BETWEEN STEREOTYPES, TRUTH AND MYTHS: THE PREDICAMENT OF CIVILIZATION TEACHERS[1]

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"The study of the French culture has recently become a recognized discipline and a cause for much puzzlement among teachers."[2] This sentence was written some twenty-two years ago. It is fair to say that the "puzzlement among teachers" has not quite disappeared. Why? This is the question I would like to try to answer by reflecting on the changes that took place in the theory and practice of civilization teaching in foreign language departments. My remarks will be based on my experience as a teacher of French in American universities, but I believe that, to some extent at least, I am addressing a problem that is common to all foreign language teachers. After presenting a brief summary of what happened over the last thirty years in undergraduate and graduate curricula, I will look at some of the reasons why changes occurred. This will lead us to the key question: is there a field called civilization, and, if so, how do we define it? Finally, I will examine the options we have for teaching civilization in a foreign language classroom.

I

Not too long ago, foreign language departments used to concentrate their efforts on the study of language and literature. To learn about French society or French political institutions, one had to take courses in other departments. The first French "Cours de Civilisation française", as Lawrence Wylie tells us, was offered in Paris and other cities in 1919 as a way to keep some of the World War I American soldiers busy before a peace treaty could be signed sending them home.[3] At the time, it was obvious that the best introduction to France was a survey of its past, and their teacher's mission was to present the whole of French history in thirty lectures. (The challenge sounds familiar). Then, in the twenties and thirties, a growing number of college students went to France for a year of study. They would naturally take this civilization course that was being offered at the Sorbonne and at other universities. At the same time, in the United States, courses titled "Introduction to France: A Survey of French History and Civilization" began to appear. But until the sixties and even into the seventies, such courses were few and considered of peripheral interest, and they were totally absent from the graduate curriculum. A clear indication of the view

French departments had on the matter can be detected in the title of one of them offered at Harvard in the thirties: "Social Background of French Literature".[4] The goal of language learning was the study of literature. Civilization courses were supposed to provide information considered as useful, but not essential, for a good understanding of literary masterpieces. The situation was pretty much the same in the United Kingdom, although some universities there took notice early of a coming new trend.[5]

After the Russians launched their first Sputnik in 1957, and succeeded in placing it in orbit, there was a flurry of activity in the U.S.. The American government suddenly decided not only to catch up with them technologically and send a man to the moon, but also to develop the study of the language and the civilization of countries important to American interests. The National Education Defense Act was passed in 1958 and summer institutes to teach foreign languages and civilizations were set up. Although that gave a boost to civilization courses, that was not enough for them to gain legitimacy.[6]

Where are we today? The traditional course in French history is still in existence in most American universities, but a change has clearly taken place: many foreign language departments now offer several major tracks: a literature track, a linguistics or teaching track and a civilization track. In addition, at least one course in civilization is offered at the graduate level. It does not mean more history courses. Over the past 20 years, whether one likes it or not, the main shift has been a move away from the past to the present. New courses had to be created – courses dealing with the media and new art forms (the press, television, the cinema, comic strips), with contemporary critics and philosophers whose works had clear implications for the study of culture (Barthes, Lacan, Foucault), with social change (feminism, immigration), and with contemporary political, social, economic and cultural life and institutions (socialism, youth, business French, "francophonie"). In the U.S., where administrators and teachers cannot ignore for very long students' demands nor the pressure of economic needs in the society, it is not exaggerated to say that almost everywhere we have witnessed an irresistible trend toward more non-literary courses. The same holds true, to a varying degree, in Great-Britain and Europe.[7]

I am not saying that this trend is good: it happened. I am not saying either that these changes have taken place without long, heated and sometimes acrimonious debates. On the contrary, the majority of the professors, who had received a strictly literary training and who considered themselves as specialists of a century or a movement or even of an author considered this trend as dangerous: they fought against it as much as they could, and they still do in many cases. It was a threat to the preeminence of literature and to the departments' traditional power structure. Besides, teachers had to be found for these new courses. Since, most of the time, new staff

could not be hired, it was putting pressure on them to retool themselves in fields they knew very little about. Many of them refused to do so, which largely explains why civilization tracks often went down the drain: for lack of teachers. They were also genuinely concerned with the level of courses taught by non-specialists: where could they turn to find the tools, the information, concepts, and methodology necessary for such courses?[8]

