

Alfred Müller-Armack, On the road to Europe


Caption: In his Memoirs, Alfred Müller-Armack, former Chief Adviser to Ludwig Erhard at the German Ministry of Finance, recalls the negotiations held in 1953 on the establishment of a European Political Community.

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We began to negotiate in Rome in the late summer of 1953, in tropical heat. The negotiations took place in the centre of the city, in the Renaissance rooms of a palazzo approached up a majestic flight of steps, several metres wide. There were also similar flights of steps in other palaces in Rome. I think, perhaps, that they were designed to allow for entrance on horseback. There was a suite of smallish rooms upstairs, where we had our meetings. The doors were thrown wide open and led into a romantic garden that was surrounded by high walls which screened out the noise of the city. The garden was mostly shaded, but the heat still made its way into the rooms. The skill of the Italians in protecting themselves in hot weather had obviously not been applied here. Not even the ample offerings of refreshments from our hosts were sufficient to prevent us Northerners from melting in the heat, something which had the effect of doubling the tension in the negotiations.

The subject under discussion was the objective of providing an economic foundation to support the political organisation of Europe. The idea at that time was to use the political route to achieve integration on the economic front. This initial conference on overall integration brought together a number of men who remained for many long years the mainstays of the European negotiations and who, later, were also to constitute the group of the Old Europeans. Ophüls was there on behalf of the Germans, Van Tichelen for the Belgians, and Linthorst-Homan, who took part as a Member of the High Authority until 1967, represented the Dutch. The Italian negotiators changed more frequently. On the French side, there was Olivier Wormser, whom I then met for the first time. He subsequently became the most influential adviser and negotiator under all the French governments and now — after a period as Ambassador in Moscow — is President of the National Bank of France. He was a very tall man with snow-white hair and pale, ascetic features. For a whole decade, it was my task to negotiate with him as my permanent ‘opposite man’. For many years, I approached him with the respect of someone junior, because I thought that he was at least 10 years older than me. Then I found out from him that he was born 10 years after me. He was still active far into the era of de Gaulle, working at the side of Couve de Murville in implementing the French policies of ‘difficultés’ and of ‘conditions préalables’, and he made no mean contribution to perfecting the French strategy that always manoeuvred along on the very limit of causing the negotiations to fail. He was a product of that class of person so highly revered in France, the ‘inspecteurs des finances’, and was indispensable to all the governments of his country. It was his aim to bring some hard bargaining into the negotiations. However, I must admit that the 10 years of vehement arguments that I had with him, and he with me, did not cloud our personal relationship, so that the forms of address so easily dispensed in diplomatic language, ‘mon ami Olivier Wormser’ and ‘mon ami Müller-Armack’ were not a complete contradiction of the reality, although they did have their limits in practical matters. Even in those early days in Rome, he displayed a simply indefatigable ability to invent concepts and ideas to be thrown into the debate with the aim of showing how many hurdles and obstacles lay in the path that we were intending to take. He did this with something of a flourish and in the belief that all the problems of integration could somehow be solved.

It was the first time that I had taken part in negotiations of this kind. They were led by Maltzan, with Ophüls also participating. The first barrier we came up against was Wormser’s demand that the six states should bring about ‘social harmonisation’ before they were united. The belief in France was that it was the first welfare state in Europe and that not until the costs borne by the French for social security, in particular under their family policies, had been equalled in the other countries could there be serious consideration of merging the markets. Our point of view was that opening up the markets would, of its own accord, bring about a certain amount of equalisation on the welfare front and that the entire unification project would be put at risk if the complicated coordination in the field of social policy were to be placed at the beginning, especially since we expected that wages, which were at that time highest in France, would level out to the same high level in a Common Market. On this point, there was some emotional and heated discussion. In order to overcome these differences, Maltzan gave me the floor. This was my first independent step in international talks. Maltzan was kind enough after the session to remark that my professorial manner in following the fundamental concept, which was still unmistakable after a year of working on economic policy, had had a calming effect on the atmosphere of the negotiations. I was very gratified at this praise,

since I enjoy settling differences, and, in later sessions, right into the final phase of the negotiations on the common agricultural policy, I was told that I had obviously become highly skilled in the art of compromise. In the past, I once coined the term irenics, the bringing together and reconciliation of opposites, and regarded it as a kind of life motto, which was then reinforced when I realised that my birthday was the day of St Ireneus, the apostle who tried to mediate in the early times between the hardened fronts of opinion. However, regardless of irenics, I was obliged at the same time to take a firm stand. This was how the concept of 'social harmonisation' became a controversial idea in the European integration negotiations, and it was not until 1956, when the Hungarian uprising and the Suez crisis meant there was the danger of involvement in a large-scale war, that formulae for mediation were found in Paris. After a Ministerial council under the chairmanship of Pineau had broken up as a result of the arguments about these ideas, three mediation formulae were found at the instruction of the Heads of Government present there. These formulae gave France the right to make claims under a protection clause if there were flagrant differences in overtime rates, in holiday pay or in the case of unequal payment for men and women. With the signing of the Treaty of Rome, this idea vanished like a phantom. No one, especially not the French, thought of referring to it, particularly since wages and social security payments in the Federal Republic had, in the interim, overtaken the levels paid in France.

The negotiations in Rome still concerned the clear vision of what should now happen in detail with regard to political and economic unification. They were a starting point, and the fundamental idea was, quite rightly, to find a joint approach to bringing about political and economic integration. However, it was unmistakable that the entire conception was too vague to survive. When the group around Mendès France caused the European Defence Community to fail in the vote in the French Parliament in 1954, the other, essentially unconnected initiatives were also brought down. The days in Rome were only an initial encounter with European problems and did more to show up the difficulties than the opportunities.

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