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French public opinion from the ‘revival’ of European integration to the Rome Treaties: between disengagement and indifference

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Paul-Henri Spaak, one of the lead players in the European ‘revival’ from 1955 onwards, described the atmosphere of those decisive years in his memoirs: ‘There were a great many sceptics. Overall, public opinion was not hostile; it was indifferent. The work accomplished was done by a minority who knew what they wanted.’¹ His assessment can be applied just as well to the reactions of the French, which were extremely mild as regards the Rome Treaties when compared with the feelings aroused not long before by the dispute over the European Defence Community (EDC), the proposal for which was rejected by the French Parliament on 30 August 1954. What was to blame? Was it the fact that the field of battle chosen was the economy, an area for European unification apparently less likely to stir up strong feelings? Or public indifference? Or can we attribute the relative calm to the skills of political leaders such as Christian Pineau and Maurice Faure, respectively Minister for Foreign Affairs and State Secretary for Foreign Affairs with responsibility for European Affairs in the Guy Mollet government set up on 1 February 1956? This government, with its desire to reach an agreement quickly, was certainly a different matter from that of his predecessor, Edgar Faure, which had to find ways of working with a more divided majority, especially with its strong Gaullist component. Hardly more than two years passed between the Messina Conference (1–3 June 1955), the signing of the Rome Treaties (25 March 1957) that established the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC) — known as Euratom — and their rapid ratification in France (10 July 1957). We could, of course, point to the favourable atmosphere that was created following the settlement of the Franco-German dispute over the Saar; or to economic growth; or the Suez effect, which alerted Europeans to their powerlessness and pushed them towards union; or the skilful manipulation of institutional issues that glossed over the supranational aspect of the union in order to highlight the community-related aspects. None of these incentives, however, can fully account for the generally moderate reactions, or the speed of the process.

Quite apart from the extensive campaign of persuasion launched by the French Section of the Workers’ International (SFIO) and the government, together with Jean Monnet’s Action Committee for a United States of Europe, in March 1957, there was a shift in the various sectors of public opinion. People in France were won over to the principle of European integration, even if, with hindsight, that support may seem more like a mere mouthing of words than real conviction, and they turned out to be generally receptive to proposals for economic cooperation.

Since the crisis of 1954, the internal rifts in the political parties had shrunk and their members had closed ranks, following the example of the SFIO. However, some of the radicals, led by Pierre Mendès France, were still hostile to European integration. The same was true of the Communists, and of the Gaullists, who had a lower profile after the elections of 2 January 1956, in contrast to the Poujadists, who were spurred on by protectionist reflexes. Overall, however, the way the political forces elected to the National Assembly were distributed in the House meant that a pro-Europe majority was able to assert itself. The preliminary exploratory debates held in the French Parliament, on Euratom between 6 and 11 July 1956 and on the Common Market between 15 and 22 January 1957, helped to blunt the potentially violent counter-attacks by the opposition. The first debate produced a parliamentary majority that was in favour, provided France was still free to produce nuclear weapons; the second roused the various forms of latent opposition on which the government relied in order to get its partners to agree to its demands.

Misgivings in commercial and trade union circles, which mainly came to light during the debates on the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), gradually gave way: there was a shift from hostility, explained by a marked attachment to protectionism, to a willingness to negotiate, which led to discussions as to how the disparities between national economies and French exceptions could be catered for. Furthermore, as Pierre Gerbet puts it, ‘financial and monetary problems notwithstanding, the French economy was

expanding rapidly and its extremely high growth rate made an opening of borders inevitable [...] For the sake of its own development, it had to engage in more and more international trade'.²

Mixed feelings among the public

The revival of the European ideal, which was marked in 1955 by the Messina Conference and by Jean Monnet's creation of a pressure group to work for a United States of Europe, was followed with interest by reporters and commentators in the press, including *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, *Combat*, *Franc-Tireur*, *L'Express* and *Le Populaire*. However, the treaties themselves were handled with caution, by raising the question of French national security with regard to Euratom and by demonstrating — in a more positive sense in *La Croix*, *Le Monde* and *Le Populaire* — what the consequences would be for the national economy of breaking with protectionism through the Common Market.³ The tabloid press, meanwhile, more or less ignored what was happening!

