

THE END OF THE FRENCH BONVIVANT ? *A few observations on Leisure Spending in France*

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The world has it that the French are "Bonvivants"⁽¹⁾ and scores of languages have adopted the famous saying 'To live like God in France', meaning France is the best if not the only place in the world to enjoy all the pleasures of life.

How appropriate are these expressions still in 1995 and how has leisure time spending in France been affected by the profound mutation of the French society.

In order to get a clearer understanding, it may be helpful to consider some of those factors which determine the type, quality and quantity of leisure time spending. (The limited scope of this study and the very richness and cultural variety of both the French population and their traditions constrain us to focus on the overall picture rather than on regional customs or socio-economic group behaviour.)

Assuming that leisure time is the time a person or a group of persons, after deducting all sorts of working time (at the job, at school, at home) and work related "in betweens" (transport, sleep), have available to consecrate to non-obligatory activities, five major questions can be raised:

1. How much leisure time do the French really have in 1995?
2. What impact have changing consumer habits had on leisure time spending?
3. How does the ongoing rural desertification ⁽²⁾ influence Leisure time spending habits?
4. Is there a relation between changing family structure and changing leisure habits?
5. How do the French in 1995 spend week-day and week-end leisure time and holidays?

1. How much leisure time do the French really have in 1995?

The French work on average 8 hours a day, 5 five days a week (Fig.1). Time spent in transportation to and from the working place has steadily increased in France due to growing concentration of the work force in major urban areas, compelling more and more of them -rather ironically- to find lodgings farther and farther away from the city-center: it is far from being an exception to encounter people in the Paris area who daily spend 3 to 4 hours in commuting. The average daily transportation time, though, seems to be around 2 hours in France.

Persistent unemployment, however, and slow economic recovery have in the past 15 years triggered off multiple experiments with job-sharing and further reduction of working time; former Socialist Prime Minister Michel Rocard-like the German Chancellor Helmut Kohl-is among a growing number who advocate a 4-day working week. While

(1) hedonists

(2) i.e. depopulation

Figure 1.

FACTOR:	Source	France	Japan
Annual working hours	1993	1,678	1,913
Paid holidays/year	1993	25to30	10
Week off/year	1993	5	2
Living Cost ^(a)	1989	111	186
Salary/month	1993	196.000¥	393.200¥
Total holidays/year	1992	154 ^(b)	120 ^(b)

(a) Factor 100 corresponds to living cost in New York.

(b) including Saturdays, Sundays

this latter still appears utopic, the overall structure of the workforce has considerably changed with slightly over 20% of the total work-force being involved in 'alternative' working schemes such as part-time work, interim work, retraining-programmes, intermittent work, seasonal work, thus creating more 'compulsory leisure time' for many. This in addition to 25 paid holidays a year, a multitude of National and Religious holidays and two-day week-ends.

Thus the average French citizen has about 4 leisure hours a day and 154 free days per year.

2. *Changing consumer habits.*

The present unemployment rate in France has broken the 11.5% barrier (3,708,000 jobless in August 1995) against 3.2% in Japan. The slight improvement of the overall economy initiated under, but not basically generated by the hesitating economic policy of the center-right Balladur government, and the in last summer by the Juppe government decided additional tax levy have all but succeeded to offset the psychological impact of the threat of unemployment on the wage-earning households.

Literally speaking everybody, in all socio-professional categories knows and fears that they are not anymore shielded from unemployment. Hence the increase of shelter investments such as real estate: the house owning rate in France rose from 46% in 1973 to 54% in 1992, and the part of the household budget that goes to the housing (20.5% in 1991 up from 15.3% in 1970) has, together with healthcare spending, shown the strongest evolution since 1970: up from 3.2% to 5.8% in 1991, a tendency which seems to have been clearly intensified in the last 4 years.

On the other hand the proportion of income invested in savings has declined significantly from almost 19% in 1970 to 12.7% in 1992. Partially, this is due to current low interest rates and a somewhat shaken confidence in the banking system⁽¹⁾, but presumably also to the combined psychological impact of a destabilised labour market

(1) Credit Lyonnais banking scandal.

and an economy too slow to recover. The prevailing 'fin de siècle' mood has, moreover, been exacerbated by a loss of faith in those institutions which have traditionally embodied the cultural values of the French society: the political parties have sunk into corruption; the catholic Church seems out of touch with the realities of life; the National Education System is constantly being questioned; the judiciary system has suffered an unprecedented loss of confidence; the role of France and the French language in the world has diminished; and even the image of the presidency has been tarnished after recent revelations over President François Mitterrand's collaboration with the Vichy-regime at the end of World War II or the in May 1995 elected President Jacques Chirac's undelicate handling of the international community over the France's resumption of nuclear testing.

