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The French Debate on Europe

Europe was a major theme of the presidential election campaign that monopolised public attention during the first months of this year. The outgoing president emphasised his efforts, since 2008, to encourage members of the euro zone to act and his rival made European growth a central part of his manifesto. Nevertheless, the question of Europe in the electoral debate in no way corresponded to a full picture of either candidate's views on the topic. Nicolas Sarkozy, despite a mostly positive pro European line, did not hesitate to campaign for national protection and changes to European regulation (especially Schengen). François Hollande, credited with good intentions on Europe, nevertheless had the liability of needing to tread carefully, given the internal socialist party divisions demonstrated in the European constitution referendum, a factor that partly explains the French 'no' and the blocking of the whole constitutional process.

This rather strange position on Europe, both central and contested in the presidential campaign, can be explained only in the context of the current crisis that has transformed the debate in France. To understand this development it is first necessary to have a clear view as to where the European spirit can be found in France and what role Europe has played in domestic politics in recent years. Only thus can we understand the new situation created by the change in government in France.

Four political movements

Support for Europe in France rests on four political movements. First, the Gaullist movement of General De Gaulle, as defined following his return to power in 1958 and particularly after the end of the war in Algeria (1962). Choosing to be closer to Europe, as set down in the Elysee treaty of 1963, allowed for a reinterpretation of the Gaullist conviction of the necessity of a grand national project. With the loss of its colonies, France saw more involvement with Europe as a new project that would allow it to maintain its historic position as a global power. The second movement in support of Europe, the left wing, was also based on a desire to find a substitute. The left saw in the construction of Europe a response to the confusion (not openly admitted) of 1983 when François Mitterrand, confronted with economic reality, was forced to repudiate the left's 1981 changeover programme that had not taken into account international economic interdependence. In a highly political manoeuvre, just as the line represented by the Socialist government's Jacques Delors came into effect, he was sent to Brussels. Delors, anxious to demonstrate his competence as a sound economic administrator, saw the construction of the single market and competition rules as an excellent way to renew the doctrine of the left and stimulate the French economy.

The other two movements are less directly linked to party politics but represent trends of thought that crosscut society and are especially to be found in public figures. The Christian Democrats, who have never carried much political weight in France because of the influence of secularism, are able to claim such founding fathers as Robert Schuman. They represent an electorate that favours the market economy and business, are less prone to ideology and see Europe as a way of overcoming old domestic quarrels (especially between left and right). They also see Europe as a way to limit the government control present at all levels also known as 'Gaullist-communism' which represents the large consensus for a centralised, activist Jacobin state bringing together doctrinal enemies such as the communists on the left and the Gaullists on the right. The final political trend also represents an influential

cross section but one that has little political visibility, namely the Franco-German Europeans. This group emphasises the relationship between France and Germany in Europe not just at political level but also in the context of people to people (town twinning, television channel for culture etc) for obvious historical reasons but also because such a rapprochement can produce similar results in a number of other areas: social dialogue, education and training, regional policy, ideological renewal of the left etc. They believe France can be reformed by outside constraints. They do not believe in the stimulus effect of market deregulation and they acknowledge the difficulties a state has to change its practices on its own.

The diversity of membership and thought in France that constitutes support for European integration means that it is unable to exercise any continuous or uniform political influence. In addition, French policy on Europe varies according to the national political configurations of these four movements. In fact one can perceive three distinct phases. The first one, from De Gaulle to Mitterand, promoted a French approach to the construction of Europe that created a long-term misunderstanding among the French population as to what Europe could provide. There was then a period of confusion brought about by the changes in the internal geography of Europe from 1989 until the 2004 enlargement that gave rise to an attempt at institutional reorganisation in the form of a proposal for a European constitution that was ultimately sabotaged by France. Finally, we have the current phase of promoting intergovernmental action as a replacement for the Franco-German driving force but this has had to endure the ordeal of the sovereign debt crisis.

