

'The French initiative' from Le Figaro (11 May 1950)

Caption: On 11 May 1950, in an article published in the French daily newspaper Le Figaro, Raymond Aron focuses on the economic and political scope of the plan to pool European coal and steel output.

Source: Le Figaro. dir. de publ. BRISSON, Pierre. 11.05.1950, n° 1763; 124e année. Paris: Le Figaro. "L'initiative française", auteur:Aron, Raymond , p. 1; 10.

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The French initiative

by Raymond Aron

A few weeks ago, Chancellor Adenauer unveiled through an American press agency his sensational proposal for a Franco-German Union. The French press and the spokesmen for the French Foreign Office were practically unanimous in denouncing what they termed *interview diplomacy*. Why, they asked, if the German Government had something to say to the French Government, did it not send its message through the High Commission?

The tone adopted the day before yesterday by Mr Robert Schuman when tabling his own proposal was, some say, similar to that of Mr Adenauer. The British Cabinet was not informed until later the same day. The public, swamped by so many sensational initiatives which came to naught, reacted with scepticism. Is the pooling of Franco-German heavy industry simply a smokescreen to conceal inaction, like the European institutions or the High Atlantic Council for Peace? Or, on the contrary, could the technique of *interview diplomacy* give hope for efficient measures?

The economic impact

The idea of supranational control over Western Europe's heavy industries is not new. It has been bandied about for many years in nearly all the programmes and resolutions of the committees and congresses that promote a united Europe. It came up against the opposition of the French Government, which could not accept its industry being placed under the same control as the Ruhr's heavy industry, and the resistance of the British Government, always suspicious of such vast and woolly projects.

In formal terms, the international authority outlined by the French Government could be likened to a cartel, which it is currently fashionable to revile. But cartels have fulfilled certain needs of the European economy, despite their drawbacks. It mattered little whether or not a simultaneously professional and state organisation in an industrial sector deserved the label *cartel*. The real issue lay elsewhere. What are the aims of the organisation? On this point, according to the official text, the intentions clearly differ from the conventional practices of cartels.

One objective would be to narrow over time the disparities between the prices paid by French and German users of coal and steel. The price equalisation method would be used temporarily, but the aim would be to create conditions conducive to competition between the processing industries, thanks to a levelling of raw materials prices. In other words, instead of earmarking domestic markets for national industries by freezing the price differentials for French and German coal and steel, the resistance of businessmen to free trade could be overcome by undermining the argument used in part to justify that resistance. The goal would be to set up a large area, not to allocate partitioned markets.

The objections that the Socialists will raise will probably concern managerial staff, relations between industrialists and state representatives and the system of ownership. In my opinion, we were right to set aside ownership as a secondary issue. The fact that tens of thousands of people own shares in Ruhr coal or steel companies changes nothing in the real balance of power. The administrators, whether you call them managers or directors, hold, and will continue to hold, effective authority, regardless of the system of ownership. In order to dispel the suspicions of the Socialists, it would be useful to bring together in the managerial staff the private sector directors, who most often are not capitalists or owners, and the directors appointed by the governments.

We might also bring in union representatives to serve on advisory or supervisory boards.

The project will succeed only if it is supported by the public. It would be highly regrettable if the Socialists, in Germany and France, were reluctant to participate. 'National Socialism', even of the labour brand, could not be regarded as a model.

The political impact

For the moment, the French proposal is having above all a political impact that is tantamount to a break with German policy, a policy that has been obstinately upheld by the French Foreign Office for several years now.

The proposal implies, whether our political masters realise it nor not, that bans or authoritarian limitations on German production will be abandoned, as will unilateral control of the Ruhr. We have never ceased to repeat that the ban on the unrestricted building of freighters and the production of synthetic oil and steel, beyond a certain limit, runs contrary to the very nature of things and would be swept away by uncontrollable events. The International Ruhr Authority, despite the motions tabled by the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee, was stillborn, because it came up against the indifference of our allies and the lack of goodwill on the part of the Germans. Now that the shortages are no longer with us, the danger of allocating insufficient amounts of coke for export has also passed. As long as the other countries of Europe also resort to double pricing, any action by the International Authority will be dead in the water.

Either the French proposal signifies nothing at all or it means that, for once breaking with tradition, the French Foreign Office is taking the initiative, relinquishing untenable positions and intends to negotiate directly with the Germans for a status acceptable to all and, consequently, likely to last. Instead of taking precautions against yesterday's perils, a forward-looking stance is being taken. In the next 12 months, Bonn will gradually recover its sovereignty, and military occupation will continue, but the High Commissioners will become ambassadors. The time has therefore come to lay the foundations for genuine cooperation between the two countries.

Heavy industry in the Benelux countries will probably willingly join the Franco-German combine, but it is most unlikely that British industry will do so. All the arguments put forward, by labour and British interests, in support of Britain's reluctant attitude towards the OEEC, will only weaken the French project. Its presentation, on the eve of the London Conference, was not designed to soothe the politely-contained sour mood of our Brussels Treaty allies.

A combine of French and German heavy industry could be the start of a speedy transformation of European politics that, in time, might transform the European economy. The technical difficulties, the twin peril of state control and private coalitions, are evident. After the failure of the OEEC and the Council of Europe, efforts should be made to create the conditions required for economic integration in a limited sector.

Even the bombastic diplomatic style, which our allies find somewhat unpleasant, might be justified if it were interpreted as a kind of commitment to take seriously a slogan that has been repeated all too often, but never sufficiently applied: the reconciliation of France and Germany must be pursued in order to build the foundations of a united Europe.

Raymond Aron