
Review Article

Arrogance or ambivalence? Rethinking France's role in a Europe of twenty-seven

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Abstract France's role in an expanded EU of 27 member states is often presented as one of French arrogance, domination and hegemony. Christian Lequesne's book challenges this view, arguing that France has lacked the confidence and ambition to lead in an expanded EU. Its difficult relationships with new member states, and its ambivalent support to enlargement in the 1990s, are the product of a country unsure of its own role in Europe and in the world. Lequesne's book should serve as a starting point for reflecting about the impact of 1989 on European integration, the nature of the EU enlargement process and the reasons behind France's hesitant embrace of globalization.

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Introduction

Recent events would suggest that France has not given up its ambition of leading the European integration process. An activist French presidency dominated the latter half of 2008. French president Nicolas Sarkozy mediated in the Russo–Georgian war, managed the fallout from the Irish No vote in June and held together an EU buffeted by the centrifugal forces of a global financial meltdown. Keen to maintain the momentum in Europe, the French government made public its concerns about the capacity of the Czech government to take up the mantle of the EU presidency. Sarkozy himself suggested that the Czech presidency should be complemented by a new council made up of the members of the Eurozone, chaired by France – a suggestion that prompted the Czech president, Vaclav Klaus, to mock Sarkozy's aspiration to become Europe's 'permanent chairperson'.¹ Former French Europe minister, Jean-Pierre Jouyet, made France's intentions clear in an



interview with *Libération* in February 2009: 'France and other countries will take initiatives; no one can prevent member states from meeting, notably at the level of the Eurozone'.²

From this inauspicious beginning, the Czech presidency during the first half of 2009 continued to be marked by an ongoing struggle with France. On 5 February 2009, Sarkozy upset the Czech government further by suggesting that French carmakers should rethink their strategy of locating production in Eastern Europe (viz in the Czech Republic) and selling cars in France.³ This struggle has fed through into popular perceptions of the Czech presidency. An early defender of the Czechs against French bullying, the Charlemagne column in *The Economist* recently turned against Prague, lambasting the 'parochial myopia' of the Czech political elite and citing the Lisbon treaty as an opportunity to ensure that 'small, incompetent countries, such as the Czech Republic, no longer take turns to speak for Europe'.⁴

French disputes with the Czech Republic are part of a broader context of tension and mutual distrust that has characterized relations between 'new' and 'old' Europe (Levy *et al*, 2005). In 2003, at the time of Eastern Europe's support for the US-led war in Iraq, then French president, Jacques Chirac, made clear his displeasure by rebuking the new member states. They had, in his words, missed a good opportunity to 'shut up'. In response, the Czech daily, *Mlada Fronta Dnes*, fulminated against French arrogance, arguing that 'if Chirac wants to revive the spirit of Leonid Brezhnev and renew the doctrine of limited sovereignty, which means fewer rights for some countries, it is his own affair'.⁵

This tense relationship between East and West in Europe is the subject of Christian Lequesne's new book, *La France dans la Nouvelle Europe: Assumer le changement d'échelle* (2008). Lequesne provides an insightful account of the dynamics driving the frayed relations between new and old member states. In particular, he challenges the view that France continues – as in the days of de Gaulle – to stamp its mark on European integration. On the contrary, Lequesne paints a picture of a weak and vacillating France. To the French political and administrative elite, the EU appears as a threat, not as an opportunity. For all of the bickering and barbs that have been thrown across the expanded Europe in recent years, Lequesne shows convincingly that France's confrontations with new member states are the result of the country's own uncertainties. It is from this starting point that we should analyse France's relationship with an expanded EU. In shifting our attention to the doubts that plague French policy makers and diplomats in their dealings with their European counterparts, Lequesne has illuminated a crucial facet of the contemporary EU.⁶

