is so riddled with perks and bonuses that it's impossible to actually know what any civil servant earns. By the same token, French tax offices have always had difficulty assessing how much money there is in the country. The switch to the euro brought a lot of cash back into the system because an estimated 80 percent of all five hundred-franc bills were said to be stashed in mattresses and pillows across the country. When French protesters demonstrate, they never openly ask for money; they wrap it in another demand like better working conditions.

The French consider money base. In his book *Le Mal Français* (*The French Disease*), former minister Alain Peyrefitte recounts a mind-boggling anecdote that illustrates how far this attitude goes. During a reception for a French Nobel Prize winner in physics, one of Peyrefitte's assistants deplored

the fact that the professor had never patented his discovery and that others (Americans) had gotten rich on his invention. One science student vehemently disagreed. "At least the French man was honest!" he said. It's as if talking about money tarnishes things.

What goes on in the French bedroom is also considered private—even where politics are concerned. We were lucky enough to be in France during the Monica Lewinsky affair that rocked the second term of Bill Clinton's presidency and watched the French relish the chance to sneer at Americans for their puritanical attitude about sex. But when the fun wore off, it was clear to us that the French failed to understand what all the fuss was about in the first place, or why Americans were making such a fuss about the president having an affair. The French truly consider sex a private matter. They don't think what politicians do with cigars in the intimacy of their own offices is the public's business. The French gossip about the sex lives of public figures at dinner parties, of course. But they don't have the same urge as Americans or the British to instantly go public with the details.

At the 1996 funeral of former president François Mitterrand (1981–95), the famous French gossip magazine *Paris Match* published a cover photo of Mitterrand's wife with his mistress and illegitimate daughter standing by her side. The photos surprised the nation, but it turned out that several hundred journalists and politicians had known about Mitterrand's mistress for the last twenty years. No one even thought about making it public. No one even criticized Mitterrand for keeping his mistress and illegitimate daughter in a mansion at taxpayers' expense while he was in power.

North Americans would see Mitterrand's behavior as immoral and as an abuse of power, but the French just think it's Mitterrand's business. His illegitimate daughter, Mazarine, even became something of a media personality since her "coming out" at her father's funeral. The French don't grill their politicians over their private conduct—or that of their family members—like Americans do. The assumption is that as long as no crime was committed, the bedroom is a private space. While an American might

think the French are opening the door to debauchery, this attitude does have one advantage. It makes politicians a lot less subject to blackmail.

The French expect people in power to run the country, not set moral standards. As a consequence, French journalists don't investigate sex scandals—or care that much about other countries'. In 2001, when France's head of their Supreme Court, Roland Dumas, was charged in a corruption case involving his mistress, not a single French talk show asked Dumas's wife how she felt about her husband having an affair. It was a private matter. An outsider may jump to the conclusion that the French have no morals, but what they really have is a different idea of what constitutes a morally reprehensible action, and what level of scrutiny is acceptable.

But there is no doubt that they are more tolerant about extra-conjugal affairs. During our stay, the national train service ran an add showing four pairs of feet popping out from under a duvet. The text read: "Tell your spouse you're on a business trip." According to statistics, the number of Americans who admit to having committed adultery is 50 percent—the same number as in France. Adultery is a big sin in France, like elsewhere, but not the same kind. In the United States, adultery is a breach of trust, or a breach of contract. The French are primarily concerned about the impact it has on family life. The family is still pivotal in France, and ruining a family is more appalling than a breach of contract, which happens all the time.

We lived a short walk from Pigalle, which was once Paris's red-light district. The crowds we saw heading there were mostly busloads of tourists on their way to drink champagne and ogle the skimpily dressed dancers at the neighborhood's cabarets. In the mind of foreigners, especially Anglo-Americans, French is almost synonymous with sex, and many people would swear that the French are the most lecherous people in the world. The French do talk a lot about love and sex, and often in graphic detail. They have a gigantic body of poetry and writing dating back to the eleventh century that testifies to their interest in exploring new dimensions and new postures. The Marquis de Sade was French, and Nabokov, the author of *Lolita*, though Russian, was published in Paris, as was Henry Miller, author of *Tropic of Cancer*. And a great part of their film production over the last century has been dedicated to exploring the frontier between

good taste and bad taste. Talking about sex graphically is acceptable behavior in public—up to a certain point—but more as an abstract idea than a testimony of one's actual conduct. Regarding this, they come out, paradoxically, as rather prudish. The French don't even have a term for French kiss, except the very vulgar *rouler une pelle* (literally, roll a shovel). And it may well be that they prefer the heroics and the talking to the actual act.

