Responsibility for Europe: A relative concept

On French-German tensions during the euro crisis

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French-German leadership during the euro crisis has been fraught with tension. It's not so much the case that Germany is abandoning its European responsibilities, more that the crisis emphasizes differences in political culture. While Germany may seem dilatory, French resolve forfeits democratic deliberation.

Since 2008, the European reaction to the consequences of the financial and economic crisis has been coordinated by a strained Franco-German duo. It has been the French president and the German chancellor who, within the framework of the European Council, have launched projects designed to safeguard the eurozone. Their initiatives have taken place against the backdrop of European institutions disoriented by a spate of financial catastrophes and a European Central Bank in complete upheaval (Jean-Claude Trichet having turned over his position to Mario Draghi). Ever since the misfortune of the constitutional treaty and the rise of euro-scepticism, community procedural methods have been marginalized in favour of what, in European jargon, is called “intergovernmental” action. In other words, Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel have eclipsed the Commission and the Parliament. Yet this return of political responsibility, though indispensable, has not been unproblematic. The Franco-German relationship has often been rocky, with discordant declarations making the finalization of agreements an uphill struggle.

Franco-German initiatives have usually appeared too late and seemed too weak to be wholly credible. This being said, without the meetings between Sarkozy and Merkel, Europe would have seemed voiceless, passive in the face of one piece of bad news after another (a series of downgraded ratings), leaving the eurozone vulnerable to American scepticism [1] and down-turning financial market speculations. While risking irritating other capitals, the Paris-Berlin axis occupies a central position in European decision-making and will probably determine the future of the eurozone. However, the duo in the limelight is far from functioning perfectly; personality differences aside, the relationship between the two capitals appears blighted by misunderstandings. These probably result not from any renunciation of European convictions on either side, despite recent critiques
of Germany to this effect, but from differences regarding sound economic management, national sovereignty, democratic practices and international responsibilities.

The specific political cultures of France and Germany are expressed through different temporalities. The Franco-German response to the Greek crisis was hampered by the difficulty of synchronising responses, as Nicolas Sarkozy’s haste jarred with Angela Merkel’s wait-and-see approach. Beyond personal political styles, what is at stake are institutional time schedules. With the Greek crisis, the German authorities maintained an attitude that was hard to interpret: “Permanent procrastination, inopportune initiatives, brutal declarations followed by flexible fallback positions”, as one French commentator put it. In areas where France favours the adaptability and flexibility of institutional responses, Germany refuses to bypass legitimate procedures. Although the slowness of the German response creates difficulties in a crisis situation, it produces more steadfast, well-considered strategies. France, on the other hand, works promptly towards solutions yet curtails public debate, weakening the continuity of its strategies.

The proliferation of disagreements

Although the euro crisis has induced France and Germany to cooperate more closely, it has also caused longstanding political differences between the two countries to assume new depth. Disagreement about the euro goes back to its inception. The exceedingly political choice made by François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl did not erase opposing economic approaches to the role of the currency (which is what the Maastricht debate was all about). By following the gradual procedural method characteristic of Europe, the single currency was launched despite the institutional system being incomplete. Today, various kinds of disequilibrium linked to insufficient coordination of economic policies have caught up with Europe. Its legitimacy no longer deriving from the ability to bring positive results to European citizens, the Union is now facing another, postponed, appointment: that of its democratic legitimacy.

The French referendum on the Lisbon Treaty expressed dissatisfaction with the “democratic deficit” back in 2005. In Germany, it was the much-debated ruling of the Constitutional Court on 30 June 2009 that, while validating the constitutionality of the Lisbon Treaty, reasserted the need for ultimate democratic legitimacy at the national level. Insofar as Europe is not a federal system, ruled the Court, the German parliament must be able to decide on any treaty modification; it is thus the parliament that retains the “competence to extend the competence” of the European authorities. What will be the impact of this ruling? In fact, it reflects more a continuation than a reversal of the doctrine of European integration. Yet it is a retreat insofar as it implies that national ratification for any future treaty modification is required, notably one perpetuating the European Financial Stability Fund.

