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## French say Non! to planet Hollywood



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### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Toby Miller does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

A spat between France and the US over international trade in music and films invites the usual stereotypes of Gallic snobbery versus the free market monster. But a closer look at the relationship between the two countries, and their respective creative industries, reveals they have more in common than you might think.



Land of the freedom fries, home of the brave. rikomatic

When you take the test to become a US citizen, one of the questions you must be prepared to answer asks which three countries won the second world war. The correct answer is: the United States, England [sic], and France. And those 20 million Soviet citizens who gave their lives in Stalingrad and elsewhere? They were presumably off playing tiddlywinks. It was us, the French, and their Limey friends wot won it. And the US considers the Statue of Liberty its most powerful symbol of welcome and freedom — a gift from the people of France.

Despite those mythologies, a profound mistrust runs through the Franco-American relationship, exemplified in the unpleasant epithets that were part of everyday talk under George W Bush in response to France's opposition to the invasion of Iraq ("surrender monkeys" and Congressional menus renaming "french fries" as "freedom fries" were personal favourites).

This cosmic ambivalence is regularly reinforced by conflicts over cultural policy. The short version is that France favours exempting culture from free-trade agreements, whereas the US wants a pure market. France says culture is akin to the environment or the military — it isn't something that can or should be alienated through international competition. Culture has a

special quality, a unique meaning that helps hold a people together. The US argues that it is one more commodity, like sugar or transport.

The latest struggle has emerged during negotiations for a European Union-US trade treaty, over film and music subsidies. Reaction to French wishes for a clause exempting culture from negotiations has been virulent: José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission derides Paris's position as "culturally reactionary" and showing "no understanding of the benefits that globalisation brings from a cultural point of view".

Two decades ago, cultural critic Bill Grantham called France and Hollywood

*the feuding hillbilly dynasties of world culture ... it appears impossible for more than a few months to go past without some person who should know better declaiming about the God-given right of the people of France to view some forgettable special effects extravaganza, or of the urgent need to protect the gossamer-fragile civilisation of Racine, Flaubert, and Proust from the cultural depredations of Bruce Willis and Leonardo DiCaprio.*

The feud derives in part from the French belief that their invention of film technology a century and more ago was denied its full reward because of dirty US tricks over patents. In addition, the French have long argued that their way of life could be compromised by the US fetish for technology and accounting. This anxiety goes right back to the libertine poet Charles Baudelaire. In the mid-19th century, he **feared that** "The mechanical will ... have Americanised us, progress will ... have atrophied all our spiritual side".

In other words, the French think they have been cheated financially by the US and their spirituality is threatened. Today's trade arguments are not merely to do with culture as something outside commodification, though that is certainly relevant. They are also to do with a long-held belief that Hollywood stole the treasure.

In fact, if we examine the two sides of this latest debate hard-headedly, the rhetoric of each falls apart. On the Hollywood side, the notion that successful exports of film and TV drama is simply to do with skillful management and innovation is a very tall tale indeed.

The reality is that Hollywood relies on vast public subsidies, from inside and outside the country, via a network of hundreds of film commissions offering tax breaks and pliant workforces. The Pentagon offers technology, locations, and extras and the State and Commerce Departments feverishly provide their services. Hollywood is not laissez-faire; far from it.

And on the French side, claims for a cultural exemption from international trade are similarly flimsy. The bourgeoisie of its film industry is protected from market forces without really delivering a truly representative product: the argument that it is reflecting the nation back to itself falls down in terms of the race, gender, and region of the major players and the stories they tell.

When the French Government protests over culture, however, it is not just speaking for itself. Many smaller nations feel the same way about Hollywood in terms of language, themes, and

influence, but they dare not speak the truth to power.

The French may be just as hypocritical as the US, but they present an alternative to the commodification of all and sundry and the entrenchment of English as the dominant world language. Even as we question their motives, we should think very deeply about their critique and query Hollywood's claims. Capital loves subsidies, regardless of whether it is French or American.

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