Public opinion as revealed by the polls was characterised by the same mixed feelings.⁴ Certainly, throughout the 1950s there was a consistent average of six out of ten people who said that they approved of the work being done towards European unification; but three out of ten had no view on the matter. The limits of this 'permissive consensus' became clear when it came to the EEC and the EAEC. Firstly, there was a decline in the number of supporters of the European idea: they came to no more than 45 % in December 1955, only slightly higher than the number who abstained (43 %); these were the lowest figures for the decade, and mirrored the official ups and downs. Following a brief improvement, the dip in May 1957 — 55 % — can be explained by the public debate as to whether the Rome Treaties were lawful, while also suggesting that each decisive step towards European integration would coincide with a public hesitation that revealed the gap between support in principle and consent to the establishment of the Communities in practice. Secondly, only half of sympathisers fully subscribed to the plan: in May 1957, 31 % approved of Euratom, with 29 % against and 40 % with no opinion. There were the same thresholds when it came to the Common Market, which 35 % supported unreservedly, although the spread of opinion was more positive, with 25 % generally in favour, 7 % having reservations, 4 % against and 29 % unsure.

When the treaties were signed, they were still not very well known. Euratom was the least familiar of the Communities, including the ECSC: 53 % had heard of it, which was a decrease of 4 percentage points compared to the previous year, but only 35 % knew that France was part of it. The number of people who could give any factual details about it was even lower! According to data collected in 1956, supporters of a completely independent atomic policy made up one fifth of the French public, 14 % favoured complete integration with Europe and 30 % wanted to see a joint cooperation programme in which each country kept its national decision-making power; but 4 out of 10 French people (more than any other single group) had no opinion on the matter. Obviously then, when Christian Pineau decided, along with Guy Mollet, to promote the more popular plan of a nuclear Europe for peaceful purposes as a way of getting the Common Market accepted, as he himself said, it was a response to the political situation, not to deep-seated public opinion. There was certainly more information on offer about the Common Market, but people's knowledge of it was still hazy: 64 % had heard about it and 49 % were up to date on France's involvement in it. The establishment of the ECSC had shown that the French saw the economy as being within Europe's areas of competence; it had also led to an increasing feeling that integration was not possible without Great Britain, both because of an attachment to the Franco-British alliance and because of Britain's economic potential: in September 1957, out of the 70 % who supported integration, 60 % considered it essential that Great Britain should be part of it (compared with 6 % against and 4 % undecided). As to the expected effects of the Common Market on a personal level, confusion reigned: half of those questioned did not respond; for one out of three people in France, however, economic union meant an opportunity to improve their living standards. Finally, if we look at the spread of support for the EEC, the significance of socio-economic and socio-cultural variables is apparent and, consequently, we can also see the relevance, from this period onwards, of Annick Percheron's model for the elitist sociology of Europhilia.⁵ There were more than 20 percentage points between the least and the most well-off (from 50 to 73 %), and almost 40 between the least and the most educated (from 56 to 94 %). Farmers were the only group that showed a wider variation: they made up the biggest group of supporters in the first half of the 1950s, but became the least enthusiastic group from 1956 onwards, concerned as they were about the consequences of the Common Market for

people in their occupation.

In April 1956, when asked to place the six possible goals of French policy in ranking order, the French put the political and economic union of Europe in last place, far behind improving living standards, defending social justice and safeguarding the French Union. The ‘revival’ that followed Messina did not prompt them to see European union as something that needed urgent action, any more than the signing of the Rome Treaties had made it a priority for them. Although the Communities were attractive because they encompassed the issues of security and the quest for improved wellbeing, they did not become one of people’s day-to-day concerns, however important the step that was taken when they were set up. Europe was never in the forefront of collective awareness and did not arouse any enthusiasm in the public mind.