In a similar way, a gradual reduction of household consumption conveys the prudence with which the French face the future: household spending in 1992 was 1% down from the 2.9% increase in 1990 and previsions for 1995 suggest that despite some consumer friendly government incentives such as the "Balladurette-measure" and since September 1995 a similar "Juppette measure"⁽¹⁾, the phantom of unemployment and ever rising income taxes will continue to haunt households and, consequently, have a negative impact on their leisure spending.

This predominantly pessimistic social context has -not surprisingly- boosted one of the most flourishing Leisure Industries: the games of chance on which, in 1992, the French families spent 1,280 trillion ¥-a 45% increase over the last 5 years. In a defeatist 'après nous le déluge'⁽²⁾ mood they try their luck in increasing numbers at lotteries,

Figure 2.

PART OF HOUSEHOLD SPENDING FOR LEISURE ACTIVITIES					
France : 7.4%			JAPAN : 10.3%		
64.500¥/year/person			113.400¥		
Top Priority in life					
France			Japan		
	budget	value	budget	value	
1. Housing:	20.5%	1	18.9%	2	
2. Health:	9.8%	2	10.9%	3	
3. Leisure:	7.6%	3	24.3%	1	
4. Food:	19.2%	4	20.4%	4	
5. Clothes:	6.3%	5	6.1%	5	
6. Durables:	7.7%	6	4.6%	6	
7. Transport:	16.1%	7	8.0%	7	

(1) Destined to boost the car-manufacturing sector, under the provisions of the measure, the government would pay an additional 100.000¥ for each car older than 10 years turned in, on condition that the owner purchases a new one.

(2) After us the heavens can fall ?

horse-races, casinos and T.V. games.

With a reduction of the average income growth rate from 3.8% in the seventies to 1.9% in the nineties and an average monthly salary of 196.000¥, leisure spending accounts for 7.4% of the average household budget, ranking 6th, although it is ranked 3rd under the top-priorities in the lives of the French (Fig. 2).

3. Continuing Rural Desertification with hopes for a reversal and its impact on leisure time spending.

France has traditionnally been a nation of farmers, knights and princes. The princes have survived, the knights have integrated themselves into the ranks of the 'bourgeoisie' and the working middle class, and the farmers ... have almost disappeared!

Over the last 20 years, indeed, the share of agriculture in the GNP has been rapidly declining from 10% to 3%), while the service sector has grown to a considerable proportion: from 50% to 65% in 1993.

The combined effects of the democratisation of higher education, the lure of high salaries and comfortable living conditions in the big cities, and the inexorably declining living standards of the farming class, have accelerated the process of social desertification in the rural areas.

At the end of the 60s, local authorities in rural areas embarked upon massive programmes to prevent people from moving out, building a complete leisure infrastructure (tennis courts, swimming pools, shopping centers etc.). These measures, however, failed to prevent the Exodus to the big cities such as Paris, Marseille, Lille, Toulouse, Lyon, Bordeaux.

Medium size cities (between 100,000 and 250,000 inhabitants) tried to reverse that movement by making their cities more consumer-friendly, by offering high-quality education and training, and by attracting large companies especially in the field of information and high-technology to the by now innumerable 'Technopoles' and 'High-Tech' parks. Their modest success, however, was no match for Paris, Ville Lumière, where the best schools, the best universities, the best jobs and top-entertainment are to be found.

Even the ambitious programme of 'delocalisation' launched in 1991 as the brainchild of France's first woman Prime Minister Edith Cresson, the obvious purpose of which was to revitalise the French Provinces by relocating state owned or-managed services and enterprises from the capital to the French Hinterland, has met with strong opposition from the personnel involved; the plan seems to be slowly taking off and may make a modest contribution to the strenghtening of local economies and consequently of the local leisure industry.