Finally, NATO’s intervention in Libya provoked spectacular disagreement after Germany abstained from voting for the United Nations resolution, thereby dissociating itself from its Western allies for the first time since 1945, leaving France to go it alone with Great Britain on military matters.

The convergence of these disagreements has caused doubts to proliferate: Has Germany
policy become unpredictable? Does it represent an ill-controlled return of the will to power? An indifference to European common interests? A series of bad calculations linked to domestic policy issues?

The repercussions of reunification

A poll taken in January 2011 showed that 50 per cent of the German population has little or no confidence in Europe and that more than 70 per cent does not view Europe as the future of Germany. [6] How can this development be understood in a country whose European commitment used to be self-evident? Germany’s relationship to Europe has changed since reunification: for a country that didn’t expect to be reunified in the near future, the prevailing post-national perspective was quickly replaced by a redefinition of the national interest. Europe doesn’t occupy the same place in Germany as it used to. Not only has reunification changed Germany’s relationship to its national history, it has also come with an economic cost that the country has met by merging domestic austerity and export policy. The success with which Germany has absorbed the shock of reunification in twenty years has given it confidence in the solidity of its institutions and its modes of democracy. This is in stark contrast to other European countries, where the incapacity to reach strong political consensus or to formulate crucial political choices has exacerbated the economic crisis.

Misunderstandings between France and Germany are nothing new. The architects of the European Union gambled on integrating Europeans through largely apolitical topics that would minimise historical disagreements. But now disagreements are over how economies are managed – the common ground upon which rapprochement was supposed to have been built. The archaic theory of “climatic difference” has even re-emerged during the debt crisis, with the “Club Med” countries being contrasted with those associated with hard work and prudence. “It’s a cruel irony of history if the most dangerous cracks appear in precisely the area that the Union considered to be its primary mission, the economic sphere”, wrote Hans-Magnus Enzensberger. [7] Rapprochement no longer works at the economic level because the debt question is not only a matter of economic disequilibrium but the result of political paralysis and social deadlock that varies from country to country. [8]

Why is rescuing the euro so unpopular in Germany? The question has of course been raised inside the country itself. Many have said that it’s because the chancellor herself is unenthusiastic. Because Merkel dislikes reacting under pressure, she gave priority to local elections that were important for retaining her majority, thus playing for time over the first plan to save Greece on 8 May 2010. For commentators belonging to the wartime generation, such as the former chancellor Helmut Schmidt or the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, [9] it is a generational issue: as chancellor Kohl himself often declared, his was the last generation to have experienced the war (without having participated in it directly) and therefore it sensed the moral duties attendant upon the German past.

Angela Merkel symbolizes a new generation formed by the division and then the reunification of Germany; her confidence in the market economy was forged in opposition to the East German regime. Far removed from the Rhineland culture that marked post-war West German politics, she is at home in Berlin, in a country whose centre of gravity has shifted away from France. Merkel stands symbolically for the Berlin Republic and its
The right to chide?

This generational change would not have exerted such influence had it not been accompanied by an economic strategy introduced by Gerhard Schröder and continued by Merkel. Ever since the Hartz reforms, [10] German economic strategy has received a strong consensus: lowering of labour costs, the reduction of domestic redistribution and consumption, strict limitation of deficits, export development. This strategy has enabled Germany to post a strong trade surplus and limit unemployment. However salaries have been greatly restrained, job quality has deteriorated, and social aid is no longer as generous. With the symbolic abandonment of the deutschmark and the cost of the reunification, Germans sense that they have paid for the European cause a little too dearly. Disregarding their marked condescendence towards the Greeks, Germans sense that an additional effort is being asked of them after they have already accepted numerous sacrifices. The growing impoverishment of the population perhaps explains the popular success of Thilo Sarrazin’s anti-immigrant tract \textit{Deutschland schafft sich ab} (“Germany does away with itself”). Sarrazin, a former Social Democratic finance minister for Berlin, has been allowed to remain in the party, suggesting that, for a significant portion of leftwing voters, his xenophobic nationalism is compatible with the defence of the German social model.