It did not take long for an active minority of foreign language teachers to start suggesting solutions to their new professional needs. The pioneer in the study of contemporary French civilization is Lawrence Wylie who taught at Harvard for many years. Early in his career, he combined an intense interest for the language and culture of France with an education as a social scientist. Dissatisfied with the American school of the cultural anthropologists of the forties, he and his family decided in 1953 to live a year in a southern French village. His essay on this experience has become a classic. Several editions of *Village in the Vaucluse* attest to the success and the timeliness of his enterprise. Another book, studying another village, this time in Western France, was written in collaboration with Harvard students under the same circumstances in the early sixties. Wylie also pioneered a textbook designed for American students who wished to approach French culture from an anthropological and a sociological point of view: *Les Francais*. It was published in 1970.[9] Two young Yale professors also published in 1967 an article that is just as pertinent today as it was 23 years ago: "A Semiotic Approach to Culture". They too published a textbook based on their approach.[10] From then on, books and articles on French civilization became so numerous, especially in the late seventies and in the eighties that critical bibliographies are periodically compiled.[11] New periodicals started to appear: *Contemporary French Civilization* in the U.S. (1977), *Modern and Contemporary France* in Great Britain (1979). Old ones such as *Le Francais dans le monde* published in France and *The French Review* published in the U.S. accepted more and more articles in the new field. National and international seminars and meetings on the teaching of French civilization were held: for example two six-week-long National Endowment for the Humanities seminars were organized at SUNY Albany (summer 1979 and 1981) to help language and literature teachers to retool themselves.[12] The 1987 International Conference held at Portsmouth, England, was a forum where civilization teachers were invited to share their experience with each other.

Another sign of the growth of the field of French civilizaton into a field of study of its own was the creation in 1978 of New York University's Institute of French Studies that confers M.A.'s and even Ph.D.'s in French Civilization. Although it puts the emphasis on the social sciences, it is interdisciplinary in nature and does not do away with literature.[13] In Great Britain, under the influence of technological universities created in the 1960's, many French departments have adopted a more

radical approach and do not offer literature courses anymore. While older institutions still maintain it on the periphery, French civilization in that country is becoming mainstream. History from 1789 to the present and the social sciences have replaced literature and the traditional history course going back to prehistoric times.[14]

II

The innovations I have just described in French curricula were not the result of arbitrary decisions taken by crazy teachers and administrators. How could we forget how much people's lives have been changed by television and planes, by the possibility for anyone to know what is going on in the foreign country, to see and hear people talk, to go abroad and see for oneself? These new means of communication had an enormous impact on students' lives and interests. Foreign books came to life. But life, everyday life, also challenged books and the traditional definition of Culture. One hundred years ago, Matthew Arnold saw the study of Culture as "the acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world".[15] For our purpose, let us say "in France", or any other country. This definition emphasizes knowledge of the past and it passes judgment on what is worth knowing of that past. It is through the great achievements of its past that one can know and understand a culture. But students started rejecting this heavy emphasis on Culture and demanded that the study of the here and now of the foreign country become an important part of their curriculum.

The development of the social sciences, especially since World War II, also helps to put this evolution in perspective. For a good while, anthropology has been teaching us to forget about the distinction between primitive and civilized people, to look at all societies as equal, with their own characteristics, their own coherence. As a consequence, literary, intellectual, artistic or scientific achievements cannot serve any more as absolute criteria to establish a hierarchy between cultures. By the same token, they throw into doubt the longstanding idea that it is through a corpus of works traditionally considered as superior that one can approach and understand best a given culture. Instead, what should be studied, in Wylie's view, is "the total way of life" of French people today.[16] New history, in a way, joined forces with anthropology. In the thirties, a few French historians (known today as "l'Ecole des Annales") decided that too much emphasis was placed on political history, its great events, its great figures, its famous places, that history was also the history of everyday life, of ordinary people in ordinary places. As Revel puts it, "peasants have been elevated to the status of kings".[17]

A comparable trend away from an elitist position and a broadening of perspective could be observed in the domain of literature. New forms challenged the literary

canon. Are detective novels and comic strips literary genres? Literary style itself was subverted. Many writers used spoken or even vulgar, incorrect or obscene language. Dialects and patois today excite new interest and enjoy a kind of legitimacy. Boundaries between what was considered good or bad French became blurred. In other words, the primacy of Culture was threatened from without and from within, by human and social scientists, and by writers themselves.