Thus, with 74% of the French population living in urban areas of which 20% (over

10 million inhabitants) are in Paris ⁽¹⁾ alone, old tendencies in leisure time spending have been intensified and new trends developed by the professionals of the Leisure Industry:

a) Week-end Urban Desertification

Some 20 years ago it was the privilege of a happy few. But in 1995 a growing number of citydwellers chose and can afford to spend their week-ends in a cottage in the countryside. An immediate consequence of the rural desertification, scores of farms or houses were and still are for sale at give-away prices. Parisians especially (but also scores of foreigners) have invaded the countryside where they rather clumsily try their hands at gardening, often to the amusement of the local population. The Friday night exodus from Paris to the 'Campagne' is a real plight and so is the Sunday evening return, all the relaxing benefits of the country life vanishing in hour-long delays in up to 60 km long traffic jams.

b) The reaction of the tourist industry

The tourist industry has not failed to respond to this need in city-dwellers for a relaxing week-end or holiday amidst Nature. Since the eighties, they have been creating a comprehensive network of 'Gîtes Ruraux', and 'Tables vertes': the former being a fully equipped house in the countryside rented by the week, the latter offering lodging and a taste of regional gastronomy in the local host family's house. These facilities, at the same time boosting local economies, are only one expression of what has become a successful and lucrative 'Green Tourism' industry.

4. Changing Family structure-changing leisure habits?

The so-called "family explosion" in the eighties has in the nineties assumed such proportions (figure 3) as to cause more than one observer to express real concern for the

Figure 3.

total number of households in 1990 : 25.5 million			
Family type:	1970	1980	1992
bachelors	26.5%	27.7%	31.2%
bachelor men	16.8%	18.0%	28.6%
bachelor women	10.4%	12.2%	21.2%
married	61.9%	60.1%	55.2%
1 person household	22 %	24.6%	27.1%
monoparental hh	4.4%	4.5%	6.8%
living together	3.6%	6.3%	12.2%

(1) Two expressions in the French language "monter à Paris" and "descendre en Province" reflect this striking reality : Paris is a country within a country, proudly clinging to this marriage of convenience with the provinces.

cohesion, if not the future itself of the French society, while others consider it an ultimate manifestation of individual freedom.

This growing diversity of family types could not but generate new leisure activities. Encounter-clubs, encounter-services by minitel (a unique home-interaction tool precursor of the Internet, which grants access-over the phonenumber and through the intermediary of a small screen to a large variety of service data bases), bachelor dancing parties and tailored holiday formula's for bachelors are flourishing, while nationwide improved childcare and baby-sitting facilities allow monoparental heads of family to have a ball once in a while.

5. How do the French in 1995 spend week-day, week-end leisure time and holidays?

a) Leisure on weekdays: Family-centered?

After a long day at work, the French have a definite tendency to spend the evening at home with their family. The degree of individual family cohesion and the extent to which day-time activities have an impact on the psyché of its individual members, determines the type of leisure: pseudo-leisure activities (PL), which are activities acting basically like protective screens against anything or anybody the presence of which might be experienced as an aggression, or genuine leisure activities (GL).

Figure 4 gives an idea of the extent to which the French-like the Japanese-have been transforming their houses into fortresses of leisure. T.V watching tops listening to the radio and reading a newspaper as the number one leisure evening activity (fig.5), while one child out of two plays videogames regularly.

Three public channels, 2 private channels (M6 for American series and ARTE, a Franco-German joint-venture for cultural programs), Canal+⁽¹⁾ are the only choice the French have⁽²⁾, which is surprising for a country that features among the world leaders in the development of High-tech Communication Technology. The reasons though are obvious: poor knowledge of foreign languages on the viewers side - dubbed American series remain successful but subtitled movies are only programmed late at night- and the deliberate strategy of the T.V. channels and the national authorities to promote the French dream through collective rituals such as amply broadcasting chance games. Identification with the winners, the 'why not me?' reflex, the recurring suspense 4 times a week, they all contribute to keep alive the dream of many French to make it one day.

T.V. has thus earned the questionable status of an interacting member of the family, linking parents and/or children in joy or horror, making or breaking the family over

(1) By 1992 only 17.6% of the households subscribed to Canal+and bought the indispensable signal decoder.

(2) By 1991 only 3.3% of households had subscribed to cable T.V. and only 2.5% had a parabolic antennae for satellite T.V.

