

European Misunderstanding

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European Misunderstanding

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The European Question

Since its origin, the integration of Europe has been based on a misunderstanding. A misunderstanding named “Fear.” Not fear of Communism, which had been such an easy pretext for so long, but fear of Germany. It has been haunting Europe since the end of the Second World War and has determined the politics of France. Thus was born the condominium that France and Germany believed they could impose on their partners. Chancellors and Presidents — Adenauer and de Gaulle, Schmidt and Giscard d’Estaing, Kohl and Mitterand — embodied this plan. But can France and Germany still lead the construction of Europe? The question is not often asked, out of fear of causing a seismic political event not only on both sides of the Rhine, but throughout Europe. How could it be otherwise, since the Franco-German relationship is founded on “the will to preserve peace on the continent,” of which it considers itself the guarantor — as if peace were not the business of all the European people. However, the question must be raised.

Progressive enlargement of Europe, quite as much as the fall of the Berlin Wall, deeply transformed the initial conditions of European construction. France and Germany have just over a third of the population and a little less than half of the total Gross Domestic Product of the Europe of 15 members; they have lost the legitimacy they jointly derived from their demographic and economic weight. In addition, the collapse of Communism, which allowed German reunification and the reunion of the two halves of the continent, has changed the terms of German security. Under these conditions, one should not be surprised if the

show of voluntarism manages neither to overcome the differences nor to clarify the misunderstandings, which are recognized on both sides as “sufficiently profound and recurring as to be troubling.”¹

The hour is particularly propitious for reconsidering the construction of Europe. A page of history was turning as President Mitterand and Chancellor Kohl retired from the political scene — the last statesmen whose European leadership bore the imprimatur of the Second World War. Everywhere in Europe, a new generation of political leaders gradually is coming to power. In addition, while xenophobia and racism are on the rise, the Christian Democrats who had dominated European thought for a half-century are giving way to liberal conservatism. Social democracy, for its part, has survived, but not without a profound *aggiornamento*. Still, the page will be turned once and for all only on the day when the European misunderstanding is resolved. For that, we must face the debate raised by the German question.

“The German question is, par excellence, the European question.”² Pronounced in 1966, General de Gaulle’s proposition strikes to the heart of the debate. It is European (he explained) for historical, geographical, intellectual reasons that could apply to any other state in Europe. But, he added, “It is European because forever, Germany has felt anguish, even fury, fed by her own uncertainty as to her borders, her unity, her political regime, her international role; and the more unsettled her destiny has been, the more unsettling it seems to the rest of the continent.” On the other side of the Rhine, Chancellor Kurt Kiesinger echoed this by referring to the prospect of German unity. Germany, unified Germany, is at a critical size: too big not to play a role in the balance of forces, too small to be able to keep the forces around her in equilibrium.³

The fall of the Berlin Wall reopened the debate on Germany. Margaret Thatcher said, with her usual brutality: “Germany, which has always oscillated unpredictably between aggression and self-doubt . . . [is] by her very nature more a factor of destabilization than of stabilization in Europe.”⁴ The Germans would respond a few years later by again invoking their country’s special involvement in the events of the past. We must avoid seeing Germany, says a CSU-CDU document, “stuck again in the uncomfortable position of being in the middle. In the past, this position between the East and the West prevented Germany from establishing an unambiguous framework for its domestic affairs and kept it from achieving a stable and durable equilibrium in its

external relations. Her attempts to overcome this situation by the conquest of hegemony, at the center of every European conflict, have failed.”⁵

During the Liberation, the Allies thought they had the answer to the debate and the doubts. They would take Germany's affairs directly in hand. Neither reparations nor indemnities would be levied, but they would define Germany's borders themselves, as well as the unity of the country, the political regime, and the international role, without consulting the people or the new German leadership. That would be the “punishment” of Potsdam, where Germany's post-war fate was decided. Once more, history decided somewhat differently.