Culture also had a tendency to look at nations as living individuals, whose character, temperament and identity could be defined pretty much permanently. From Strabo and Caesar to Voltaire, Chateaubriand, Michelet, Maurois, the same stereotypes about the origin and the identity of the French people seem to be repeated. One could almost see in the drawing of the portraits of nations a kind of literary genre. The talent of the writer would consist in defining as precisely as possible a "génie", a kind of essence.[18] Before WWII, cracks could be seen in these portraits. But because the war had given a new urgency to the need to know the cultures of all the nations involved in the conflict, the U.S. government spent large sums of money to have cultural anthropologists try to find scientifically what writers had failed to do: to establish a list of characteristics supposed to give to each nation its identity card. The results of the research can at best be described as unconvincing.[19] The models that were supposed to replace the intuitive and eclectic portrait of the past were immediately challenged by sociology and social anthropology. It seemed perfectly clear that no short, systematic, exhaustive and coherent scientific definition of a culture could be offered. There were far too many variables. A society is too diverse and too complex to be summed up by any listing, whether it includes fifty or one hundred items.

A similar change of focus making it more difficult to arrive at any valid generalization about a culture has been emphasized in a different way since the nineteen fifties by semiotics, the science of signs derived from linguistics. Semioticians agree with soial scientists that a new definition of humanism is in order. As Beaujour and Ehrmann put it:

> "Five centuries of classical humanism have led us to believe that values ought to be sought only in the discourse with the highest degree of organization, i.e. literature. New sciences of man in society such as linguistics, and the broader science of semiotics, force us to realize that man and his values can be studied in the humblest of contexts"[20]

This strikes a now familiar theme. It does not mean the demise of literary studies. It does mean, however, that new, valid and complementary ways to study a culture can be found.

The basic assumption of this semiotic approach comes from Barthes's application

of Saussure's ideas to the study of society. Just as a linguistic sign, Barthes says in *Mythologies*, is composed of a signifier and a signified, a cultural sign is composed of a signifier (the linguistic sign) and a signified that is the specific object of cultural study.[21] If we take the example of the word "constitution" (I take the responsability of this example), the signified refers, in France as well as in the U.S., to the body of fundamental principles according to which a nation is governed, the organization and distribution of power, the rights of its citizens. However, this word has in the U.S. a cultural meaning (we could say connotation, or implicit meaning) that one could never find in France. Although it has every reason to be proud of its present constitution, in two hundred years France tried sixteen of them, while the U.S. stuck with one. The fact that some additions have been made and that it is constantly reinterpreted by the Supreme Court as time goes by does not really matter. This is certainly one of the reasons why Americans look at their Constitution as an almost sacred text. We reach here the mythical level. Of course, everyone in the U.S. does not see this as clearly as we do. "Normally, the native is not aware of these connotation since they are part of the nonconscious makeup of his culture".[22] Yet, it certainly would be difficult to understand American political life, and actually, American culture, without keeping this idea in mind. The object of the semiotic approach to culture, then, is "to grasp the cultural signs embeded in ordinary language". For this reason, it can be seen as a "stylistics of language", although it does not limit itself to the study of linguistic signs: one should pay attention to other kinds of signs as well: gestures, for example. "The system of communication of a given culture is comprised of all these types of signs which give this culture its uniqueness and provide all its members with a common system of reference". This stylistics is designed "to bring out a particular cultural style and to make explicit the *hidden* rhetoric which *binds* together the *images of that culture*".[23]

At this point, it should be noted that, although, the human and the social sciences brought about a widely, but not universally, accepted change of focus and a new concept of culture, we cannot expect the anthropologist, the historian, the sociologist, the writer, and the semiologist to have the same ojectives. This may partly explain why, as civilization courses have become more and more accepted in foreign language departments, the goals of civilization studies seem harder to define. The new field may be going through growing pains. But are we sure, after all, that there is a new field?

III

Let us look at the problem from another angle. When we teach language, we deal with a clearly defined human science. Regardless of all the disagreements that exist

between linguists, we know that language is a specific system of articulated signs, used to transmit human messages. We know what we teach: a linguistic code. And the goal of language teaching, in spite of methodological differences among instructors, remains just as straight-forward: it is a measurable competence in the four skills. The definition of literature today raises more questions. It surely does not include all written texts. But what is literary and what is not? We stand here on shifting sand. Not too long ago, a science fiction novel was not considered as a literary work. No criteria, linguistic, esthetic or any other, is fool proof. The safest is to observe that there is a body of texts, a corpus, considered by most people as literary in a given society at a given time. This lack of a clear definition of literature creates problems for teachers. What do we teach when we teach literature? How do we measure progress in competence? To what extent should literary analysis rely on the human and the social sciences (linguistics, sociology, anthropology, but also psychoanalysis)? It is up to the teacher to answer those questions as well as he can.