An unemotional political discussion

The Rome Treaties were ratified on 10 July by 342 members of parliament to 239, and on 23 July by 222 members of the French Senate to 70, after a debate that Jean Monnet described as ‘serious and unemotional’.⁶ Although they were at the opposite extremes of the political spectrum, Communists and Poujadists voted unanimously against ‘the Europe of corporations and monopolies’, one in the name of defending the proletariat, the other in the interests of the small, independent middle class. Gaullism was no longer a political movement: General de Gaulle did not officially break his silence, but the 20 or so Social Republican members of parliament who claimed to represent him campaigned very actively behind Michel Debré against the plan for a Euratom for peaceful purposes, which they regarded as synonymous with a loss of nuclear independence and an abandonment of nuclear weapons. It is clear that with the relationship between the political forces being what it was — and especially with the radical Maurice Bourgès-Maunoury as Minister for Defence — the President could not honour the undertaking he gave during his inauguration speech on 31 January 1956 to give up nuclear weapons. However, the concessions obtained from France’s European partners did not prevent a large majority of Gaullists from declaring themselves against the treaties in the name of the sovereign nation’s interests. Finally, a powerful minority of radical members of parliament joined up with the opponents of integration on this issue — 19 of them, with 25 voting for and one abstaining — despite the influence exercised by the State Secretary for European Affairs, Maurice Faure. His main opponent was Pierre Mendès France, who thought that the vulnerability of the national economy made it incapable of facing up to European competition without a reorganisation which could only harm the interests of the workers unless social security legislation were first harmonised. His anti-free-market plea struck a chord with the youth wing of the radicals, who also argued against encroachment on France’s military sovereignty by Euratom. They stressed the absurdity of having such a nuclear organisation without Great Britain and, more generally, Britain’s absence certainly played a vital role in determining the position of Mendès France and his supporters. Among those close to the former Prime Minister, Georges Boris also fought to have priority given to the French Union, with support from other radicals.

During the ratification process, however, other political groups proved their loyalty to their European identity. They included the moderate right wing, which followed Antoine Pinay, the Minister for Foreign Affairs at the time of the Messina revival and a supporter of the process. The majority of the self-employed and the rural population also voted in favour. MPs from the Popular Republican Movement (MRP) — the ‘Party of Europe’ — had, since the preliminary exploratory debates, always unanimously supported the treaties. However, they were clearly more attracted by Euratom, given France’s national energy dependency, than by the Common Market, where their firm approval in principle went hand in hand with a call for the country to be given guarantees. The days of that passionate enthusiasm for Europe which had rallied the Christian Democrats in favour of the EDC were long past, but their commitment, however tempered by realism, remained intact. As for the Socialists, after violent clashes over the plan for a European army, they quickly recovered their unity when it came to the revival of the Community: a motion in favour of the Community principle was passed by an almost unanimous vote of the party Congress in July 1955. At the same time, the General Secretary, Guy Mollet, agreed to take part in the founding of the Action Committee for a United States of Europe. When he became Prime Minister after the Republican Front victory, he and his Minister for Foreign Affairs, Christian Pineau, gave a firm boost to the Community negotiations, triumphing over the protectionist camp that was personified in the government by Paul Ramadier, Minister

for Economic and Financial Affairs and also a Socialist, and Maurice Lemaire, the Social Republican State Secretary for Industry and Trade. The position stated by Christian Pineau at the Congress of June 1956 was approved by the party: priority should be given to the EAEC; the plan for an Economic Community was approved, but neither the problems of adjustment that the French economy would have to face nor the challenges represented by the harmonisation of social security contributions and the inclusion of the overseas territories were concealed.⁷ Support for the government's action led the SFIO to adopt a leading position in favour of the text. During the preliminary debate in January 1957, there was a glowing acceptance of it in the agenda put forward by Robert Verdier, Chairman of the Parliamentary Group. A former opponent of the EDC, Alain Savary was chosen by Guy Mollet to be a rapporteur for the Common Market Treaty in the National Assembly and called on his colleagues to ratify it, concluding by saying that 'the choice is not between the Community and the status quo, but between the Community and isolation'.⁸ However, those who made their reservations heard should not be forgotten: for example Vincent Auriol, the former French President, or Paul Ramadier, who, fearing the effects that a liberal Common Market would have on foreign trade, complained that it would weaken the State's economic and social prerogatives and would have preferred to create a free-trade area with Great Britain. Overall, however, the attentions of the Socialists were directed elsewhere, towards the Suez Canal and Algeria and, in the end, the treaties raised very little excitement, or even attention, among them.

The French negotiators, however, responded to their wishes by making sure that the French Union was associated with the Common Market and that the free-market basis of this customs union would be offset by regulatory systems and arrangements to ensure solidarity. In pursuing a political project for the purpose of modernising the national economy, Guy Mollet's government consulted trade unions and employers' organisations and managed to overcome their reservations, but still had to face staunch opposition from senior levels in the administration.

