

Coffee, philosophy and a little flirtation

PARIS. You know Socrates, Seneca and Erasmus. But what about Marc Sautet? What about the thousands of Frenchmen who unblushingly term themselves *philosophes*? In English-speaking countries, sticking “philosopher” on a business card would get you guffaws. In France, parading as a philosopher wins you a tolerant, even respectful, smile – with just a touch of skepticism.

In this homeland of 17th-century genius René Descartes (“I think, therefore I am”), thinking is no laughing matter. Literally millions of French adults – all forced to study philosophy to graduate from high school – go through life philosophizing, and revelling in it. Thinking is a national sport. The best philosophy essays by graduating 18-year-olds appear in major newspapers. Mass-market magazines run cover-stories on philosophy and its wilder cousin, theology. A plethora of popular and academic periodicals entrenches the obsession.

Since 1992, a network of “*Cafés-Philo*” started by teacher Marc Sautet brings together hundreds every week to ponder riddles like “How far should we go?” or “What is morality?” and, last week, “The fantasy of the self-made man.” A trained philosopher or layman moderates free-wheeling discussions, illuminating themes and suggesting solutions. At the original venue, the Café des Phares at Place de la Bastille, Sunday-morning meetings still draw scores of disciples (150 were expected yesterday, with 15 moderators). Many participants are atheists or agnostics: clergymen claim those high-school *philo* courses killed their faith.

The Café-Philo idea of self-running groups has spread to 24 countries, including Canada (several groups in Quebec and B.C.). It continues here among students, expatriates and retirees, all eager to play Jean-Paul Sartre. Co-founder Michel Turrini told me that Cafés-Philo fill many needs – social (fighting loneliness), intellectual (stimulation lacking in media), even ‘spiritual’ (filling the gap left by loss of faith). “Many atheists come to make sense of the world.”

Last Monday night I attended a Café-Philo in a Latin Quarter brasserie. Ten people, all seniors, discussed “Is equality possible?” under the guidance of brush-cut Claude Bonnenfant, a sixtyish former auto-worker. First-names-only debate was passionate, pointed and respectful, with plenty of laughter. “People come here for connection in a lonely world,” Claude confided. “They want to learn, exchange, make friends.”

Another café-culture trend formalizes book discussions. One group flaunts the playful label of *les obsédés textuels* (sounding like *les obsédés sexuels*). But the idea’s the same: good talk to stir brain cells, new perspectives, laughter, coffee, friends, and – why not? -- a little flirting.

A newer trend is the *Ciné-Philo*. Fifteen Paris cinemas feature live teachers analyzing images or films in relation to famous philosophers. “What’s the relationship between *Titanic* and Lucretia, *Soldier Ryan* and Aristotle, Schopenhauer and Chaplin, Lars von Trier and Descartes?” asks host Ollivier Pourriol. The promise: “a new look” at familiar pictures – “to give spectators philosophical tools allowing them to decode images and find their meaning.” Current topics: “The spiral of love” and “Desire as a clear object.”

If your love-life is spiralling, or desire is not clear enough, you can go way upscale to the free public lectures of the Collège de France, citadel of the greatest minds in France. You can fall asleep there in the most comfortable seats in Paris.

You find echoes of “philo” everywhere in daily life. I asked my hardware-store man what kind of tape I needed for packing. “A priori,” he assured me, “there is no perfect tape. But let’s analyze: logically you need this one.” To say somebody has a certain mindset or holds certain views, you say he is “in a certain *logique*.”

The god of French logic is still old Descartes. Every school-child is drilled in Cartesian logic, a doubt-rejecting system that elegantly strips away fuzzy thinking – a disaster for ideologues or, as Pope John Paul II moaned, theologians. Poor Descartes died in the service of Queen Christina of Sweden. The official story blamed a morning chill; unofficial ones blamed *une logique gallante*.

With the French Revolution came theorists of people power, culminating in Marx’s Communist Manifesto (1848). German philosophers still befuddle plenty of French minds – Heidegger is a favourite. But you can’t blame prolix Germans alone for hooking the French on intellectualizing the trivial and obvious with high-falutin’ obscurities. Auguste Comte and Émile Durkheim were guilty of starting sociology. And the 20th-century’s Derrida cult “deconstructed” literature until it was joyless.

France now harbours a cacophony of impenetrable new philosophers, few of whom ask that ideal Café-Philo question: “What good is philosophy?” The answer lurks in the bookstores. “People are buying simple books that teach you how to be happy,” says *La Procure*’s Pierre Collantier. Luc Ferry’s down-to-earth *Learning to Live* sold 200,000 copies. “But year after year,” he added, “the classics beat everybody: people just love Socrates and Seneca. They’re medicine for the soul.”