Lequesne's argument takes the form of a series of insights. He begins by arguing that enlargement – by which he means the 'big bang' of 2004, which



saw the entry of ten new member states, eight of whom were part of the former Soviet bloc – has qualitatively transformed the EU. This, in his view, has meant that France can no longer pretend to lead European integration in the way that it did in the years of the Franco–German engine, what Lequesne refers to as years of ‘quiet functionalism’ (2008, p. 15). Lequesne argues that French political elites have not come to terms with this shift, and have perceived enlargement above all as a threat to their leadership role in Europe. In particular, enlargement has given birth to two kinds of sentiment within the French political elite – a federalist nostalgia for a smaller, French-led EU; and an assimilation of enlargement with the wider challenge of ‘neo-liberal’ globalization, thus associating anti-enlargement sentiment with an opposition to the market economy in general. Lequesne argues that France must reconcile itself with an EU of 27 members, which also means reconciling itself to the post-Keynesian consensus, so that it is able to play a constructive role in European integration. Attachment to an idea of French hegemony and dominance in Europe has become the main obstacle to French influence in the EU.

In its review of Lequesne’s book, this paper focuses on three of the wider themes raised by Lequesne: (1) French foreign policy and the impact of 1989; (2) France’s relations with Eastern Europe and the process of EU enlargement more generally; and (3) the meaning of the French ‘No’ in the 2005 referendum campaign and the reasons for France’s ambivalent relationship to liberalism and market economics.

Taking each theme in turn, this paper addresses the following questions raised by Lequesne’s book:

- How important was 1989 as a moment of rupture for French foreign policy and in particular France’s role in European integration? Were the events of 1989 alone responsible for France’s new – and increasingly disharmonious – relationship with the EU, or can we trace in earlier decades the roots of the problem? And what are the implications for how we understand the impact of 1989 on European integration in general?
- Can we explain the frayed relations between France and the new member states of Eastern Europe only with reference to the arrogant mind-sets of French politicians? Are tensions between East and West not a product of more fundamental factors, notably the asymmetries of power that exist in an enlarged EU and the constraints placed upon the self-governance of new member states as a condition of their entry into the Union?
- In understanding France’s ambivalent relationship to political liberalism and market economics, is enlargement a symptom or cause? And are their alternative explanations to Lequesne’s view that low levels of solidarity in France, and the resulting distrust of the market, are the result of its social system and welfare state?



1989: *La Rupture*?

Lequesne's first chapter covers France's role in European integration in the 1980s. He argues that Mitterrand's active role was part of a return to a 'quiet functionalism' of the kind that had marked integration in the 1950s. Mitterrand was instrumental to finding a solution to the problem of the British rebate, in pushing forward the single market programme and in making steady progress towards European monetary union. These events were part of a close working relationship between Mitterrand, Jacques Delors as President of the European Commission (and Mitterrand's former Finance Minister) and Helmut Kohl, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. In Lequesne's words, 'in this community of 12, necessarily limited by the borders of the East–West division, French governments found a reason to pursue a "common European good" that allowed them to maximise their national interest by imposing their views in Brussels' (Lequesne 2008, p. 36). The year 1989 put an end to all these, and France's role in Europe has been transformed since then.

Lequesne's account privileges 1989 as a point of rupture. He also draws a firm line between Gaullist obstructionism in Europe and a more harmonious relationship between France and Europe in the 1950s and then from Pompidou onwards. It is worth noting, however, that France's leading role in Europe was bound up with Gaullist foreign policy and with the role de Gaulle forged for France in the Cold War order. In many ways, French leadership in Europe – accepted until 1989 – is derived from France's wider role in international politics. Therefore, understanding the significance of 1989 requires a broader consideration of French foreign policy and the forces that sustained France's leading role in Europe and beyond. Viewed in this way, 1989 is not itself the cause of France's deteriorating relationship with the rest of Europe. Rather, we can see the emergence of a paralysis in French foreign policy dating back to the attenuation of Gaullism as a political force.

