Sixty years On: France and Europe from the Treaty of Rome to the 2017 elections

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Introduction

The publication of this special issue is timed to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome in March 1957 by France and its five fellow founder members of the European Economic Community (EEC).1 The Treaty of Rome committed France to integrate its economy ever more comprehensively with those of its fellow member states. If Parsons is to be believed (2017), by far the majority of French organised interests at the time (political, economic, industrial, administrative, diplomatic) were just as resistant to this development as they had been to the 1951 Treaty of Paris establishing the European Coal and Steel Community, and the European Defence and Political Communities (EDC and EPC) in 1954.

In this interpretation of history, a minority of French politicians carried the day in 1957 by virtue of luck and a constellation of circumstances, just as they had done in 1951 (and would do in later years at similar critical moments), whereas in 1954 these factors did not line up: former Prime Minister Georges Bidault had argued in the parliamentary debates on the European Defence Community in 1953 that building Europe could not come at the price of unmaking France or its empire (then, the Union française); il faut faire l’Europe, Bidault argued, sans défaire l’Union française2.

In contrast, the Treaty of Rome set up terms of engagement over which France had driven a hard bargain, which appeared unthreatening to national autonomy, and which survived the transition from the Fourth to the Fifth Republics in 1958. On the eve of the 2017 French presidential elections, our empirically-rich collection of articles returns to those early years and to the 60 years since to inform our reflection on the state of France’s EU membership today. Collectively, we assess how and why Europe matters in our understanding of contemporary France, and we seek to situate our findings in the ongoing research agendas for the study of France and the European Union.

1 Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Italy and West Germany.

Specifically, it would appear that studies of Europeanisation as an independent variable of change have in the case of France reached something of a dead-end; or rather, from one reading of Parson’s meta-review of recent literatures, reflect a ‘distressing’ stalemate in the reality of French politics, a ‘national inertia’ characterised by the ‘resilience of the French party system and institutions’ (2017: 599) and where ‘French people have difficulty connecting their views on Europe to choices of representatives, and the only clear party positions on Europe come from extremists’ (ibid, 598).

Presidents and parties

Our contributors bring nuance to this picture. With regards to the presidency, and specifically the presidential elections of 2012, Reynolds’ reading of the campaigns leads him to conclude that the question of Europe was clear and present, despite appearances to the contrary; it was, he argues, the elephant in the room finally revealed in all its bulk and immutability. President Sarkozy’s response to the world financial and economic crisis of 2008 onwards and his enactment of the 2008 French presidency of the EU’s Council of Ministers were the primary sources of this salience. In matter of fact, French presidential candidates throughout the Fifth Republic have all used presidential elections as occasions to solemnly and emphatically reaffirm their commitment to Europe, and the 2012 elections were no exception to the rule, certainly on the part of the mainstream candidates of right (Nicolas Sarkozy) and left (François Hollande). Moreover, French presidents routinely claim that they make no distinction between the national and European levels of governance, supporting Robert Ladrech’s depiction of Europeanisation, coined as far back as 1994, as ‘an incremental process reorientating the direction and shape of politics to the degree that EC political and economic dynamics become part of the organizational logic of national politics and policy-making’ (Ladrech, 1994: 69, our emphasis).

So perhaps ‘salient’ is the wrong term to depict an issue that at presidential election time is both everywhere – as an ‘organizational logic’; and nowhere – as a distinct political cleavage (Drake, 2013). Behind this picture are France’s parties of government which have been disturbed but not transformed by the addition of a European layer of governance in the Fifth Republic. Specifically, they have by and
large eschewed any extensive revision of their ideological and ideational foundations.

Parsons draws a direct line from the early days of the European Community to the present time in this regard, noting that ‘...[t]he fragmentation that so confused French debates over the early communities, with parties struggling to digest or stifle European dilemmas, still troubles the relationship (Parsons, 2017: 597).

