

'The difficulties with the green pool', from Le Figaro (10 August 1954)

Caption: On 10 August 1954, in the French daily newspaper Le Figaro, rural economist Pierre Fromont, a member of the French Academy for Agriculture and an opponent of any form of European control over the agricultural sector, considers the difficulties involved in establishing a European agricultural system.

Source: Le Figaro. dir. de publ. BRISSON, Pierre. 10.08.1954, n° 3085; 128e année. Paris: Le Figaro. "Les difficultés du pool vert", auteur:Fromont, Pierre , p. 1; 10.

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The difficulties of the green pool

by Pierre Fromont

The meeting in Paris in early July of the Ministers for Agriculture or their delegates from 17 European nations was an almost clandestine affair. It was convened to pursue the work of the international conferences, which, since France put forward the idea of the green pool in 1950, have been striving to make it a reality. It managed to go unnoticed, thereby perpetuating the deplorable method of those who, contemptuous of the masses, are seeking, through a sort of revived paternalism, to force upon them arrangements that will be revealed to them only when it is too late for them to take part in the discussions. This discretion also conveyed the extremely serious difficulties being encountered today in pursuit of the original idea.

That idea hinges on the assertion that suppliers outside Europe are currently unable to deliver. The countries of the New World, which can easily supply the dense populations of Western Europe as long as they remain sparsely populated agricultural economies, have been tending, so the argument goes, to consume the entirety of their crops ever since their inhabitants have increased in number and a growing proportion of them have become engaged in manufacturing. The trend is clear enough, but it is evolving slowly, with many a sharp and profound reversal. Today we are witnessing just such a reversal. The production of wheat, one of Europe's primary imports, has increased so quickly that the United States alone has accumulated stocks capable of satisfying the needs of world trade for one year. Surfeit is the order of the day for dairy products such as butter as well. Far from fearing a shortage, European nations are visited daily by representatives of countries across the Atlantic offering them products at knockdown prices. The real danger for them lies not in consumption but in being submerged by such an enormous volume of imports at such low prices that their agriculture would be disrupted for several years. Preaching, in the name of Europe, the need for European countries to make sacrifices so as to increase their agricultural output and their purchasing of European agricultural products seems to them a mockery, and a mockery is precisely what a once generous and rational project has become.

The disappointment is all the more bitter as the sacrifices required grow larger. We had never denied the need for those sacrifices, we knew that agricultural prices in the Old World are currently higher than those of the New World, but we hoped that the gap would diminish.

In fact it has widened to an extent that could not have been imagined: delivered to frontier, French wheat is sold at 4 100 francs per quintal, while the United States, Canada and Australia sell at 2 100 francs (f.o.b.), a price England turns down as too high! It is true that Great Britain is known for striking a hard bargain, but even Germany, which is presented by some as the 'good European', will only buy the French product if it is not more expensive than the American equivalent. No doubt that is being a good European on the cheap, but faced with such a huge price differential, no one is asking for priority clearance of European products anymore. No doubt, individual countries frequently accept such sacrifices to ensure the survival of their own producers. They do so in the national interest, for this survival represents a form of insurance for them. At European level, solidarity is not strong enough for such factors to come into play. Thus, Spain was long kept out of the preparatory discussions on the green pool, since its government's ideology did not appeal to the majority of those involved in the project. Within a nation, in contrast, provinces whose elected representatives vote 'against the government' are supplied just like all the others.

This last feature also helps clarify one of the reasons, fundamental this time rather than simply circumstantial, why a 'European agriculture' is having such difficulty taking shape: the systematic confusion between politics and economics. At the outset, the aim was to improve the supply of food to Europe. Integrating the various national agricultures, i.e. abandoning sovereignty, was seen as just one possible solution; it has since become, in the eyes of some, 'the' only solution. Turning it down becomes the mark of the 'bad European'. Two things are clearly being confused here. Urging the nations to relinquish sovereignty is asking them to take a political decision, one which must be made for political reasons. To ask them to do so in the name of greater wealth is to fail to recognise that these are two entirely separate scales of value. The belief that anything can be bought for a 'mess of pottage' is both an intellectual error and a lack of tact.

Such a development is regrettable. There is a lot to be done in Europe to help the various nations produce and trade more. Thus, in Western France there are thousands of hectares to be reclaimed from the sea. French engineers, whose excellence is not in question, are the first to acknowledge the incomparable expertise the Dutch have acquired in this domain; for France, drawing on their skills would be a case of Colbert revisited. Similarly, we have at our borders throngs of industrial workers who would be only too happy to drink wine. Judging from the price they pay for their beer, it would not be difficult to offer them wine worthy of the name at a comparable price. A little understanding is all it would take from the governments concerned. Modest achievements of this kind would usefully serve the interests of all. That is where we must start if we wish to build Europe.

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