With the Cold War, which tossed part of Germany into the Soviet camp, the Allies were forced to thoroughly re-examine their attitude with respect to Germany. They had imagined it remaining unified; Stalin imposed the partition into two States. They had wanted it stripped of its mining and coal resources; France had to resolve itself to restoring the Saar. They had started to dismantle the factories and to demilitarize the country, in the face of the “Soviet threat;” the Americans pushed for a prompt rebuilding of its economic power and its army. Only the decentralized democratic system escaped this revision, with considerable autonomy of the regional government that was set up by the allied military authority. Under these conditions, how could the past be exorcised? The allies were divided on this question: by integrating Germany into a multitude of institutions — NATO, OSCE (later to become OECD), the Council of Europe, the Western European Union — answered the Americans and the British; by integrating it into a European ensemble, suggested the French. Sovereignty was recovered, but constrained for some, shared for the others. The two steps were taken concurrently; they always are.

The German question is also a French question *par excellence*. Since Great Britain withdrew, concentrating on Empire rather than on Europe, France alone had to take the initiative. Finding itself isolated in not wanting a German renaissance, France had to invent the means by which to render it impotent. And that was Europe. To dilute German power: such would be, and such is, the objective of France's policy in Europe. The ECSC Treaty, the Euratom Treaty, the Treaty of Rome, the Elysée Treaty, the Treaty of Maastricht, whether we are talking about coal and steel, nuclear power, the customs union, defense or currency, the goal is the same every time. Under the cover of Europe,

France hopes to use Germany's power to benefit its own economy. For, right from the start, everyone understands that Germany can only re-emerge as "powerful."

Germany was not fooled by the French machinations. But it found them to be in its own interests, temporarily. Chancellor Adenauer's priority was to attain sovereignty with equal rights; his successors' is gradually to affirm the legitimacy of "German national interests." But they have a common goal, reunification. Born of the Franco-German question, Europe is being built according to the rate of Franco-German co-operation. The Benelux countries and Italy, like the United States, expected this to help secure a lasting peace and to fix Germany into the "Western camp" vis-à-vis the Soviet threat; they supported this *pas de deux*. New members were brought into the union throughout the '70s and '80s, but none of them questioned this assumption.

But the Europe that is being built this way is anything but European — that is, free from the Nation States. After the Liberation, France had no more intention than Great Britain of disappearing into a European ensemble. Neither one planned to give up its place on the world stage. No one wanted to see his national identity dissolving into a "European identity" that was carefully not defined. National interests determine the conduct of European affairs, and only the elected leaders can address them. As soon as the first divergences come up in day-to-day management, the federalist approach that underlies the ECSC⁶ institutions, disappear and the intergovernmental structures gain ground. Once national interests come into play, the High Authority of the ECSC does not have legitimate authority to resolve questions that concern the States. In Messina, where the Treaty of Rome was being negotiated, the governments adjusted their focus and set their watches to the hour of the nations. The power would go to the Council of Ministers of the States, not to the Commission (which was to be the forerunner of a future federal government). The latter preserves only the power to make proposals, even though it secured a "monopoly" on that.

Thus was born the "Community" method: European proposals, international (called "intergovernmental") decisions. The possibility of decision-making by majority tempered this retreat from the federal option. The crisis unleashed by General de Gaulle in July 1965, which led six months later to the "Luxembourg Compromise,"⁷ closed the door again on the federal way for quite some time. The States safeguarded

their sovereignty, but they were obliged to learn the art of compromise. The intergovernmental co-operation retrieved all these rights. In Europe, compromise is anything but an innovation; rather, an old acquaintance. For centuries, at least since the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia,⁸ it has governed the relationship between European states. And we know what happened: It made Europe a battlefield.