As Lequesne observes, the defining feature of de Gaulle's relationship to Europe was its instrumentalism and de Gaulle's own sense of self-sufficiency (Lequesne 2008, p. 15; Hoffmann, 1999, p. 81). France was not dependent upon Europe; on the contrary, European integration was interesting only in so far as it furthered the interests of France. Moreover, Gaullist foreign policy rested upon a firm and rather abstracted conception of the French nation, encapsulated in the pursuit of what de Gaulle called *grandeur*. Playing a leading role in fashioning a European order capable of influencing the course of international affairs was an integral – but not essential – part of de Gaulle's wider foreign policy framework, which included nuclear self-sufficiency, an independence from the two superpowers and a leading role in the Third World. Europe was an important element in de Gaulle's foreign policy ambitions in the early 1960s, but after the failure of the Élysée treaty in 1963, de Gaulle lost

interest in pursuing his goals through European cooperation (Deporte, 1981, p. 253; Vaïsse, 2009, pp. 100–104).

To properly understand the force behind Gaullist foreign policy, we need to consider Gaullism as a product of French domestic politics, which succeeded by drawing support from different social classes (Hazareesingh, 1994, p. 278). De Gaulle's vision of *grandeur* and national unity was the corollary to a deeply divided internal political scene. As Deporte put it, for de Gaulle, a strong France abroad was necessary in order to 'tame the "forces of dispersal" at home' (1991, p. 271). In abstract terms, it was the internal divisions of French society that were overcome through the Gaullist framework of national unity. It was this unity that de Gaulle presented to the outside world in his foreign policy. Gaullist foreign policy was thus marked by a paradox – a country divided internally by political conflict was the basis of a strong and unified power in its relations with Europe and the rest of the world.

The seeds of France's current difficulties within Europe lie in the retreat of Gaullism as a political force rather than in the collapse of the Iron Curtain. They were present at the time of Mitterrand, but obscured by the opportunities that the Cold War gave to France to punch above its weight in European and international affairs. After the disappearance of de Gaulle, his political legacy frayed, leaving the French right split between Giscardien centrists and Jacques Chirac's RPR party. At the same time, in a related development, the power of the French Community Party waned, leaving the door open to the rise of a moderate French left (Johnson, 1981). The impact of this on French foreign policy was not immediate. George Pompidou found himself having to rely upon pro-European Gaullists, such as Maurice Schumann, to win the presidential election in 1969. Schumann and others had resigned from de Gaulle's government in 1962 after the press conference by the General where he had attacked supporters of European integration (Vaïsse, 2009, p. 115). However, though France's policy towards Europe softened, Pompidou retained the main lines of the Gaullist foreign policy framework. France continued to think of itself as *primus inter pares* in Europe because of its enduring status as a leading power within the Cold War constellation.⁷

In the 1970s and 1980s, this Gaullist foreign policy consensus remained in place, unchallenged by Mitterrand when he took power in 1981. Behind the continuity of forms, however, there was a shift in substance from a foreign policy corresponding to a specific set of internal political dynamics to one possible only because of the external situation. As Deporte has argued, de Gaulle's ambition had been to *transform* the international order. By the time of Mitterrand, France had become dependent upon the very framework that – rhetorically at least – it was committed to overcoming (1981, p. 260). France's role in the Third World, its ability to distinguish itself from the superpowers and the authority it commanded on its close relationship with Germany, were



all a *product* of the Cold War order (Bozo, 1995, pp. 221, 230; Hoffmann, 2000, p. 310). Internally, French political life had lost its deep divisions and politics moved towards the centre; there was no longer any vital need for national unity. France's foreign policy identity, including its policy towards European integration, resembled a hollow shell, propped up by the external international architecture. Acknowledging the hollowness of this foreign policy consensus, Pierre Hassner memorably quipped, 'don't touch it, it's broken'.

The year 1989 was, therefore, not the fundamental driver of change in France's relationship with Europe. It consecrated and confirmed what many people knew already: that France's leading role was a fiction entertained by its own elites and made possible by the framework of the Cold War. Mitterrand's 'quiet functionalism' of the 1980s relied upon the foreign policy role de Gaulle had forged for France in the 1960s (Deporte, 1991, p. 269; Hoffmann, 1999, p. 85; Hoffmann, 2000, p. 309). In terms of historical periodization, 1989 is perhaps not as significant as Lequesne suggests.⁸ Moreover, Mitterrand's constructive role in Europe in the 1980s reflected his deft use of some of the tasks of Gaullist foreign policy. By this time, however, France's power was a product of the Cold War order more than it was the external representation of a particular constellation of domestic political forces. France's difficulties in exercising power in the post-Cold War period are thus tied to earlier developments, and not just to the change at the international level.