Grand design

Initially, the Gaullist project of a French Europe provided another way of projecting French national power with a 'grand design' appropriate to continuing the nation's history and influence. It developed in an atmosphere of benevolent public indifference, as a positive but distant project evoked at the end of speeches to indicate that one was thinking of 'our children and grandchildren' without being involved in anything of immediate importance. This passive consent that gave easy political credibility to those using European rhetoric, however, opened the door, from 1989 and in 1992 with the Maastricht Treaty referendum, to problems that divided both the politics of left and right in unforeseen ways. The post-imperial programme had involved the country in a contract that had never been fully understood and had progressively and painfully become undone. France had defended its interests via Europe because Europe was in its image. Some of Europe's institutions were in France (Strasbourg), its administrative style was French and many of its senior civil servants were French and French was one of the major working languages. "A French Europe is a construction in which the pooling of sovereignty does not harm French interests, within which French legal tradition provides the framework and within which the introduction of common policies does not undermine the national competences that allow autonomy in relations with the great powers such as the US and the Soviet Union."¹ The French authorities wanted to prolong many of these characteristics, remaining frozen in their initial attitudes.

For a long time France's European policy was happy to maintain the fiction that Europe provided a vehicle for Gallic power as demonstrated by Jacques Chirac in his defence of French Common Agricultural Policy benefits, obtained without concession. Domestic debate in France never once touched on the valuable

¹ Sylvain Kahn, *Géopolitique de l'Union européenne*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2007, p. 35.

contribution that other countries' opinions could bring to the European debate. Hence the ambiguous attitude to European rights and the length of time the state, especially the Council of State, required to recognise the legitimacy of the Court in Strasbourg. The fact that there could be a democratic gain via the European institutions never entered the scheme of things. This first phase of France's engagement with Europe explains why the arrival of countries newly liberated from the Soviet bloc provoked such a delayed shock. Cooperation with Germany required little in the way of French *quid pro quo* and the arrival of southern countries such as Spain, Portugal and Greece was seen as a way of counterbalancing northern Europe with France as the middle point. It was not the same with enlargement to the eastern countries. The argument for democratic reconciliation carried little weight as the disappearance of the other half of Europe behind the Iron Curtain had not been a major inconvenience. French political parties found it hard to integrate enlargement to the east into their narrative of the European adventure: how could this be connected to the re-affirmation of French supremacy in shaping integration? In fact, French political debate remained silent and the long and bloody conflict that broke up Yugoslavia remained an active concern for a minority, who tried hard to interest public opinion in a region that reawakened memories of the Great War and historic anti German alliances.

Referendum

The 2005 referendum on the Constitutional Treaty exposed this discrepancy and the growing tension between the dynamism of the European Union and the archaic vision prevailing in France. It was less a debate between federalists in favour of integration and those who wished to return sovereignty to the state than a brutal wake up call that Europe no longer resembled the model that had been discussed in French domestic politics. Despite the symbolic presence of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, it appeared that it was a case of setting down rules that were good for all and that the primacy of French style decision-making had now been eclipsed by constraints mutually acceptable to all members. In such an old established centrally controlled state, the question of devolving competence so familiar to federal countries was revealingly viewed as 'anti political' and therefore unacceptable.

In retrospect, because the 'no' camp offered no alternative vision and its victory simply demonstrated collective impotence, electoral surveys showed that the public had used their votes as an a posteriori referendum against enlargement. The explanation is as follows: it was not so much a question of refusing to allow Poland or Hungary to join the EU but rather a manifestation of the confusion felt that, in the new Europe of 27, they could no longer continue the fiction of Gallic power. The rejection of the Treaty thus marked the exhaustion of one idea as to the role of France and acknowledgement of the inability to find another myth with which to mobilise popular support. In this sense it was also an indirect recognition of a crisis in the search for a national narrative that, despite intense political debate in the best historical tradition, provided no ideological basis for an alternative European scenario. In other words, the 'no' camp that promised to 'turn the tables' failed to transform its victory at the polls into a unifying project and it was not surprising that Nicolas Sarkozy later ensured the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon. The arrival of members of the 'no' camp in the Ayrault government, with Laurent Fabius at the ministry of foreign affairs, Bernard Cazeneuve at European affairs and Arnaud Montebourg at industrial affairs, appears to be less a reflection of anti Europeanism on the part of François Hollande than a desire to have internal political balance. It would appear that the divisions of 2005 have produced nothing more significant than the fact that they still need to be taken into consideration today.