The Treaty of Maastricht would appear over time as the ultimate attempt to preserve the illusion that France entertains — of dominating Germany by enclosing it in a European ensemble. Today, still, for President Chirac, the Franco-German axis remains the means of building an “autonomous Europe under the leadership of an independent France, in competition with the United States.”⁹ We only think of Germany, be it divided or unified, as a captive of Europe, dissolved within Europe. However, the collapse of Communism has released it. How could the dream of a Germany that would be synonymous with Europe, that would dominate Europe and direct its every step to suit Germany’s interests and ambitions, and that would make a weapon of its recovered sovereignty — fail to reappear? It is natural that reunification was accompanied by a wake-up call to German national feeling. It is understandable that it inspires fears and questions, even in Germany. But let us not make Germany the scapegoat of European problems. Are its national pride, its will to make its leadership prevail, and its need to bolster its identity, any less legitimate and less European than France’s? What other prospect do we offer to Germany? The post-war period is over. It is time to substitute the European question for the German question.

But how can we imagine creating Europe without the citizens as the driving force, without political passion as the heart? Looking back, people will be astonished that for nearly a half-century Europe could have been a political project from which politics was excluded. Any debate on the goals pursued and the ways to achieve them is banned; any interpellation on the design of Europe is prohibited. Admittedly, the defenders of Maastricht acknowledge that the Treaty is not perfect. They recognize that the citizens were not consulted. Still, they do not acknowledge that one may criticize the options chosen after long and difficult negotiations. To question is already to be against. Isn’t it urgent to move ahead, to make progress with the construction that is presumably threatened by the retrograde proponents of Nation States? Later, we are told, when European construction is complete, there will

always be time to correct and amend, if it still seems necessary. The Council of Amsterdam's failure to re-found Europe on its citizens shows that this hour will never come to be.

The reasons for refusing political debate are numerous. The illusion that political union must "naturally" follow from economic and monetary integration combines with the will to retain political power at the national level. The Franco-German tête-à-tête rests on the conviction that the ancestral quarrel will be overcome only if it is discussed as a series of "technical" questions by animated leaders with an unshakeable will to compromise. It prohibits any other approach. In Luxembourg and Brussels, Jean Monnet and his successors always considered Europe to be too serious a matter to be left to public passions. In Paris, Bonn, Rome, and other capitals, the governments were convinced very early on that it was too important to be addressed by any democratic authority other than them. Thus every party concerned deferred the hour when it would be necessary to consider transferring sovereignty, i.e. abandoning their power. Instead of European construction becoming a European affair *par excellence*, some have depoliticized it, while others have reduced it to a matter of domestic politics.

Rather than a "return of the States,"¹⁰ the conditions of European construction have allowed the permanence of the States. Behind the appeals for greater federalism, the dance of the relations of powers makes sure of that. Introducing committees of national civil servants into the execution of the decisions, and introducing subsidiarity into the definition of the division of competences, have proven to be instruments for renationalizing significant domains that had been presented or promised to the Community. The Single Act and the Treaty of Maastricht were unanimously presented as accelerating European integration. However, Laurent Cohen-Tanugi hit the nail on the head when he wrote, "It's all coming out as though the States wanted to exploit the lack of consensus to take their revenge on a process that was starting to get away from them."¹¹ The more the leaders announce fresh "progress" in the construction of a European Union, the more, actually, it recedes. The fear of a "German Europe" is used as bogeyman to justify perpetuating a Europe built of separate nations.

Any European public space, where the ways and the means could be democratically discussed without mediation by the national governments, was carefully isolated. National interests lead the way. At the

UN as in the international economic and monetary meetings, the European nations, members of the Security Council or G7, deny Europe any representation. Since the passions tend to become nationalist, they are played down in order to avoid building up dark clouds over Europe. The world of sports is emblematic. Sports organizers remain “nationalist.” The number of European competitions has increased, but they remain international. The European Court of Justice imposed a single market for soccer. But there are no European teams¹² to participate in the great world events — the Olympic Games, soccer’s World Cup, world championships for track and field or figure skating, etc.. Everywhere in the construction of Europe, national entities rule the day.

Do we really want Europe? For anyone who has considered himself to be “building Europe” for the last 50 years, the answer is beyond doubt. But look closer, and it is not so clear. European citizenship, introduced with the Treaty of Maastricht,¹³ is founded on States, not on humans right and fundamental freedoms; national economic policies are maintained simultaneously with the realization of the single market and the march toward the single currency; European defense and expansion in the East are carried out through NATO and only American intervention restored a hint of peace in Yugoslavia [Bosnia]; institutional reform consolidates intergovernmental power and places it further beyond the reach of democracy. Europe has the European flag, it looks like Europe, and it is called Europe; but it is not Europe in the true sense.