Business, trade unions and senior-level administrators

Although economic circles — as recent studies show⁹ — embodied specific cultures and reactions to European ideas, there is no denying the range of opinion within them. As a whole, however, they seemed hostile to the idea of opening up the borders to all types of products. One of the negotiators, Robert Marjolin, whose position was very isolated, given that he was fighting for the opening-up of the French economy on a free-market basis, writes in his memoirs: 'In 1955, the huge majority of French people, or at least of those who gave it some thought, were fundamentally hostile to any form of free trade, even if it was confined to the European geographic area. [...] During this period, France was essentially protectionist. Any move towards freedom of trade roused fears that were difficult to allay.'¹⁰ This assessment should, of course, be qualified by drawing a distinction between the different sectors of activity involved; research carried out at the time,¹¹ and today, highlights sectors of industry and categories of people (young employers, managers, members of the professions) who were more in favour than others. Even so, faced with the steady trend towards the deregulation of trade, and with a growing realisation of the increasing interdependence of Europe's economies since the Second World War, these sectors had to accept the negotiations, once the first Spaak committee's proposals were announced on 21 April 1956, if they were to have any influence and carry any real weight in determining the type of association that would eventually be decided upon. The debates, therefore, went far beyond the choice between economic liberalism and protectionism, but focused on how borders could be opened up: when forced to choose, because they did not have the resources to mount head-on opposition, they opted to reject the idea of merely opening borders, of merely deregulating trade as urged by the British, going instead for a continent-wide economic approach which advocated a negotiated organisation of the market. So they resigned themselves to a type of haggling, with the aim of accentuating the community aspect of the proposed arrangement. This was the only system capable of coping with the differences between the situations in each of the countries: the main concern of French employers from the time the negotiations started was the harmonisation of social security contributions and wage and salary conditions between the future participants. France had higher social security contributions and payroll costs, which meant that it would probably be at a disadvantage in standing up to competition. This apprehension among employers became a leitmotif of the National Council of French Employers (CNPF), which, in 1956, through its Chairman George Villiers, called persistently for social security contributions and wage and salary conditions to be harmonised before the opening-up of the borders. This

claim, paradoxically, chimed in with the concerns of many trade unions who were in favour of the Community project and who, invoking the theme of a social Europe, advocated a progressive unification of employment conditions. The trade unions, with the exception of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), did not demonise the Common Market, but did fear that French workers would lose some benefits; as stakeholders in the Community process, they focused their attention, above all, on the safeguarding of workers' interests. Overall, 'the non-Communist trade unions were not afraid of any invasion of foreign workers after the opening-up of the borders and were not against the Common Market, as long as social benefits were not threatened'.¹² Like most trade unions, agricultural organisations, including the very representative National Federation of Farmers' Trade Unions (FNSEA), eventually came round to the idea of the Common Market. Though initially very concerned by a deregulating of the trade in agricultural products, these groups were receptive to the attention Guy Mollet gave to their grievances and were directly involved in negotiating the agricultural aspects of the treaty. Having abandoned all systematic opposition when faced with the determination of the political decision makers, economic circles and professional organisations tried to put forward a number of conditions, many of which would be taken up by the French negotiators. The point was that there was a need to secure guarantees and escape clauses should any difficulties arise. Even though the French demands cannot be attributed solely to economic and industrial circles, it is true that they helped to focus the negotiations, especially the negotiations of the second Spaak Committee, which met at Val Duchesse from 26 June 1956. France won the most concessions, even though, at the beginning, it was only interested in the draft Euratom treaty: among those concessions, many were related to the most frequent employers' demands (a compromise on the equalisation of payroll costs, safeguard clauses in the event of economic or monetary difficulty and inclusion of the overseas territories in the Common Market). The farming organisations' demands were also listened to: it was decided that a joint agricultural policy, with a price-fixing mechanism, would be drafted progressively. All these changes definitely played a part in the emergence of a more positive attitude towards the Common Market. The danger of a mere customs union being set up was therefore averted in favour of a true economic community.