Modernisation from outside

The progressive crumbling away of the Gaullist fiction of a 'French' Europe has been accompanied by a parallel failure to debate the administrative reform required to respond to external factors. The single market project, followed by the introduction of the euro were viewed as providing decisive help in pushing aside French economic conservatism and, in the name of European engagement, offering assistance to the government in overcoming the blockages associated with weaknesses in the social dialogue, with its culture of favouring conflict over compromise and the tendency of the unions and employers to call upon state intervention when negotiations failed. The French modernising elite counted on one particular institution, the Commissariat General au Plan (planning commission) to encourage the policy changes they wanted. From Jean Monnet to Jacques Delors it was this institution that provided the reforming impetus. After the setback of Jacques Chaban-Delmas' 'new society' it was Europe that took over the role of pushing modernisation in France and the arrival of Jacques Delors in Brussels in 1985 became its symbol.²

The rhetoric of management responsibility as a substitute for the utopia of the left is well represented by the socialist mayors in the major towns. This influence stretches beyond municipal borders via the regional presidents, all socialists (except in Alsace), whose interest in the European model is directly linked to the extra responsibility they expect to gain for their administrative areas. The Hollande-Ayrault government clearly represents this socialist culture and it also includes a large number of powerful regional politicians such as Pierre Moscovici, Jean-Yves Le Drian and Marylise Lebranchu. There are some notable absences namely the mayors of Lille (Martine Aubry), Greater Lyons (Gerard Collomb), Grenoble (Michel Destot, although somebody who is politically close to him is in charge of higher education and research).

Today, this project of modernisation from outside is in difficulty as a result of the euro crisis. Despite the intensity of the debate on Europe since 2005, the so-called 'constitutional moment' (2002-2009) failed to prepare politicians to deal with the sovereign debt and euro crises that began in 2009. After the shock of the referendum 'no', each political camp failed to change despite the scale of the upheaval. The French political scene has remained on the edge of a restructuring that has never taken place. In fact, those parties that united to say 'no' to Europe, on the extreme left and extreme right, have had no reason to change their line. The only party, whose electorate remain firmly attached to Europe, is the MoDem. The supporters of the two large government parties the PS (socialists) and the UMP (centre right) are both internally divided over the issue of Europe. As a proper debate would be too difficult for both these parties, they have tried to gloss over the divisions and carried on as if there is no public demand for a redrawing of the political landscape.

This restructuring of the electorate without any corresponding change in the political parties makes it particularly difficult for politicians to deal with the euro crisis. While the proposal to leave the eurozone (as supported by the National Front) is not regarded as credible by the electorate, support for the euro is weak. It is especially difficult to promote in a democratic fashion the common budget strategies required to defend the currency. Whereas the Treaty of Lisbon was seen as an institutional coup, the future measures for better political coordination of budgets as demanded by the stability pact will not be able to be ratified democratically and, for the moment, it is not even clear how they can be proposed.

² Pierre Grémion, *Modernisation et progressisme*, Paris, Editions Esprit, 2005.

Such are the contradictions of Europe today and it is hard to see how well placed France is to offer proposals to overcome them. The economic debate on the golden rule for fiscal policy, the constraints of austerity and the necessity for growth to keep budget deficits under control will no doubt move forward in the months to come. But what about the question as to how much democratic support there will be for this deepening of Europe that assumes the stability pact is not up for negotiation. Perhaps we are in the process of creating 'federalism by accident' with the control of national budgets being an unemotional new stage in the development of Europe. Such a process without democratic ratification, however, increases the use of a defective power structure.

The power of political culture

Could it be that the supporters of modernisation via external factors have underestimated the power of political culture? This perhaps explains the nagging criticism of democratic deficit and the wave of euro scepticism that is sweeping Europe: the ideal of Europe as a closer union of nations has been reduced to a succession of technical norms and a frontier free area that causes anxiety for a growing number of people, unable to profit from the opportunities of geographic, professional and private mobility. The construction of Europe, nevertheless, far from smoothing away national political cultures has the virtue of allowing a critical comparison of promising national traits.