From Brezhnev to Brussels?

As an explanation for why France's relations with Eastern Europe have been so fraught in the post Cold War period, Lequesne argues that the fault lies with the attitudes and language of France's leaders. In his words, those leaders 'have not managed to find the words that would capitalize upon one of the foundations of the European Union, increasingly important since 1989: the equalizing of power between "big" and "small" states in Europe' (2008, p. 72).

In making this argument, Lequesne presents an overly sympathetic account of the EU's expansion process. He is certainly right to point out to the role played by the pan-European institutions in equalizing relations between otherwise very unequal member states. This explains the preference of small states for federal solutions to European problems: the pooling of sovereignty dilutes French power and mitigates against the risks of French domination. The Fouchet Plans of the early 1960s failed precisely because the other members of the EC saw in their explicit anti-federalism an opening for French hegemony. However, the equalizing force of European federalism no longer corresponds to the contemporary multi-level and multi-form EU. Moreover, it bears very little correspondence to the experience of Eastern European states

and their protracted negotiations with Brussels, which came to an end in 2004. Lequesne under-estimates the extent to which current antagonisms are a product of ‘actually existing’ inequalities that were inscribed in the EU enlargement process and the scant regard it paid to matters of sovereign equality.

Whether one studies the process from the perspective of the impact of enlargement on national parliaments, on legal systems or on the evolution of political parties, it is hard to deny that the accession process inhibited political development in Eastern Europe. As various authors have shown, Eastern European states found themselves moving from one kind of limited sovereignty under the Brezhnev doctrine to another kind of limited sovereignty, this time in the form of the ‘post-Westphalian’ sovereignty promulgated by the EU (cf. Zielonka, 2006; Bickerton, forthcoming). With respect to national parliaments, accession reversed the trend of ‘governing parliaments’ – a shift of power towards elected bodies soon after 1989 – and created islands of European expertise within national executives of aspiring candidate states (Agh, 1999; Grabbe, 2001). The impact upon national parliaments was significant and many found themselves functioning as little more than rubber-stamping authorities (Malova and Haughton, 2002). The impact upon lawmaking was a steady deterioration in the capacity of national governments to implement the EU’s vast body of rules and directives, the famous *acquis communautaire* (Dimitrova, 2002; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2007). As one scholar noted, Estonians resorted to a tactic of ‘double-think’ – following laws without believing in them – that had been a hallmark of the Soviet era (Raik, 2004).

The cumulative impact of these factors on the political development of the region has been considerable, and recent work on the rise of populism in Eastern Europe has connected the EU’s expansion to what memorably called ‘the strange death of the liberal consensus’ in Eastern Europe. In his words,

By presenting their policies not merely as ‘good’ but as ‘necessary’, not merely as ‘desirable’ but as ‘rational’, liberal elites left their societies with no acceptable way to protest or express dissatisfaction.⁹ The transition period was marked by excessive elite control over political processes and by a fear of mass politics. The accession of the Central European countries to the EU virtually institutionalized elite hegemony over the democratic process ... Ordinary citizens experienced transitional democracies as regimes where voters could change governments but could not change policies. (2007, pp. 58–59)

Lequesne’s argument, by focusing on the attitudes and actions of French leaders, does not address this transformation in the workings of the EU. With an increasing move towards structured or enhanced cooperation, and with the



emergence of different policy regimes within the EU itself ranging from monetary policy to immigration and asylum issues, the experience of new members both during accession and after 2004 has been variable. Membership of the EU has not been experienced as a process of equalization but as one that has enshrined in law the inequalities between East and West. EU membership has certainly had many benefits for new members, noticeably in the economic domain, but existing tensions are a product of very real inequalities, not just poor communicating or a lack of sensitivity on the part of French officials and leaders.

Enlargement: Symptom or Cause of the French Malaise?