Figure 4

FAMILIES WHO POSSESS AT LEAST		
	France	Japan
■ 100 books	31.5%	—
■ 26 to 100 books	34 %	—
■ 1 to 25 books	29.1%	—
■ no books	4.7%	55,546¥ ⁽¹⁾
■ Music listening device	65.1%	73.5%
■ Stereo set	40.8%	61 %
■ CD player	5.1%	47.5%
■ Minitel	9.8%	—
■ Black & white T.V.	2.9%	—
■ Colour T.V.	90.9%	99 %
■ Video camera	14.5%	26 %
■ Telephone	93.7%	98 %
■ Computer	6.9%	12.2%
■ Car	77.4%	78.6%
■ Videorecorder	40.8%	63.8%

(1) average yearly spending on books

Figure 5.

PROPORTION OF FRENCH PEOPLE OVER 14 WHO:			
	1973	1981	1989
■ read a newspaper everyday	55%	46%	43%
■ never read a newspaper	23%	29%	21%
■ read -5 books/year	14%	19%	19%
■ read -10 books/year	9%	9%	12%
■ read +25 books/year	22%	19%	17%
■ listen to the radio everyday	72%	72%	66%
■ never listen to the radio	12%	11%	15%
■ Listening Time H/week	17	16	18
■ Watch T.V. every day	65%	69%	82%
■ never watch T.V.	6%	4%	5%
■ Average watching time H/week	16	16	20

political, social or economic issues, and often too, functioning as a screen between the partners of a family: in a society where 96.2% of men and 74% of women between 25 and 45 years old are working, T.V. in the evening is an ideal medium to avoid stress-contamination (both partners thus deliberately avoid contaminating the atmosphere by talking about their professional, financial, child-related problems etc.).

This to the detriment of an authentic leisure activity, that -in times long past-

was a most essential ingredient in the well-being of the family: eating 'en famille'. The era when the meal was a real feast for the palate and the dining table, a not always appreciated altar of family reunion has long gone; and readymade deepfrozen paëlla 'prepared in grand-mother's way' or canned Sauerkraut with sausages in Gewürtzstraminer have gradually replaced authentic cooking, especially in the increasing number of young households, where the wife wants or has to work to help make ends meet.

The above should not have one worry over the future of the gastronomical miracles of French cuisine: there still are scores of grand-mother cordon-bleus around and excellent restaurants and wine-growers all over the country continue to provide -although not for every purse, and less and less on weekdays- exceptional moments of palatal ecstasy.

Family games such as Monopoly, card-playing, chess, snakes and ladders or the popular 'Trivial Pursuit' remain valued-though rather periodic- 'time-killers' on cold winter evenings or boring Sunday afternoons. Even the most intimate game, sexuality, continues to score high as a leisure activity: 45% of the masculine population and 48% of the female population are "very satisfied" with their sexual life⁽¹⁾.

b) Week-ends: alternance of family-centered and individual activities

As the French salarymen or -women in both public and private sectors as a rule don't work on Saturdays and Sundays, and more and more schoolgoing children have their Saturday off, the Week-end is a source of leisure showing some remarkable disparities.

For those city-dwellers who do not flee to the countryside or to the beach, and for most country-side residents, Saturday morning is above all the time for prolonged breakfasts with croissants, ficelles and hot chocolate, of family shopping in the nearby shopping center, often followed by eating out (Mc Donalds is present in every major shopping center as a mostly ignored insult to the delicious but inexorably declining cooking skills of many a housewife) and a stroll in the park or window-shopping.

Saturday afternoon is filled with cultural activities for the young: music, painting, or ballet at the local academy or sports at the local stadium, while being a nice opportunity for housewives to consecrate to household tasks put on hold during the week; evening leisure spending includes an unquantifiable number of activities, of which the most popular are movie-going, dancing and eating out.

Sunday has often been qualified as the most boring day of the week: except for the bakery, the butcher in the countryside, a few Arab grocery stores, and the horse-racing betting shops, everything⁽²⁾ is closed.

It usually starts with "La grasse matinée" (having a long lie in), mass 'en famille' for

(1) 1993 Report on the sexual behaviour of the French, ACSF

(2) Stores like the Swedisch IKEA (furniture) or Virgin (Musicrecords) are major pro-leaders in the debate with the goverment over the appropriateness of allowing stores to open on Sundays their strongest argument being: "Shopping=Leisure").

the catholics (80% of the population, although not all practicing) and lunch-usually the best of the week.