Within senior levels of the administration in France, attitudes were rather similar. Although divided, they were nevertheless mostly inclined to be hostile at the time of the Messina Conference, in 1955: 'I remember,' René Massigli, then Secretary-General at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and an unconditional supporter of Mendès France, wrote rather mischievously, 'an interministerial committee meeting on 22 April, at which the technical experts acting without government directives delighted in showering cold water on the enthusiasm for Europe shown by Antoine Pinay's colleagues.' [Pinay was Edgar Faure's Minister for Foreign Affairs.]¹³ Within the Foreign Ministry, the majority view boiled down to an insistence on 'the great difficulties' that the establishment of the Common Market would cause France. There were some who were in favour, of course, following the example set by Bernard Clappier, former head of Robert Schuman's private office, but there is no denying that the opponents were in the majority. Reservations regarding Spaak's proposals from senior levels in the civil service concerned with economic affairs were finally revealed by a memorandum from the French Government to the other partners. It included concerns mentioned above: the most important relates to the fate of the overseas territories. Many were worried about a possible break between France and its territories, especially the newly independent ones such as Morocco and Tunisia, which still wanted to remain in the French Union. However, the Ministry of France's Overseas Territories, headed by Gaston Defferre, was keen on this European Common Market, 'which would also become a Euro-African Common Market'. Aware of the general trend towards decolonisation at the time, he believed that European integration would have the advantage of tying into Europe territories which might have been toying with the idea of going down other paths. Among other reservations that came up, there was the difficulty France would have competing on equal terms because of the differences in production conditions between the Member States, the need to support farm prices and regret at the excessive haste dictated by the speed of the negotiations.

The skill displayed by the government, the many briefings held to persuade professional organisations and, most of all, parliamentary factions, and lastly the Suez crisis of November 1956, all helped bring about a reversal of opinion. Christian Pineau even explained that 'it was public opinion which came round to the idea of the Common Market as a means of giving France some independence from the United States of America'¹⁴ and not the government. In reality, the reason why there was no battle over the Common Market as there was over the EDC was that people were tired of these confrontations and not greatly interested in

overly technical issues. The Foreign Minister, who had done so much since his arrival at the Ministry in February 1956, also recalled in his memoirs the resignation the Euro-sceptics displayed when they were faced with this bold, coherent gamble, marked as it was by a much greater degree of institutional caution than had been shown previously.¹⁵ The industrial sectors finally resigned themselves to it, again through fear of France becoming isolated. It was comfortably ratified by the National Assembly. This all illustrates the turnaround that French public opinion was forced into: despite their initial indifference and reluctance, people were obliged to change their minds when faced with the pressure of a clearly articulated political will.

Notes:

¹ P.-H. Spaak, *Combats inachevés*, Paris, Fayard, 1969, vol. II, p. 71.

² P. Gerbet, *La construction de l'Europe*, Paris, Imprimerie nationale, 1999, p. 180.

³ G. Bossuat, *L'Europe des Français*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 1996, pp. 412-414.

⁴ This study was carried out on the basis of *Sondages*, 1958, Nos 1 and 2, and the report on *L'opinion des Français sur le Marché commun et l'unification européenne de 1950 à 1968*, IFOP, October 1968.

⁵ Annick Percheron, 'Les Français et l'Europe, acquiescement de façade ou adhésion véritable ?', in *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 41, No 3, June 1991, pp. 382-406.

⁶ J. Monnet, *Mémoires*, Paris, Livre de poche, 1976, p. 628.

⁷ P. Delwit, *Les partis socialistes et l'intégration européenne*, Editions de l'université de Bruxelles, 1995, pp. 72-74.

⁸ J. Monnet, *op. cit.*, p. 628.

⁹ É. Bussière, 'Les milieux économiques face à l'Europe au XXe siècle', in *Journal of European Integration History*, 1997, vol. 3, No 2, pp. 5-22.

¹⁰ R. Marjolin, *Le travail d'une vie. Mémoires (1911-1986)*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1986, p. 279.

¹¹ J. Szokoloczy-Syllaba, *Les organisations professionnelles françaises et le Marché commun*, Paris, A. Colin, Cahiers de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1965, 372 p.

¹² P. Gerbet, 1957. *La naissance du Marché commun*, Brussels, Complexe, 2007, p. 100.

¹³ R. Massigli, *Une comédie des erreurs. Souvenirs et réflexions sur une étape de la construction européenne*, Paris, Plon, 1978, p. 506.

¹⁴ E. Serra (Ed.), *Il rilancio dell' Europa e i trattati di Roma. La relance européenne et les traités de Rome. The Relaunching of Europe and the Treaties of Rome*, Brussels/Bruylant, Milan/Giuffrè, Paris/LCDJ, Baden Baden/Nomos Verlag, 1989, p. 525.

¹⁵ C. Pineau and C. Rimbaud, *Le grand pari. L'aventure du traité de Rome*, Paris, Fayard, 1991, p. 269.