A large part of the public opinion wonders why Germany’s successful economic policy has not been followed across Europe. Germany’s partners retort that, although the model has unquestionable virtues, it cannot be generalized: since the eurozone is the primary export zone for Germany, it is little justified in criticizing its neighbours, who are also its customers, for deficits that feed its own trade surplus. Germany is indeed one of the main beneficiaries of the euro and would surely be the first victim of the end of the currency (40 per cent of German trade is done within the eurozone [11]). Germany is not wrong when it views its economic strategy as coherent, but it should also acknowledge its contribution to European disequilibrium through its trade surplus.

European solidarity under duress

While the crisis of sovereign debts reveals differences in economic strategy among eurozone countries, it also serves as a reminder that each nation, through its history and institutions, makes collective choices that reflect a political model. Even if Europe provides a common normative framework on the basis of minimal membership criteria, it has not replaced the forms of legitimacy or the ways in which democratic choices are formed.

Reflecting on criticism of Europe within Germany, Jürgen Habermas, a strong advocate of Germany’s European vocation, points to the surprising discrepancy between two events that occurred in March. [12] On the one hand, the results of regional elections in Baden-Württemberg saw the Christian Democratic majority, traditionally dominant in this industrial heartland, replaced by a coalition led by the Green Party. On the other hand, negotiations over the new rules for the eurozone were simultaneously being held in Brussels, without citizen approval seeming to be required.
The importance of local politics and the vitality of citizen mobilisation concerning issues such as energy (the phasing out of nuclear power) or transportation and urban regeneration (the mobilisation in Stuttgart against the colossal reconstruction of the train station) are likewise visible in Berlin in the unexpected election to parliament of members of the Pirate Party (15 seats, with nearly 9 per cent of the votes, after an election campaign whose budget totalled only 40,000 euros). In the same elections, the centrist FDP, a member of the government coalition, collapsed to a mere 1.8 per cent of the votes.

The contrast with the negotiations at the European level, held behind closed doors and accompanied by premonitions of catastrophe, is striking. After every Council decision, each presented as the response to an emergency, there follows a phase of national ratification. In Paris, this takes place quickly; in Berlin, at a pace befitting a parliamentary process. All this happens beneath the nervous gaze of the financial markets, which react instantly. On 29 September 2011, despite the hostility of the majority of public opinion, the German Parliament finally approved the funding plan for Greece, the enlargement of the rescue budget, and the mandate of the European Financial Stability Fund. This vote contradicts the French adage that while a parliamentary regime is subject to the fickleness of public opinion, the leeway given to the President in international affairs shelters him from the inconstancies of his compatriots. It’s true that the French president can make quick decisions (e.g. to enter the Libyan war), but this detracts from the vitality of public debate, which is too often bypassed in France. Who in France raises the question of the cost to the French taxpayer of rescuing Greece? The pace of German-style parliamentary debate is slower but less disconcerting for citizens. The successive rescue plans have so far not sufficed to ease the pressures imposed by the financial markets and to prevent speculation on bankruptcies within the eurozone, yet they severely test European solidarity and the ability of the German-French duo to reach compromises.

European Union countries often accept these compromises not because understanding between France and Germany comes easily, but because they are the two countries whose viewpoints are often the most difficult to reconcile. The crisis of sovereign debts will be no exception to this rule. Germany has liberated itself from the “culture of restraint” that prevailed in the Bonn Republic. It no longer hesitates to insist upon its economic interests and to show its discontent at the European level. Germany is preparing neither for secession nor hegemony. But the end of self-censorship implies that its partners, above all France, must adapt. After all, since 2005 France hasn’t exactly abstained from eurosceptic one-upmanship.

Footnotes


2. See: Christian Calliess, Henrik Enderlein, Joschka Fischer, Ulrike Guérot, Jürgen Habermas, "Europe and 'the new German question'".


4. See: Klaus Ferdinand Gärditz, Christian Hillgruber, "Should Karlsruhe Be the Guardian


12. Jürgen Habermas, "A Pact For or Against Europe?", in U. Guérot and J. Hénard, What does Germany think about Europe?, op. cit.

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