The French pay a price for being so defensive about the private lives of their leaders, though. Even for matters far more serious than sex, they are sadly neglectful about calling their politicians to accounts. Every month, the prime minister hands each of his ministers an envelope with fifteen thousand euros in cash for discretionary expenses. Ministers are not expected or required to report on what they do with this spending money. Despite the French National Assembly's vast powers to investigate such matters, by tradition, or out of convenience, politicians are rarely made accountable for their spending. (This practice was forbidden by the new prime minister, Jean Pierre Raffarin, in 2002.) Since all ministers benefit from this kind of corruption, no one has been willing to take on the system. Besides, it's no secret to the public, and they aren't doing anything about it, either.

The French media don't even seem to understand what "conflict of interest" means. Journalists often sneer at the idea of political accountability, calling it an Anglo-Saxon concept. In recent years, a generation of young French judges, who are not part of the traditional political class, have been trying to stop the systematic corruption in the political system by nailing some high-profile politicians. Their investigations into party financing scandals have revealed that all of France's political parties are involved (one political party asks for kickbacks and pays the other parties to keep quiet). Yet even as the judges unveil dozens of political scandals, the French public has been surprisingly indulgent about corruption. They tend to think that once a wrong act has been punished it turns back into a private matter. So they reelect politicians in spite of allegations of corruption, or even after some have been found guilty of fraud. The French media have not exactly been trained to hunt out corruption, and stringent privacy laws haven't helped them. In the early 1970s, the *Assemblée*

Nationale passed an anti-libel law that would make reporters guilty of libel if they *intended to harm* a plaintiff's reputation, even if the facts revealed were true!

The French are horrified by Americans' attempts to develop the Internet and the Web by allowing companies to document individuals' transactions, profile their spending habits, and trade those profiles as commodities. France's privacy laws prevent companies from using personal information of any kind either for marketing purposes or to gain credit information. In France, there is no such thing as a private company keeping records of people's credit ratings. That's the government's business, and the French are even wary of letting the government get too much information about them. It is forbidden to ask questions about ethnic origin or religion on national censuses. A landlord in Lille asked his tenants to indicate their ethnic origin on an informal survey in 1999, and it turned into a national scandal. (See chapters 15 and 21 for more on this.)

In some ways the French are more guarded than North Americans are, but in other ways they are definitely more open. We found them extremely welcoming toward strangers on the whole, though not in the way North Americans are. For instance, the French don't show guests around their homes. It's simply not part of their concept of hospitality. Guests who come to dinner or for *l'apéro* are pretty much restricted to the living room and the dining room. The doors to the rest of the rooms are usually closed. During our first Christmas season in France, we were invited by a French friend to stay at his parents' place in Pau, near the Spanish border. Our friend is married to a French-Canadian woman. The four of us slept on the second floor; his parents' room was on the first. When we got up the next morning, the doors to every room on our floor were wide open. When we went downstairs for breakfast, the doors on his parents' floor were shut, as were the shutters.

North Americans are always impressed (though not always pleased) by how much protocol and ritual still exists in France. One reason is that the French consider eating a public act. When North Americans try to imitate French meals, they come across as overly formal and uptight. They've missed the point. The French aren't formal just because they enjoy rules

and decorum. Since eating is a public act, it follows clear rules everyone agrees on. Diners place their napkins on their laps as soon as they are seated. Cutlery is handled a certain way, and dishes are served in a certain order. The dining room—not the kitchen—is the most public room in the French house.

The French don't do this for show. It's an automatic reflex. They don't understand why North Americans eat at all hours and in any circumstances. (Eating is in the private sphere in North America. You do what you want, and it's nobody's business.) A Christmas shopping trip to Paris's *grands magasins* confirmed our theory. We decided to eat at the cafeteria of *Au Printemps*, one of Paris's upscale department stores, and expected the casual lawlessness one usually sees at tables in cafeterias. Instead, all the French families were sitting with their cloth napkins on their laps, holding their cutlery correctly (knife in the left hand, fork in the right), taking their time as if they were enjoying a Sunday dinner. The food on their trays was arranged in three courses: appetizer, main course, and dessert, with water or wine. Pretty civilized for last-minute Christmas shoppers. Although *Au Printemps* is an upscale store, the behavior of its clients is more the rule in France than the exception. On every road trip we ever took we saw people acting the same way at *L'Arche*, a roadside cafeteria chain.

One of the reasons the French stay skinny in spite of their eating habits is that they don't snack much. Snacking flies in the face of their definition of eating: when you snack, you're doing what you want in your own private way. For the French, it's an invasion of the private over the public sphere—a little like someone talking loudly on a cellular phone on the train. Whenever the concierge in our building saw us eating an apple, drinking a coke, or eating a sandwich on the run, he looked us in the eyes and wished us *bon appétit*. He said it with a smile, but something about his tone made it feel like a mild slap on the wrist. What is so remarkable about eating an apple in the elevator? It's an abrogation of the rules of eating.