If we turn to civilization, although we can console ourselves by keeping in mind that literature teachers are also going through a tough time, we may feel that our problem is a bit more complicated. When culture gives up its identification with literary works and formal written style, it gives up the specificity of its corpus and of its code. It now seems that civilization can be found everywhere. We do have an anthropological definition to start from: a culture consists of "the body of characteristic traits of a given society".[24] At least we have a goal. We do know what to look for. It is obvious, however, that this definition raises a lot of questions.

1. The number of factors that play a role in the elaboration of cultural identity at any time is quite large. Cultural identity has to do with language, geography, history, ethnology, sociology, political science, economy, literature and the arts, all the branches of history (the list is not exhaustive). Where are we to look for these characteristic traits?

2. What is meant by French civilization traits? The role of bread and wine in everyday life? Are we talking about some general ideas? Braudel's propositions about the identity of France may serve as an example. In his view, there is in France a need for centralization against which it is dangerous to act. Second characteristic: the French economy has always been lagging behind the one of world leaders. Thirdly, the influence of French civilization in the world has always been brilliant, more or less justified, and Paris always played a major role (a reason, among others, why centralization is a necessity). Finally, French society has a hierarchical structure.[25] This last remark of course raises another question: what is characteristic of one society? Social hierarchy is a very

common phenomenon indeed! Aren't there many traits common to several cultures? Can a culture be taken in isolation?

3. The definition we are given also seems to imply that a society is homogeneous. This is nowhere the case. Where should we look for our characteristics? In which social class or milieu? Some sociologists notice that social groups today tend to meet in the middle and they talk about a "moyennisation de la société française" which blurs differences due to social environment.[26] It might make our task easier. But others insist on the permanence of the habitus, "generative grammar of our behavior" transmited from generation to generation in social milieus or classes.[27] If we admit that this habitus evolves very slowly, our task becomes more difficult.

4. Then comes the question of permanence and change. Surely these cultural characteristics are not as permanent as Asterix, the popular French comic strips, would have us believe. What is change? In what domain does it take place? How do we notice it? In reference to what period of time? Is change always visible? What change is important? We have to answer these questions to be able to distinguish between true change, i.e. change in the characteristic traits of the culture, from fads and infatuations of all kinds. "A civilization", Braudel claims, "is not a given economy nor a given society, but what, through series of economies, series of societies, continues to live in a way that only allows slight and gradual change".[28] But isn't this approach too broad?

5. Assuming that we can identify these characteristic traits, what kind of relationship exists between them? Should we see them as isolated elements? As connected parts of a whole? As a scientifically elaborated system? For T. Zeldin, it is impossible to generalize today about French people: there is too much diversity in their attitudes, feelings, behaviors, or ideas.[29] At the other extreme, E. Marc and G. Michaud wrote a book titled: *Vers une science des civilisations*. They aim at a high level of generalization.[30] In between, L. Porcher suggests that "a culture is made of diversities inscribed in (and constitutive of) the coherence of a whole".[31] Whom should we believe? The temptation to look for a model comparable to the linguistic code is also great and appears in many publications. Braudel's title *Grammaire des civilisations* should not be taken literally. But what about "*Lecture des civilisations*" (Debyser insists that his words should be taken literally), or "reading, interpretation of the cultural text"?[32] Are these just metaphors? Is there a code of cultural signs? "We should not limit our investigation to the study of discrete signs and isolated myths", Beaujour and

Ehrmann say, "but we ought to organize them into systems, the totality of which would ideally describe the given culture."[33] But such a totality can only be presupposed. There is no way we can prove that it exists: it represents an unattainable goal and "the puzzle remains for ever incomplete".[34]

All these questions are tough ones and cannot be ignored. To try to answer them, we cannot do without the human and the social sciences. For this reason, we inherit some of the problems existing in those disciplines. Yet, however tempting it may be, it probably would be a mistake to attempt to define the field of civilization too narrowly, to try to limit its scope for personal preference to an anthropological, a sociological, a semiotic or a historical perspective. This is why the truly interdisciplinary program of New York University's Institute of French Studies seems to me the right answer to the problem. Instead of starting from basic "synthetic" courses, the Institute takes a different approach:

> "(This) approach consists of constructing the overall program of study with successively more specialised "blocks" of information offered in courses that are unambiguously disciplinary and "analytic" – e.g. French politics in the Fifth Republic, 19th-century French history, French political and social thought, contemporary French literature, problems of the French economy, etc... Rather than synthesis History, Politics, Sociology, Culture and Ideas in a single or a series of courses on, say, France since World War Two, the building blocks approach to that topic would begin with basic offerings of a disciplinary nature in the above subjects. Then, in a second stage, more specialised courses would be offered, still with clear disciplinary identities, building upon the basic courses. For example, a course on religion or on education, a course on Politics and Literature since the war, a course on Public Administration or Public Law or a course on France's relations with its former African dependencies – all of which would assume some earlier disciplinary knowledge of History, Politics, Society and Culture.
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> The advantage of this approach is in the flexibility it offers students in preparing for the often very different kinds of careers in the civilization area. At the same time it builds confidence by giving at least a minimumsmastery of the basic blocks of information that can later be combined in different ways to meet changing vocational needs. Obviously, in the above schema, students will not have a grounding in all aspects of French society and culture since World War Two. In practice, students working under the block approach will have to decide rather early in their graduate training whether their primary interest is society or culture -- the two versants of the civlization field in the USA. After sampling the basic blocks in both versants, they will proceed to more specialised work on either societal subjects (mainly social science courses) or cultural subjects (mainly humanistic courses) but in both cases they will gain intensive knowledge of discrete, disciplinary-linked subjects, including elements of bibliographical informa-

> tion, a basic acquaintance with reference materials and even some knowledge of the research being conducted in the field of their specialisation. Moreover, having concentrated on either the society or the cultural versants they will, thanks to the disciplinary orientation of the courses, have acquired at least the fundamentals of either soial or cultural analysis — that is, to be able to grapple with societal problems as do social scientists or to deal with cultural data as do humanists or, perhaps, even a bit of both. Experience has shown at New York University that in one semester of intensive post-graduate study, students with literary backgrounds can master social analysis as can those with social science backgrounds learn to deal with cultural concepts."[35]

If this approach is the right one, can civilization still be called a new field? I believe so. It is not a new field as, let us say, computer science is. However, it reflects a change in perspective, a rearranging of priorities, a new way of looking at societies and cultures around the world. In this sense, the emergence of civilization as a field of study can be compared to the creation, all over the U.S. of "Women Studies Departments" in the seventies. The feminists also brought about a radical change in the way of looking at society and setting up priorities. That was enough, in the U.S. at least, to create a new field of study and new academic units.

IV

The interdisciplinary approach proposed by the New York University program provides a good framework for graduate studies. What about undergraduate students? Is it desirable and realistic to introduce them to so many problems, so many points of view, so much material that are in some ways complementary, in some others contradictory? The obvious answer is no. The full scope of the interdisciplinary nature of civilization study cannot be presented to students in a few courses. Even if it were, the situation would be complicated by the existence of another element of the equation we must not forget: we are teaching civilization in foreign language departments. The same problem has plagued literary studies. In the fifties, it was not uncommon in the U.S. to take a course in French literature with a famous professor whose spoken French was less than adequate and who would teach in English. Then, for more than twenty years, everybody had to use the foreign language in his teaching. Today, to attract enough students from other departments (English, Comparative Literature), since there must be a minimum number of students for the courses to take place), quite a few advanced courses are taught in the native language. Two choices have then to

be made. Which language are we going to use in the classroom: the native or the foreign language? Let us assume that the instructor will choose to use the foreign language: he will still have to decide which approach seems most appropriate, since to know a culture does not mean the same thing to everyone, even among people who agree on the meaning of the word culture and on the existence of a field called civilization.

To many, what a student needs is the ability to communicate effectively, which implies that he has to acquire a cultural as well as a linguistic competence of communication. As much as possible, he should not only speak, but also behave, like a native, a goal that can only be achieved if he spends at least a year in the foreign country. The competence to communicate requires the cognitive knowledge and the behavioral skill that will allow him to be more or less bicultural as well as bilingual. Culture here is not seen as a servant of language as it used to be a servant of literature. There is continuity between linguistics and anthropology, and everyone emphasizes the principle that culture is an integral part of language learning. However, it is obvious that, in practice, learning to communicate requires learning the foreign linguistic code more than, let us say, body language or table manners. It may be true, as some experiments suggest, that in everyday life, we overestimate the importance of language in communication, and we underestimate the amount of information we give to others through other means, but how much emphasis should be placed on these other means?[36] How much cultural background is needed for a student to communicate adequately? How do we blend language teaching and civilization teaching? How do we measure progress?