The intergovernmental conference that opened in Turin in 1996 was concluded in Amsterdam without bringing answers to the questions left outstanding at Maastricht in December 1991 when, to mask their lack of vision for the future, the heads of state and of government set the goals and the date for the IGC. The IGC would have to do what they were unable to do: to revise the Treaty that they were on the point of signing and of which the policy portion remained hopelessly empty. But in six years, no real progress was made, except for the change of government in Great Britain that unblocked the decision-making processes. As at Maastricht, institutional reform was deferred to a later date, this time after the year 2000. Contrary to the commitments made, the citizen, once again, was kept out of the debates. No government is asking him for his opinion by referendum; the sanction would probably be severe. Neither does any of the governments seem to be in a hurry to

open up again the question of institutional reform.

As a new generation of politicians takes up the reins of government, almost simultaneously in the majority of European countries, a page is turned in the construction of Europe. These men may be Europeans, but their motives are very different. The passionate striving to ensure peace, born of the smoking ruins left by two global conflicts, is no longer the animating force that drives European construction. Europe is now a “practical necessity,” as the new German chancellor says, the obligatory point of passage to achieving each one’s “national interests.” For Paris, Berlin, Rome, Madrid or London, there is no alternative to Europe. This makes it less urgent to do away with the nation-states, an objective that very much preoccupied the founders of this European construction. To found the sense of a European identity on human rights while reaffirming the sovereignty of the states — that is the new dialectic that Lionel Jospin and Gerhard Schroeder have taken on, and that Tony Blair (supported by some of the conservatives) seeks to share with the British.

Europe needs a new ambition; it needs that “European spirit” that Paul Valéry called upon shortly after “the Great War.”¹⁴ It needs a vision collectively assumed by the people. Reinforcing Franco-German friendship is essential to ensure peace on the continent — and the Franco-British *Entente Cordiale*, too. But the Franco-German pair has exhausted its historical role and can no longer claim to lead Europe. While the misunderstandings between France and Germany have not completely prevented European construction from progressing, every day it becomes more obvious that they are a significant deterrent. But this is neither a French question, nor a German question. The misunderstanding is a European question. It must find a European answer; and it can only be political.

Notes

1. *France-Allemagne: comment aller de l'avant?* Joint document by the French and German Ministries for Foreign Affairs, Paris-Bonn, photocopied, December 20, 1996.
2. February 4, 1966, quoted by Pierre Guillen, *La Question allemande de 1945 à nos jours*, Paris, Imprimerie nationale, 1996, p. 7.
3. Jacques-Pierre Crougeon, *Où va l'Allemagne*, Paris, Flammarion, 1997, p. 205.
4. Margaret Thatcher, *10, Downing street, Memoires*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1993, p. 657.
5. CSU-CDU Parliamentary groups, *Réflexions sur la politique européenne*, Bonn, photocopied, September 1994.
6. European Coal and Steel Community.
7. See below, the Search for the Holy Grail.
8. The Treaty of Westphalia, which put an end to the Thirty Year War, established the princes' religious freedom and parcelled out Germany. Moreover, it weakened Austria by forcing it to forward all the levied money and men to the Diets of the Empire. Many historians consider that it made Germany into the battlefield of Europe.
9. Cited by Jean Daniel, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, January 9, 1997.
10. Laurent Cohen-Tanugi, *Le Choix de l'Europe*, Paris, Fayard, 1995, p. 64.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
12. The constitution of European sporting teams appeared in the mandate given in 1984 by the council of Fontainebleau to the ad hoc *committee* for "the Citizens' Europe."
13. Item N2 of the Treaty on the European Union.
14. Paul Valéry, "La Crise de l'esprit," *Variété*, in *Œuvres*, t. 1, Paris, Gallimard, coll. "La Pléiade."