Conceptions of private and public explain a lot about the way the French converse. During the last year of our stay, we were invited to a housewarming party of a friend of ours, Dalila, a French woman of Algerian

parentage. Dalila's parties were always interesting cultural mixing pots. That night there were at least fifty guests, half English speaking and half French, the English on one side of the apartment and the French on the other. We floated back and forth between these two worlds. On the English-speaking side, people started conversations by asking our names and what we were doing in France. English conversation was like a game of handball where players just try to keep the ball in the air.

On the French side, no one ever asked our names. We were admitted into conversations when we spoke up and expressed an opinion on something, preferably with wit. French education and film policy were the topics that night. One young man argued that both were in a crisis. Another said that both were fine. Everyone else added their bit, supporting or attacking positions. No one ever came to a conclusion: it wasn't really the point. French conversation is not cooperative. It's about scoring points and proving you have something interesting to say. People that night spoke at the top of their lungs, interrupted each other, veered off onto new angles without warning, argued, sought confrontation, and didn't particularly try to resolve disagreements. And at the end, we exchanged names and a minimum of personal information, and expressed the hope of seeing each other again.

Again, it's all about different notions of private and public. At Dalila's party we had moved between two sets of privacy rules. The English freely asked personal questions that the French would consider too private to broach with a stranger. Yet the French argued—something the English definitely prefer to do in private.

Different definitions of private and public spheres also affect how couples act in public. As a bicultural couple, we had experienced this ourselves, but only realized what was going on when we read an excellent book on French-American cultural differences called *Cultural Misunderstandings*, by French ethnologist Raymonde Carroll. Carroll is herself married to an American ethnologist, which is an ethnological experiment of sorts. She says the typical American couple seeks to display harmony. American spouses rarely contradict each other in public, but instead try to show support for one another. Arguing and criticizing one another in public is regarded as distasteful, if not dysfunctional. It's something you do in private.

The French expect exactly the opposite: there's something wrong with a couple that doesn't contradict one another in public and constantly displays harmony. In their minds, a relationship should be strong enough to withstand differences, which are only normal in a couple. All the better if differences are displayed in public with wit and spirit—it makes conversation more interesting. It's not that French spouses disagree all the time and that Anglo-Americans never argue. The behavior is just restricted to different spheres.

Conversation, according to Raymonde Carroll, has a different function in both cultures. We realized this in the subway. At rush hour, the only thing distinguishing the Paris *métro* from the Tokyo subway is that nobody is paid to do the pushing. The French have a very discreet way of forcing their way into the jammed subway cars. While Americans tend to push their way forward in crowds with their elbows, the French simply turn their back and enter backwards. And then, no matter how many body parts get mingled in the crush, the French never say anything to each other. For the French, talking is a way of making contact with people, of getting to know them, and they don't want to know strangers in the subway. Americans have exactly the opposite reflex. Partly because physical proximity with strangers is so unsettling for them, they talk out of embarrassment, and as a way of marking distance from others. If an American ends up talking to a French person in this situation, the French person only tries to avoid engaging in a conversation, with the predictable consequence: each rubs the other the wrong way.

Carroll mostly writes about cultural differences that create misunderstandings in personal situations, but judging from what we observed in France, her ideas might also explain some misunderstandings that take place between countries. While we were in Europe we watched France and the United States disagree about some very serious issues: the bombings of Kosovo, different international treaties, the World Trade Organization negotiations in Seattle. During every conflict, the press and diplomatic circles reacted with Pavlovian predictability. The Americans blamed the French for disagreeing all the time, and the French criticized Americans for lacking subtlety and always thinking they were right.

Americans are definitely irked by the French habit of contesting the United States on every issue, but what really bugs the French is that the Americans seem to expect everyone to agree in every instance. We started to wonder if Raymonde Carroll's theory of couples' behavior didn't also apply to France and the United States on the international stage. Americans want nothing more than a perfect show of harmony among allies. The French think that if the relationship is strong enough, it should be able to withstand strong differences in public.

It is very difficult for a foreign observer to define what's private and what's public in a culture, what's intimate and what's open, what you show and what you hide, what is intuitively affirmed or understated. We're hardly conscious of these rules in our own culture. Yet entire populations have things they want to show, and things they want to hide. North Americans like to hide the role of their State. It's not that the American or Canadian State is particularly small, but we don't affirm it. Business, private interests, and community life are what we like to talk about. The State has a lot to do with the way we live our lives, but we play down its importance. It's not a fundamental part of our identity.

But it is for the French. The French State is so central to their identity—and they're so proud of its accomplishments—that they often attribute to it deeds that are not the State's doing at all. For instance, most of the redistribution of wealth in France is carried out by employers and unions, not the State. Religion, local cultures, and local government are also important elements of French culture, yet the French downplay them the same way we downplay the State. The French rarely talk about the economy, even though economic success is an important part of their way of life. That doesn't mean the economy isn't there. It is just part of France's "private life."