In my opinion, the best recent answer to these problems has been provided by P. Capretz, from Yale, with a team of experts. The method, *French in Action*, was ten years in the making. It was conceived as a TV soap opera and consists in the story, filmed in Paris and other parts of the country, of an American boy who meets a French girl and who discovers France and French society through all kinds of adventures. The program was designed as a complete introduction to fit the needs of the first three or four semesters of elementary and intermediate French at the university level. Each sequence includes taped pedagogical material. Additional workbooks are also available. *French in Action* met with a great success all over the US. There is truly a method where language and civilization are inseparable. Students learn a lot from (and can discuss) the audiovisual information about France that provides a natural bakground to the dialogue. Yet it is easy to see why even such a method does not satisfy everyone. Although this communicative approach has a special appeal for teachers at the elementary and intermediate levels in high schools and universities, it can easily be criticized for providing a superficial, fragmentary, and, above all, stereotypical image of the foreign country. For this reason, the emphasis on communication

is often pitted against the emphasis on knowledge and critical enquiry during the four years of undergraduate studies. "Our method must be strictly intellectual and unsentimental, and aim for a level analogous to that of advanced or graduate literary courses".[37] If we agree with this statement, truth should be our goal, not stereotypes, but what kind of truth?

We can look for that knowledge in the human and the social sciences dealing with the referential world. What comes first to mind is factual information about French history and geography, and contemporary political, social, economic and cultural life and institutions. Courses offering this type of information are "synthetic" courses, as Wahl pointed out. There is no shortage of textbooks trying to respond to teachers' needs.[38] Although most of them are attractive, easy to read, useful and well illustrated, it is clear that, when writing in French, their authors faced a problem they could not quite solve. How can one combine linguistic simplicity, intellectual challenge and richness of information? It is also likely that publishers, who, for economic reasons, aim at a public as large as possible, do not make their authors' task easy. To teach at the advanced level, American instructors in lieu of (or in addition to) the textbook, have to prepare their own anthology. It is a challenging, not impossible, task.

But we may be looking for another kind of truth. As we know, anthropology and soiology offer to help us study the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of French people and to sketch a system of values. How shall we proceed? "My culture is the logic according to which I organize the world. And this logic, I have learned it since I was born. In this logic, the most important part remains implicit, that is invisible. It concerns the presuppositions from which we constantly draw our conclusions. We are not aware of them because, for us, they are obvious. It is everything that, for us, goes without saying, and, as a result, is transparent".[39] If we agree with this approach, our goal will be to establish a comparison between the native and the target culture, to observe patterns of behavior, to make sense out of them and to understand how they are connected. Today's civilization textbooks often try to incorporate this anthropological perspective along with some sociological data, facts and figures in a presentation of French society as a coherent whole, all of this in fairly simple French. The best "manuel" in this category is Wylie's *Les Francais.*[40] American students like this approach. Language is less of a problem here than the truth to be found. To deal with values is to work with realities pretty hard to define in any precise way. As a result, the knowledge acquired by students is difficult to evaluate. Other teachers and didacticians prefer to combine all of the above mentioned approaches with semiotics in a search for yet another kind of truth.

As we saw before, we may feel that the study of concrete realities should not concern us too much because, everywhere, language functions as a screen through which we apprehend these realities in discourse. What is important, in this perspective,

is not historical or contemporary events, for example, but what has been said about them. If everything is apprehended through discourse, culture can be best studied through the use it makes of language, including non-linguistic signs. Teaching civilization, then, is literally teaching how to read culturally, from street names and obituaries to comic strips and political speeches. Everyday life provides a wealth of so called authentic documents ready to be deciphered.