Chapter 3 of Lequesne's book connects his argument about France's role in Europe to the debate about enlargement that broke out in France at the time of the referendum on the Constitutional treaty in 2005 and has been simmering ever since. Lequesne views the enlargement debate in France as a function of France's inability to properly accommodate itself to an EU of 27. He argues that French governing elites have an idea of France and its role in the process of European integration, which no longer corresponds to reality. The resulting clash between perception and reality generates two tendencies – both at work in the contemporary French debate around Europe – a nostalgia for a Europe of 12 member states where the closer political integration was the goal; and a rejection of enlargement as the source of all of France's current ills and responsible for making its place in Europe a difficult one (2008, pp. 74, 96, 124).

Lequesne's analysis of these two tendencies is perceptive. He notes that the French federalists – such as European parliamentarian Jean-Louis Bourlanges, or former Commission president, Jacques Delors – misleadingly present enlargement as the main obstacle to the realization of the federalist vision. In fact, the real obstacle lies in the minority status of this vision itself – too few people in France believe in European federalism for it to be a viable political project (2008, p. 79). Lequesne's own view is that enlargement can give a new direction and meaning to the European project. Such is the argument made by Michel Rocard in France and Chris Patten in the United Kingdom (Patten, 2005, p. 149). Yet, one cannot help feeling that using enlargement in this way is itself a part of the problem. When Patten, for instance, argues that the EU's future lies in Istanbul rather than Brussels, one feels that an exhausted European elite is using the vitality and dynamism of its outlying regions to reinvigorate itself. This is more parasitism than rebirth.

In the discussion of the growing anti-enlargement sentiment in France, Lequesne very usefully observes that the ability of the political left and right to

converge in its opposition to enlargement reveals the chauvinist underpinnings of much left-wing thought in France. By associating new Eastern European member states with the 'neo-liberal' project of market-driven integration, some on the French left aligned themselves with the forces of national chauvinism in the name of defending the French social model. Lequesne also makes the important point that what we saw in France in 2005 was not simply a resurgence of traditional Euroscepticism, but a more fundamental transformation in the very nature of opposition to the EU. In his words, 'the debate around the Polish plumber illustrates the emergence in France of a new form of Euroscepticism that is obsessed not with a defence of national sovereignty but with a defence of the French social model, threatened by an enlargement process itself an avatar of globalization' (2008, p. 86).

Pushing Lequesne's argument a little further, we can say that enlargement is above all a symptom of wider trends within French society. As a phenomenon, it has coincided with profound questioning of some of the basic tenets of the French social and political model. Enlargement thus only appears as a threat because the country is so unsure of itself. To understand such doubts, we should look beyond France's role in Europe.

Lequesne himself suggests that underlying France's difficult relationship with an enlarged EU is a more basic problem of reconciling the French population to the necessities of the post-Keynesian political economic consensus, an adaptation that Gérard Grunberg and Zaki Laïdi refer to as a 'ratification of the real' (cited in Lequesne, 2008, p. 120). Enlargement became a focal point of the 2005 referendum campaign because the Constitutional treaty itself was dominated by a debate about the respective merits and evils of the market economy. On the No side, the treaty was presented as a Trojan horse for Anglo-Saxon 'neo-liberalism'; on the Yes side, it was an opportunity for France to finally adapt itself to the demands of the post-Keynesian world. In Lequesne's words, 'the essential particularity of the French referendum ... resides in the importance given to the economic and social question as primacy factor behind the No vote' (2008, p. 106). More generally, Lequesne claims that 'the referendum campaign ... allows us to put our finger on a defining French trait that is not so much a fear of globalisation ... but the presence of a much more general scepticism vis-à-vis the market as a mode of economic organization' (2008, p. 103).

Lequesne provides an interesting explanation, which may not convince all readers, of this hostility to the market. He claims that France is marked by a lack of trust between individuals. This high degree of social atomism differentiates France from more integrated societies, such as Norway, Sweden, and even the 'Anglo-Saxon' countries of the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. A reason for this lack of trust is the French welfare state, a system built around different statuses and groups. These groups negotiate



bilaterally with the state and are pitted against each other whenever the government floats the idea of widespread reform (2008, p. 109). The French social model, in other words, destroys rather than creates social solidarity among individuals. And Lequesne argues that in doing so, it undermines French confidence in the market system as a whole.

