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*Antoine Vion**Academic Foresights*

French-German Friendship



How do you analyze the present situation of the French-German friendship?

Germany and France have just celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Elysee Treaty. The ceremonies dramatically contrasted with what happened twenty years ago, when maximal solemnity was framing the common celebration of Franco-German friendship. In 1993, François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl had met each other in Verdun and joined their hands in a very impressive ceremony. The announcement of the birth of the TV Channel Arte was ending a sequence through which Franco-German friendship had been boosted by the creation of bilateral institutions such as PROCOPE (1986) the Franco-German College for Higher Education (1987), the Defence and Security Council Military Cooperation (1988), the Cultural High Council (1988), the De Gaulle-Adenauer Prize (1988), the French-German Council for Environment (1989), the Franco-German Brigade (1989), or the Marc Bloch Research Center in Humanities (1992).

In January 2013, two or three days before Angela Merkel and François Hollande met officially for the 50 years summit, the German government announced the repatriation of the stock of German Gold held by the Banque de France. This makes a difference, undoubtedly. This was interpreted in France as a breach of trust and a very materialistic concern regarding the stake of this summit. Talking about Franco-German Friendship, Peter Sloterdijk recently stated ‘[that] there can be no relations between them and that their relationship which is officially set out in a treaty of friendship is, at best, what could be described as benevolent mutual disregard or benign estrangement between two former partners in love – and why not also then between two former partners in hate (1). This was, again, the well known provocative style of the German philosopher. For Sloterdijk, making an academic object of Franco-German friendship is at least the best proof that it is clinically dead. In a conference on Friendship in International Relations, I argued that simply getting back to the facts may provide a better appraisal of the past and present course of the France-German special relation. What is striking in the

and present course of the Franco-German special relation. What is striking in the history of Franco-German friendship is a continuity of ups and downs since the beginning of the 1950s. For example, the fact that Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Helmut Schmidt maintained intergovernmental cooperation at the EC level and promoted the democratization of European institutions generally puts into the shade the fact that the intergovernmental sphere has gone through stormy episodes at the end of the 1970s, like France leaving the European Monetary Snake in 1978. Aren't we today getting back to this kind of monetary dissent ?

The last five years have indeed constituted a big down for several reasons. Firstly, solving the financial crisis has led to very intense intergovernmental cooperation while the societal underpinnings of Franco-German friendship (cultural and intellectual cooperation, twinnings, military bilateral cooperation, etc.) were vanishing for several reasons. One is generational. Baby boomers have been the main policy takers of the historical process of rapprochement. Another is more conjunctural. The reintegration of France in the Commandment of NATO and the Libyan campaign affected military cooperation. Secondly, the way the German government treated the sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone, and especially the Greek and the Italian ones, was perceived by the French elites as a damageable political sequence from the perspective of European solidarity and sense of a common destiny. These quick changes of public opinions not only nurtured Euroskepticism, as political scientists stress it, but also skepticism toward the very idea of Franco-German Friendship in itself, which is quite new. But on another hand, the nomination of Jean-Marc Ayrault, who is a German teacher, as Prime Minister, and the fact that the new elected President François Hollande first visited the German Chancellor was also a sign of the common challenge of maintaining good relations despite monetary and financial dissent.

In your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?

The next 5 years might represent the deepest down in Franco-German relations, if not simply a harsh reconsideration of bilateral cooperation. Regular tensions in the governance of EADS exemplify quite well what could become the daily life of Franco-German relations in a wide range of social spheres in the immediate future. We are entering a sequence of monetary shocks. The Japanese recent turn to an inflationist economic policy already questions the ability of the United States and Europe to avoid high inflation. If ever, as I believe, European financial and budgetary problems are solved by a high level of monetary creation and inflationist tensions, no doubt that the

Germans will consider their best European allies as responsible for such a process and go one or two steps beyond in radicalizing political debates about the trustworthiness of their EU partners. And this will not only consist in repatriating Gold stocks, I guess.

The comeback of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy is another sign of such an European turn to inflationist policies. The question is now less to assess whether the Eurozone is going to be stabilized – it won't be on its actual basis and inspirations – but to know who is going to appear as accountable for highly puzzling its plot or its policy, or even for causing its dismantling. For the French and the Germans, Berlusconi may appear as the best candidate for such accountability. This would be a good application of René Girard's theory of our need to scapegoats in the expression of political violence. Greece has already paid a higher price than any other EU member in such a process. Anyway, the changes that will occur soon may have deeper impact than expected on the course of Franco-German relations.

What are the structural long-term perspectives?

Demography is the key. We are living the end of the cycle of baby boomers' Franco-German friendship, all the people who experimented school exchanges, twinnings, common feasts, cultural exchanges. Let's note that these people constitute the main set of Arte watchers as well. For demographic reasons, Germany's future will be made of labour immigration. French youth, such as the French young engineers, could be attracted by the German labour market, especially if wages increase. The main obstacle for this is the decrease of the learning of German language in France. But, as French people say, « nécessité fait loi » —beggars can't be choosers. Sociologically, if this process begins, relations may evolve into more asymmetric relations between « young French » and « old Germans ». This means that after the Glorious Thirty's experiences of symmetrizing Franco-German social relations and even experimenting mixed couples, the new dominant pattern may be made of more classical labour migration projects based on family migration. In this context, maintaining a high quality of political relations is crucial, if we want to avoid the diffusion of radical extreme right reactions of the Young Germans who will have to face educational and work competition. Due to persisting cultural and behavioral differences, some German people may become more receptive to discourses setting out the French youth as the new interior enemy.

I think governments are now in a cul-de-sac, because they manage Franco-German relations as if the baby-boom's dominant pattern was still very vivid, which is not true. They should definitely have more prospective views about the best ways to adjust the societal conditions of their neighborhood and economic interdependence. More than the short-term intergovernmental cooperation which has become the last shallow expression of Friendship with a block letter F, France and Germany should prepare to a new deal of their common destiny in Europe. There would be no other reason of the possible disruption of Franco-German friendship than the incapacity and the irresponsibility of French and German elites. Burning one's old idoles very seldom makes subtle politics. But yes men discourses on Franco-German friendship are now far too short either. Structural long-term perspectives seem to me a long process of reframing political and social bilateral relations within a new pattern of post-Euro European integration. Anticipating this and working on audacious scenarii is the main challenge today.

Notes:

(1) Sloterdijk P. (2009) *Theory of the Post-War Periods. Observations on Franco-German Relations since 1945*, Springer, p. 9.

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Antoine Vion is a sociologist and political scientist. He is currently Assistant Professor at Aix-Marseille University and a member of the LEST Research Centre. He studies transnational dynamics in European integration, as well as international relations. His previous studies on city twinning and friendship were published in *Contemporary European History* (2003), *Revue Française de Science Politique* (2003), *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* (2007), and *International Politics* (2011). A sequential analysis of Franco-German friendship will be included in the forthcoming book *International friendship* (edited by Andrea Oelsner and Simon Koschut).

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