The afternoon is a textbook example of family-explosion: men go to watch the local soccer-team, the horse races or a cycling race, socializing and drinking with friends, the children, depending on the social class they belong to, spend their time in a youth movement (scouts, youth-clubs), in the streets, or playing in their room, while mothers spend their time on the phone or around a coffee-table with friends or neighbours. In the evening, once again T.V. seems to operate as a catalyst for family-regrouping.

Leisure activities such as visiting friends or family, and amusement parks or zoos, are certainly popular, but their sporadic character excludes them from the scope of this study.

c) Holidays: tradition confronts alternative formulas

Sipping a cocktail under the palm trees overshadowing the Mediterranean Sea, surfing in the impressive Atlantic Ocean's waves in Europe's biggest nudist camp at Montalivet, observing wild horses in the Camargue, hiking or skiing in the Alps or the Pyrenees, dancing on the golden beaches of Guadeloupe or Martinique, some of France's most exotic overseas territories, or merely strolling on the Champs Elysées, the world's most beautiful avenue or in the caves of Lascaux: France seems to offer all a tourist's heart can desire, and, indeed, all German marks, Danish crowns or Dutch guilders can buy.

Budget-consciousness, ardent monolingualism, and the exceptionally rich cultural and natural diversity of France, make it the number one destination for the French holiday-maker too. Indeed, only 17.7% of the French travel abroad scoring considerably higher than the Japanese (8.6%) but far lower than another island nation : the United Kingdom with 52.9%. Abroad, the most popular destinations remain Spain (cheap and close), Northern Africa (French-speaking and cheap), the overseas French provinces and territories (cheap, French speaking, exotic).

More and more French, however much they continue to favor the two great classics of holiday spending, i.e. 3 weeks at the beach in summer and two weeks skiing in winter, have to yield to the facts, and resort to shorter and/or cheaper holiday formulas; and even shorter journeys may make deep cuts in their budget due to steep -but illegal- price hikes in accomodation, attractions and food at tourist resorts during high season.

Green or industrial⁽¹⁾ tourism have shown to be valuable alternatives, combining business with pleasure while at the same time being more budget-friendly. The coctail of the moral values crisis and the economic crisis have generated an excessive form of tourism which seems to catch on: catastrophe-tourism.

The French Ministry of Tourism, in releasing its figures for the 1994 tourist season,

(1) All kinds of factories, from car manufacturers to brewers to steel plants, open their doors to the public, thus creating a dynamic interaction of 3 interests : education, leisure and advertisement.

confirmed the above-mentioned changes in the French tourist. While 44% of the French preferred the sea, 24% the countryside and 14% the mountains this year, the general tendency remained also in 1995 one of growing austerity: the French travel less, less far and opt for the most economic solution, to the great dismay of hotel and restaurant owners.

* * *

Thus the present economic, social and labour conditions create more leisure time, for smaller leisure budgets, practiced in more different ways by a more and more socially diversified group; and while the Leisure Industry tries to cope with this unfortunate situation, through the promotion of “cheaper-for-the-same-quality” or “dreams within reach” leisure products, the dethroned French bonvivants may have to wait a few more years before God decides to come and live in France again.

APPENDIX

SCHEME OF SOME CULTURAL PRACTICES IN FRANCE		
■ Holiday travel:	59.8%	
■ Average duration:	26.3days	
■ Summer travel:	26.3%	
■ Travel abroad:	17.7%	
■ Go to the movies ⁽¹⁾	49%	1
■ Go to a fair	45%	2
■ Domestic travel	42%	3
■ Visit a museum	30%	4
■ Visit historic monument	28%	5
■ Go to public dance	28%	6
■ Attend sports game	25%	7
■ Exhibition painting/sculpture	23%	8
■ Zoo	22%	9
■ Foreign Travel	17%	10
■ Amateurs show	14%	11
■ Theatre	14%	12
■ Rock/Jazz concert	13%	13
■ Folk	12%	14
■ Music-hall, Entertainment	10%	15
■ Circus	9%	16
■ Classical music	9%	17
■ Ballet	6%	18
■ Operetta	3%	19
■ Opera	3%	20

(1) number of French, over 15 years old, who in the last 12 months

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