

‘France and Germany: one history, two memories’ from Le Monde (10 June 2000)

Caption: On 10 June 2000, commenting on the address delivered by Joschka Fischer, German Foreign Minister, on the ultimate goal of European integration, the historian, Rudolf von Thadden, Head of Franco-German relations in the Foreign Ministry of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), outlines in the French daily newspaper Le Monde the different connotations of the word ‘federalism’ in France and Germany.

Source: Le Monde. 10.06.2000. Paris. "La France et l'Allemagne, c'est une histoire, deux mémoires", auteur:Leparmentier, Arnaud.

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France and Germany: one history, two memories

The German Minister for Foreign Affairs, Joschka Fischer, has suggested the creation of a federal Europe, an idea which has met with a mixed reaction in France. How is it that the two countries have such different responses to the word 'federalism'?

The word 'federalism', as used in the Minister's speech, has nothing to do with the constitutional system in Germany. Mr Fischer has no intention of transferring German structures to the European level. As far as the historical connotations are concerned, though, we need to be aware of the following points: to the German mind, 'federalism' suggests the Bund created at the Congress of Vienna in 1814 to fill the void created by the demise of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, which Napoleon had abolished in 1806. This Bund brought a degree of order to the political chaos of the time, which is why it has positive connotations. In France, by contrast, the debate over 'federalism' goes back to the dispute between the Girondins and the Jacobins. In 1792, the Girondins wanted to decentralise government in order to combat royal absolutism. But their Jacobin opponents saw that this might result in losing the war against the Europe of the Restoration, thereby jeopardising the achievements of the Revolution. Decentralising meant running the risk of shattering the single, indivisible nation, which is why 'federalism' has negative connotations for many French people. The debate blew up again in the 19th century, when Proudhon declared war on Jacobinism in his book *Du principe fédératif* (Principle of Federation), in fact as a means of fighting against the Bonapartism of Napoleon III. He adopted some of the features of Girondism and paved the way for anarchism, which is why the word 'federalism' still has connotations of disintegration in France. His biggest enemy then was Karl Marx: in the Jacobin tradition, Marx was in favour of the power of the workers' movement, and that was expressed through democratic centralism, the basis of Communism. This conflict was to flare up again in a divided Germany after 1945.

To what extent is the German attachment to 'federalism' also linked to the founding of the FRG in 1949?

The 1949 Federation was an alternative to the centralising philosophy of the Third Reich, and the fact that it was a success also explains why Germans are attached to it. While the FRG was reorganising on federal lines, the GDR reverted to the centralising traditions of the Marxist workers' movement. In 1952, it dissolved the Länder (Thüringen, Sachsen and so on), and set up Bezirke, just as France had dissolved the Provinces and replaced them with the départements in order to stamp out the memory of the Ancien Régime. After the Wall came down, the Länder were restored in the former GDR, and reunification was carried out on a federal basis. Once again, 'federalism' simplifies things and constitutes a force which binds Germany together — because East Germans, who sometimes find it hard to identify with their countrymen in the West, can identify with their Länder. German-style federalism harks back to the tradition of regionalism, which is more acceptable to the French way of thinking than 'federalism', as it is less of a threat to national unity.

That did not stop Jean-Pierre Chevènement saying that Germany 'was still dreaming of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation'. What does the Empire mean to the citizens of the two countries?

For the Germans and the French, the Holy Roman Empire means the Ancien Régime, the Middle Ages, but there was no revolution in Germany to get rid of it. The reason why someone like Chevènement talks about relics of German nostalgia is that he regrets the fact that the Germans never carried out such a radical schism with the Ancien Régime as the Jacobins did. This is hard for a German to understand. France and Germany have a single history, but they have two memories. For France, the Holy Roman Empire raises images of Charles V's thirst for domination and his war against François I. Germans, on the other hand, think of the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, with the complete disintegration of German power, devastated by the wars of religion. At that time, it was the French who seized the Germans by the throat by annexing Alsace, invading the Palatinate and destroying the fortress in Heidelberg.

Since the time of Luther, Germany has suffered from a lack of integration and France from an excess of

integration. By trying to centralise France with the slogan ‘one king, one law, one faith’, the French ended up eliminating their Protestant minority, whereas Germany, which was not centralised, did not go down that path, and the Treaty of Westphalia enshrined its religious diversity. In the ensuing centuries, the French, who had created an ultracentralised State, had to fight their way to pluralism, while the Germans had less need to do so, although on the other hand they were afraid of sinking back into a state of weakness.

Can Germany be accused, nevertheless, of wanting to become an empire again?

When the reunification occurred, no one here talked about a Reich or an empire. Reunified Germany is not an extension of the imperial tradition. It is fundamentally different from an empire, which, by definition, encompasses several nations, several peoples, the most recent one having been the Soviet Union. For the first time, Germany is a Nation-State (*Nationalstaat*), as France has been for a long time. It moved even closer to France by inserting the *jus soli* principle into its nationality code in early 2000. It is not an ethnic community (*Abstammungsgemeinschaft*) any more but rather a citizen nation (*Bürger nation*). Germany, which is neither an empire nor an ethnic nation, has become a nation of the Western type.

If we subscribe to your definitions, how can the Reich under Bismarck have been both an empire, in other words heterogeneous, and yet something defined by its ethnicity, and therefore homogeneous?

The Empire under Bismarck was an attempt to achieve the political integration of the princely States of the old German Bund. To bring Bavarians, Saxons, Württembergers and Prussians together, they were given a basis for pre-State (*vorstaatlich*) integration. This gave the prominent position to the Volk, the ethnic nation. At the same time, the Empire included a State which was not ethnically homogeneous, Prussia, which had been home to millions of Poles since the partition of Poland. During the First World War, Polish divisions fought at Verdun as Prussian citizens. So Bismarck’s Empire featured two contradictory elements: the theoretical unity of the German people and the actual diversity of its population. That is why politicians in Wilhelm II’s day wanted to do away with this contradiction by Germanicising Germany. An intellectual like Max Weber wanted to turn Bismarck’s Empire into what we have today, a Nation-State, which it was not at the time. Hitler, who was Austrian, accentuated this phenomenon with the Third Reich. All that was left was the ethnic mindset. In rejecting National Socialism, divided Germany, along with thinkers like Habermas, dreamed of a post-national society, putting the nation in context, but with reunification it has found its identity as a Nation-State.

What does Mr Fischer’s speech have to offer?

The essence of his speech, to my mind, is that he wanted to reconcile national and post-national thinking in Europe. He explains that Germany has recovered its national identity without reverting to the nationalist and ethnicity-based traditions of the 19th century. He reconciles citizenship and nationality. That brings us closer to France and makes it possible for us to integrate both parts of Germany more effectively into the European Union.

INTERVIEW BY ARNAUD LEPARMENTIER