In this collection, David Hanley for the French Socialist Party (PS) and Ben Leruth and Nick Startin for the ‘Gaullist movement’ – the mainstream right – arrive at broadly similar conclusions. Hanley returns to three key historical moments in the life of the intra-party management of the PS: the late 1950s (‘joining the EEC and its immediate aftermath’); the 1983 policy U-turn of President François Mitterrand; and the presidency of François Hollande with specific reference to the eurozone crisis. Taken together, Hanley finds strong evidence of continuity in the party’s behaviour over the European issue; namely, that Europe was an ‘active resource’ for party management to impose unity, even at the cost of shedding ‘disgruntled activists’, but that over time this – holding a pro-EU line in the face of internal opposition - has come at serious cost to the party’s inner strength (and electoral popularity). Unity was relatively easy to achieve in the case of the EEC: in comparison with the fissiparous impact on the party of the EDC in 1954 and, above all, of the Algerian war, there was much to agree over in the Treaty of Rome. In 1983, Mitterrand’s choices to forge ahead with European integration in the face of opposition within the party cost him some dissidents, entrenched fault lines within the party and also distinguished it from the French Communist Party (PCF), but simultaneously bolstered his power as President of the Republic. François Hollande, faced with the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis on coming to power in 2012 was similarly able to exert presidential power to marginalise dissenting voices in the PS on the question of macro-economic policy manoeuvre vis-à-vis the EU. However, the party entered the 2017 presidential elections seriously weakened: President Hollande declined to run for a second term in an unprecedented admission of weakness; incumbent Prime Minister Valls fell casualty to the party primaries which saw Benoît Hamon emerge from the left of the party as official presidential candidate; and former government minister Emmanuel Macron established his own movement and presidential platform, *En Marche!*
On the right, Leruth and Startin show how the Gaullist legacy in European matters is also far from settled, and how it fragments support for the mainstream right. De Gaulle when president pursued a complex strategy towards *la construction européenne*, and so it is not surprising that his legacy is contested, meaning different things at different times to different people. Leruth and Startin do classify the legacy into three strands of Gaullist thought on Europe –federal, pragmatic and populist – and conclude that the Gaullist movement returns to the populist, *souverainiste* version like a moth to a flame, with the 2017 presidential elections so far conforming to type, confirming that at this time, ‘the movement has failed to forge a coherent, common stance on Europe’. Here too we can ask whether this fragmentation is functional, in so far as this conservatism preserves differentials between individuals and their careers, and holds out the permanent hope of triumph over one’s rivals. If so and as with the PS, such a strategy comes at a cost, namely the opening of space for rival parties and movements with clearer messages on Europe; here, the National Front and its 2017 presidential election programme proposal for systematically reclaiming, from the EU, French legal, monetary, economic, and political sovereignty.3

**Policies and ideas**

Howarth and Schild provide a complementary perspective on how the obduracy of French ideas on Europe has come at a high price, in this case, the loss of power relative to Germany, and an effective loss of economic autonomy in macro-economic policy making to the point where the Economist Intelligence Unit in December 2011 branded French democracy ‘flawed’, specifically for the ‘erosion of sovereignty and democratic accountability associated with the effects of and responses to the eurozone crisis’ (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2011). In their article for this collection, the authors trace the stability of French preferences in monetary policy since the late 1940s (with the exception of the 1958-1969 de Gaulle decade). This stability takes the form of consistent support for ‘European-level mechanisms for balance of payments support’. In the current day, this amounts to a Keynesian belief that both debtor and creditor countries in the Eurozone should share responsibility for adjustments in

order to reduce macro-economic imbalances between participating countries, and as pre-
cipated in the post-war, Bretton Woods system of ‘embedded liberalism’. This is a policy line that runs counter to German ordo-liberalism thinking (a preference for macro-economic convergence (to the creditor country norm) and supranational governance of macro-economic, fiscal policy) which has, time and time again, won out in the battle of ideas with France, despite the contributions of several significant and influential French figures (Robert Marjolin, Georges Pompidou, Jean-Pierre Fourcade, Valery Giscard d’Estaing, Raymond Barre, Pierre Bérégovoy) to the debate over the decades. Howarth and Schild argue that the Eurozone crisis did provide French leaders with a ‘window of opportunity’ to further their preferences, and that they had some limited success, but overall were capped by ‘German hostility’ to proposals such as Hollande’s call for ‘the mutualization of public debt through the introduction of Eurobonds’. Howarth and Schild’s carefully traced account ‘from the Treaty of Rome to the Euro Area Sovereign Debt Crisis’ reveals very clearly how the Franco-German relationship functions as a self-regulating system of push and pull, give and take, where the interplay is determined as much by ideational difference as by diverging material interests. They conclude that the red line that France will not cross – to relinquish further autonomy in fiscal matters – has ‘left the euro area in a dangerous in-between-territory’; and it has also left the French mainstream vulnerable to political attacks on the price it has paid over the years with regards to the battle of macro-economic ideas with its partner Germany.

Megan Brown and Eric O’Connor, finally for this collection, look back to the negotiations of the Treaty of Rome and the early years of its implementation to provide further examples of how domestic French preferences effectively limited alternative futures for the European Community (and by extension, today’s European Union). Brown’s study of ‘Drawing Algeria into Europe’ tells the fascinating story of Eurafrique which never was: how the founding members of the EEC, at France’s request, were ready to draw the boundaries of Europe beyond the Mediterranean to incorporate French Algeria. The account, drawing substantially on primary archival material, demonstrates how France’s domestic turmoil – the loss of Algeria and the fall of the Fourth Republic – brought about an early contraction of the territorial
reach of European integration, and set a course for how the EU would henceforth
define its friends and neighbours: the momentum for EU-North African relations was
never really regained, despite efforts along the way. The *Eurafrique* that never was,
seen from today’s perspective, was perhaps a lost opportunity to prevent the
problems and human tragedies posed by today’s ongoing flight of refugees from
North Africa to the EU, and to which the EU still has little coherent answer.