That the French welfare state sustains and feeds some aspects of inequality in France is certainly the case, as have argued recent detailed studies of the French social model (for example, Smith, 2004; Chauvel, 2006; Palier, 2006). However, explaining why numerous elements within the French society retain an ideological hostility to market economics takes us beyond the welfare state, to consider the broader question of how France has changed politically, socially and economically, over the last three decades. As argued recently by Culpepper, Hall and Palier, and explored in detail by Hall in an earlier work, France's transition has been rather different from other countries, such as Britain or Germany (Hall, 1986; Culpepper *et al*, 2006). In France, the gradual shift towards the post-Keynesian consensus occurred under the authority of a socialist president. It was the left, not the right, which ushered in and accommodated itself to the market. In the United Kingdom, the transition took the form of a serious political clash, where a right-wing government took on and won a battle with the British labour movement (Culpepper *et al*, 2006, p. 25). The recent twenty-fifth anniversary of the famous 1984–1985 miners' strike in the United Kingdom highlighted how divided British society was at the time, and the impact of the miners' defeat on the politicization of the British working class (Beckett and Hencke, 2009). The result was to rid British society of the mediating institutions of organized labour and working class politics. The political power of the Unions and the connection between politics and left-wing ideology were broken, and making references to the working class, to class conflict and to exploitation are anachronistic in contemporary political debate. Britain's accommodation to the market is not so much a result of greater social integration, but is the outcome of the absence of any viable political alternative.

In France, there was no such struggle. The demise of organized labour and class-based politics took place under a socialist government in the 1980s. Further moves in the same direction were undertaken by Lionel Jospin, France's former Trotskyite Prime Minister (1997–2002). Class militancy retains a grip upon French politics and the popular imaginary even though the gap between political rhetoric and the balance of power within French society grows ever wider. Hostility to the market is, therefore, a product of France's peculiar political transition towards the post-Keynesian consensus. There has been no radical break with old political forms, and so ideological politics remains strong in France even though the left is – organizationally, socially and politically – very weak, and hence the paradox of a country dominated by trade

union militancy and yet with one of the lowest rates of unionization of the workforce (11 per cent) in Europe.

Conclusion

Lequesne's book is a welcome contribution to the present debate about France's role in Europe. His insight about French weakness serves as a useful corrective to commonplace assumptions about French arrogance and domination in Europe. His book should prompt further reflection about the historical significance of 1989 and its impact on the dynamics of European integration, the nature and consequences of the EU enlargement process and the reasons behind France's difficult reconciliation with the demands of the post-Keynesian economic consensus.

Notes

- 1 'Czech president takes aim at 'permanent chairman', *EU Business*, 12 February 2009. Available at <http://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/1234352826.73/>
- 2 For the full interview with Jouyet, see the blog, *Coulisses de Bruxelles*, by the Brussels correspondent of *Libération*, Jean Quatremer. Available at <http://bruxelles.blogs.liberation.fr/coulisses/2008/12/leurope-est-pas.html>
- 3 'Sarkozy barb sets of EU protection firestorm' Radio Free Europe, 11 February 2009. Available at http://www.rferl.org/content/Sarkozy_Barb_Sets_Off_Protectionism_Firestorm/1492230.html
- 4 'A surfeit of leaders', *The Economist*, 11 April (p. 41).
- 5 *BBC* (2003) *Chirac sparks New Europe ire*. BBC Media Review, April 2003. Cited in Bickerton, 2009.
- 6 For a somewhat similar argument, see Dulphy and Manigand (2006).
- 7 Pompidou's campaign slogan was 'change within continuity' – reference to change was to appeal to the centrists in his camp, continuity was to appeal to Gaullists (Deporte, 1981, p. 256).
- 8 For a detailed interrogation of the historical significance of 1989, in Europe and beyond, see the work of the Research Network 1989. Available at <http://www.cee-socialscience.net/1989/index.html>.
- 9 Cited in Ost, 2005, p. 58.

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