Such is the third aspect of the French debate, after the Gallic dream and Europe as an instrument to promote economic change. A good example of this critical confrontation of the French political system with its neighbours can be seen in relations with Germany. Is it possible for a centralised state such as France and a federal one such as Germany to agree on how a union at European level should work? Even though they have played active roles in the construction of Europe, they retain very different ideas as to the nature of federalism.

Government in the political history of French centralisation depends largely on a representation of voluntary action, which is seen as the centre that provides the impetus for political action. Such a view of power has difficulty dealing with division and conflict: a privileged executive, fear of social diversity and with political activity absorbed into the state. Post war Germany, to rid itself of authoritarianism, looked to another mode of government where politics is orientated and contained by a double system of constitutional law (constitutional patriotism) and a state that guarantees a liberal market economy: i.e. guarantees economic competition; an independent central bank and a policy of balanced budgets.

While France at the European level often appeals for political decision making to be pre-eminent and Germany for adherence to legislative text, each country can improvise and accommodate itself to the political situation and interests of the moment. Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schroeder jointly sacrificed the euro stability pact in 2003 in order to avoid the sanctions set down in the treaties founding monetary union. In other words, France was happy to accept rules and regulations especially when it saw an opportunity to increase German engagement in Europe during the reunification process and Germany was open to the use of political expediency when it appeared to be in its interests.

But when Europe appeared as an opportunity to play on national political cultures and bring them together to profit from a new, more balanced and efficient mode of government in tackling the European debt crisis, this double model only added to the impasse. French voluntarism, overplayed in an almost caricature manner by Nicolas Sarkozy, failed to attract support from other countries and did not reassure the

markets. But Angela Merkel's political restraint, sometimes bordering on indecision has also not succeeded in bringing an end to the crisis.

Could Europe be the place to invent a third way with a positive mix of political voluntarism and legal regulation? Currently, with succeeding signs of defiance vis à vis choices for Europe and the single currency, neither a government intent on decision making nor one emphasising procedure nor even the intense cooperation of the last few months has been able to show the way back to a confident Europe. This double impasse of Jacobinism and liberalism is more disturbing than the inter governmentalism of the Council that is supposed to compensate for the democratic deficit of the European Commission and the European Parliament, whose moderation has been striking since the start of the euro crisis.

The pronouncements of François Hollande, the new French President, are somewhat split at the moment. On the one hand, his campaign that touched on only a few subjects placed great emphasis on a need for growth to be included in the stability pact. His impact has gone beyond France and has changed some of the internal dynamics of the Union. Another of his campaign themes was that of de-industrialisation in France. This is a subject that can be tackled from a number of angles ranging from the quality of French education and training through state aids for SMEs to innovation and more ecological means of production. In giving Arnaud Montebourg (who campaigned under the slogan of de-globalisation) the job as minister for industry, François Hollande appears to support a rather protectionist stance in the defence of industrial production. It would seem that the new government's European policy is caught between two potentially contradictory logics: European projects to support the economy but a French national strategy of protectionism for industrial jobs – not much evidence of European solidarity! The question is which way will the balance tip?

French debate on Europe was, for many years, essentially an internal discussion about how best to heal the wound of the loss of its colonies, the ambitions of the modernisers and the limits of the Jacobin system. Could it, tomorrow, become a debate taking into account the new European and world orders? This presupposes a change of view, difficult to achieve for a power that has still not absorbed the new global geography and the power change in favour of Asia, accelerated by the 2008 crisis. Nevertheless, the difficulty of the period makes it possible for France to change its view on European construction: interdependence is a fact; the risk of decline is real; and the urgent nature of the situation is self-evident. References to Europe that for a long time provided a political resource in the sense that they gave politicians added credibility and a reserve of ideas, nowadays require more conviction and the courage to speak in its favour. Perhaps the arrival in power of a generation that has had parliamentary experience of working with Europe will be able to influence future choices in the direction of greater solidarity.

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