Brown’s article unpicks how France went about integrating *l’Union francaise* into the
EEC as a key plank in its own *françafrique* strategy. Times had already moved on since
the ECSC negotiations which did not include discussions of French Empire. As that
dominion crumbled further during the 1950s, so did France look to the European level
for support in maintaining (for example via aid) what was left. France’s sense of
global mission at this time trumped concerns over national sovereignty: better
*Eurafrique* than no *Françafrique*. French demands were met, market access would
over time be accorded to French overseas possessions, and Algeria was set to become
the ‘most underdeveloped region of the European Community’. Free movement of
labour was a sticking point, for example for Italians fearing north African cheap
labour; but, nevertheless, the Treaty of Rome lay ‘the groundwork for an extension of
Europe beyond the continent’ and Brown talks of the ‘long reach of the Treaty of
Rome’, geographically-speaking.

As Algeria started to escape from the French grip, the EC6 struggled to picture Algeria
as a third party state: ‘how would an independent state located on the continent of
Africa be connected to the EEC, and what legal and economic rights might this entail?’
We note in passing that such questions are not irrevelant, in 2017, to the situation of
the EU27 faced with Brexit. Ultimately, domestic French politics and the loss of
Algeria meant that the Treaty plans for Algeria (Article 227) became redundant, but
the influence of the negotiations over *Eurafrique* nevertheless skewed the EU’s
development policies from the start: ‘In economic, political and geographical terms,
Europe was never only on the continent. Indeed, its greatest advocates could not
even agree where Europe ended and an African, Muslim or Arab world began’ (THIS
ISSUE). As such, the case of Algeria and Europe informs our understanding of
Eric O’Connor, in his article entitled ‘European Democracy Deferred: De Gaulle and the Dehousse Plan, 1960’, focuses on the period shortly after de Gaulle returned to power as President of the Fifth Republic. The matter in question is the debate that emerged in 1960 over the activation of the Treaty of Rome’s Article 138 provisions for direct elections to the Assembly (the European Parliament as it subsequently became known). In this account of the debate, two unequal protagonists – Renaud Dehousse for the Assembly, and Charles de Gaulle (by proxy) for the Council of Ministers – clashed over their competing visions of democracy. Dehousse had given his name to the Assembly’s report recommending the federalist-inspired move to transnational, direct elections to the Assembly; de Gaulle by 1960 had made clear his preference for plebiscitary democracy grounded in nations and their states. De Gaulle instructed his ministers to block the Assembly’s ‘Dehousse Plan’ and in doing so drained support within the Community of Six from the already minority idea of a federal European future. In this regard, the Treaty of Rome was a casualty of having been ‘created in one era and implemented in another’ and it is hard to disagree with O’Connor’s conclusion that here too, we see the original Six store up ambiguity for future generations: this ‘stalemate’ over direct elections to the EP, argues O’Connor, ‘perpetuated the original democratic design of European integration, in which democracy existed in shape and spirit, exemplified by a transnational parliament and its federalist representatives, but not in practice’. Despite direct elections to the EP finally coming on stream in 1979 and despite subsequent transfers of power to the European Parliament in the EU’s political system, this tension between the spirit and the practice of democracy at the level of the EU continues to be prominently writ large not only in EU-level discussion, but writ nationally at the level of French politics, as shown by our collection of articles discussed above.

In conclusion

The Fourth Republic that signed the Treaty of Rome 60 years ago did become undone but not over Europe. The Union française also become undone, again not because of Europe, and despite the EU5’s willingness in the ToR negotiations to extend ‘Europe’
to North Africa to accommodate French demands. The Fifth Republic inherited the 1957 settlement of the EU and implemented it à sa guise: we saw above the blocking moves of General de Gaulle with relation to direct elections to the EP, by way of example. But in the case of the Fifth Republic and sixty years on from the signing of the Treaty of Rome, it seems reasonable to ask the following question: by seeking not to become undone by the growing tensions of EU membership, perhaps contemporary France has fallen into the sort of transactionalist, cost-benefit relationship with the EU that we more readily associate with the United Kingdom’s ‘conditional and differential engagement’ with the EU, and which made the UK vulnerable to its 2016 vote by referendum to withdraw from its 43-year membership (A. Geddes, 2013)? Seen from this perspective, the significance of ‘Europe’ to the 2017 French presidential elections becomes more obvious, and gives us a more realistic sense of the possible and probable outcomes from French policy towards Europe in the aftermath of those elections. Sixty years on from the signing of the Treaty of Rome, notions of ‘Frexit’ are both as far-fetched and as envisageable as was ‘Brexit’ in 2013, on the 40th anniversary of the UK’s accession to the EEC.

References