Theoretically, it seems ideally suited to us, language and literature students and teachers. We are used to the decoding of signs: it is a matter of learning how to decode non-literay and non-linguistic signs. It invites us to develop our critical skills without having to bother with history, sociology, and the rest. The illusion does not last very long. The decoding of these signs presupposes that we have some knowledge of what they are refering to. The semiotic approach to authentic documents does provide a tool, but it is useless without a solid background or additional information since there is no grammar or dictionary we can give to our students to facilitate their reading of the so called "cultural text". To remedy this problem, Debyser sees civilization courses as combining semiology with anthropological and sociological data. A textbook illustrating his method has been published.[41] However, the fragmentary nature of these authentic documents also creates a problem. The wealth of material may turn into a nightmare for the teacher who has to prepare his class. What is important? According to what criteria can the selection be made? Students too get easily lost among texts and documents of a very different nature, ranging in style and registers from an extreme to the other, written or prepared for very different readers, inspired by very different preoccupations or ideologies.

Some teachers feel that the new definition of the word *culture* will not stand the test of time and that the safest is to stick with the traditional one. For example, they say: "Should we and can we avoid passing judgment on cultures?" Others, who follow the present trend because they see it as the result of long term changes in our societies, have the right to be puzzled. Too often, undergraduate textbooks want to please everyone at every level and claim to combine the communicative approach with the cognitive one in a perfect and harmonious way.[42] Didacticians want to touch all bases and make use of all theoretical approaches.[43] These are sure recipes for mediocrity.[44] I think that we should be as clear as possible with our objective, and, depending on the level of the course, decide whether our primary goal is communicative skill, or a particular kind of knowledge.

Does the quarrel about civilization teaching methods boil down to a question of emphasis? Of articulation of the various stages of learning? Not quite. Yes, it is equally true that a culture is made of all forms of communication, of concrete realities and of symbolic ones. We learn a foreign language to be able to function well in the foeign society, which implies that we ought to know enough about the past and the

present of that country, otherwise we would not be able to understand both the explicit and the implicit meaning of the messages bombarding us in everyday life. One could say that there are roughly three stages to consider: first, learn the language to communicate, then learn about the concrete realities of that culture, and, finally, you can turn to the semiotic approach to learn to see beyond the appearance, the hidden logic of culture.

But the problem is that we are not dealing with mathematics and that these stages cannot be clearly defined. When does one know the language well enough to move to the second stage? It all depends on what is expected at the second stage. Advanced courses in any discipline, taught in French, practically require graduate level competence in the language. And what about the third stage? How long shall we wait to introduce students to implicit meanings of words and their hidden rhetoric? Until the second year? The third year? The fourth year? Since there does not seem to be any clear articulation possible between these different objectives of civilization teaching, nobody waits that long. We end up giving the preference to this approach or to that one. But by doing so, we are deciding which goal should receive the highest priority in civilization teaching: stereotypes, objective truth or mythical reality. This is not simply a methodological choice: it is also an epistemogical one and, implicitly, we are making an ideological statement about culture.

FOOTNOTES

1. This is the text of a lecture given at National Central University on December 18, 1990.
2. Michel Beaujour and Jacques Ehrmann, "A Semiotic Approach to Culture", *Foreign Langugae Annals*, 1 (1967), 153.
3. "How we started to teach the *Cours de civilisation* in the United States" in Eric Cahm (editor), *Teaching French Civilisation in Britain, the United States and Australia*, University of Nottingham: Trent Print Unit, 1988, 10–11.
4. op. cit., 15.
5. Cahm, "The Origins of French Civilization Teaching in Britain: With Some Reminiscences", op. cit., 52.
6. Beaujour-Ehrmann, art. cit., 152.
7. One can find a good number of civilization course syllabi from Britain, the United States and Australia in *Teaching French Civilisation* mentioned above.
8. This battle between literature oriented and civilization oriented teachers is not (and probably will never be) over. The frustration of the latter is voiced in the Proceedings of the Anglo-American Seminar held at Portsmouth (England) in

1987 edited by Cahm.

9. These books are available in French : *Un Village du Vaucluse*, Paris : Gallimard, 1979. *Chanzeaux, village d'Anjou*, Paris: Gallimard, 1970. *Les Français*, Prentice-Hall, 1970 (en collaboration avec Armand et Louise Bégué).
10. Beaujour-Ehrmann, *La France contemporaine*, New-York: MacMillan, 1967.
11. For example in *The French Review*: "Bibliography on the Teaching of French Civilization", compiled by Edward Knox. *The French Review*, Vol. LVIII, 3, Feb. 1985 and LXI, 2, Dec. 1987.
12. The 1979 Seminar's lectures have been published as a book: *Société et culture de la France contemporaine*, G. Santoni ed., Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981. It still is a good introduction to the study of Franch civilization.
13. Nicholas Wahl, "Post-Graduate Training in French Civilization: The Building-Blocks Approach", in Cahm, op. cit., 186–191.
14. "The British Experience" in Cahm, op. cit., 51–105.
15. Quoted by Wylie in Cahm, op. cit., 15. It is still the definition many people agree on. It pits today Le Club de l'Horloge, politically on the right, against Espaces 49, politically on the left. See J.-L. Harouel, "La société pluriculturelle: une illusion suicidaire", *L'Identité de la France* (ouvrage collectif), Paris: Albin Michel, 1985, 199, and O.-J. Taguieff, "L'identité francaise au miroir du racisme différentialiste", in *L'Identité française* (ouvrage collectif), Paris: Editions Tierce, 1958, 96.
16. Cahm, op. cit., 19.
17. Steve Albert, "The Changing Face of French History: A review of the Fall 1987 Colloquia sponsored by New York University's Institute of French Studies", *The Tocqueville Review*, 1988, 373.
18. On this subject, see Edmond Marc Lipiansky, *L'Ame francaise ou le National-libéralisme: analyse d'une représentation sociale*, Paris: Anthropos, 1979.
19. Wylie in Cahm, op. cit., 154.
20. Art. cit., 154.
21. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1957.
22. Beaujour-Ehrmann, art. cit., 15.
23. Id., art. cit., 154.
24. R. Galisson-D. Coste, *Dictionnaire de didactique des langues*, Paris: Hachette, 1976. This dictionary presents a good survey of the problems raised by the definition of the words *culture* and *civilization*.
25. Espaces 49, *L'Identité de la France*, 139.
26. Henri Mendras, "Quelques tendances de la société française contemporaine", *The Tocqueville Review*, 1978, 5.

27. Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979.
28. *Grammaire des civilisations*, Paris: Arthaud-Flammarion, 1987. (My translation)
29. Theodore Zeldin, *Les Français*, Paris: Flammarion, 1987.
30. Guy Michaud and Edmond Marc, *Vers une science des civilisations?* Bruxelles: Editions Complexe, 1981.
31. Louis Porcher, *La Civilisation*, Paris: Clé International, 1986, 12. (My translation)
32. "Lecture des civilisations" in Jean-Claude Beacco and Simone Lieutaud, *Moeurs et mythes: lecture des civilisations et documents authentiques écrits*, Paris: Hachette/Larousse, 1981, 9. Raymonde Carroll, *Evidences invisibles: Américains et Français au quotidien*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1987, 19. (My translation)
33. Art. cit., 155.
34. Art. cit., 157.
35. Nicholas Wahl, "Post-Graduate Training in French Civilisation: The "Building-Blocks' Approach", in Cahm, op.cit., 187–188. Nicholas Wahl is the founder and the Director of the Institute.
36. Wylie, "Language Learning and Communication", *The French Review*, LVIII, 6, may 1985, 777–785.
37. Beaujour-Ehrmann, art. cit., 153.
38. One of the most widely used is probably: G. Michaud and A. Kimmel, *Le Nouveau Guide France*, Paris: Hachette, 1990.
39. Carroll, op.cit., 18. (My translation)
40. A new edition of this textbook is being prepared by the author in collaboration with Jean-Francois Brière, who teaches at the State University of New-York at Albany and is himself an advocate of cross-cultural analysis in civilization courses. See his article: "Cross-Cultural Analysis", *The French Review*, vol.LX, 1, Dec. 1986, 203–208.
41. "Lecture des civilisations", in Beacco-Lieutaud, op.cit., 9–21. Beacco-Lieutaud, *Tours de France: travaux pratiques de civilisation, guide pédagogique*, Paris: Hachette, 1985.
42. Two examples of widely used textbooks falling into this category are: M. Paoletti and R. Steel, *Civilisation française quotidienne*, Paris: Hatier, 1986, and E. and H.-L. Knox, *Plus ça change ... La France entre hier et demain*, New-York: Hatier-Didier USA, 1987.
43. F. Debyser and L. Porcher are examples of talented didacticians who, in my opinion make comprehensive theoretical proposals that seem to be of little use in practice.

44. The most useful survey of problems facing civilization teachers is *Enseigner une culture étrangère*, by Geneviève Zarate (Paris: Hachette, 1986). It is neither too ambitious, nor looking for easy solutions.