

The Limits of Integration: An Analysis of French Political and Labor Union Leadership Views on the EU

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Studies of the process of European integration are typically quantitative and rely basically on rational theories. They attempt to explain political and economic relations by analyzing the rational choice that actors and states confront. Culture is viewed as largely irrelevant.¹ For neo-functionalism (Haas 1968, Mutimer 1989, Lindberg 1963, Tranholm-Mikkelsen 1991), and regime theories (Keohane 1986, Keohane and Dye, 1977, Gilpin 1981, Waltz 1979, Moravcsik 1994), power and interests come first. Other views, inspired by world system theory and critical theory (Cox 1987, Gill 1992), see the nation-states (members of the European Union-EU), as the product of worldwide systems of economic or political power, exchange, and competition. Culture is seen as self-serving hegemonic ideology or repressive false consciousness, and has only marginal interest; money and force, as well as power and interests, are seen as the cardinal factors of the European union. These perspectives, although different and in opposition in many aspects, view the nation-states as natural, purposive actors, and culture as expressive material that either integrates collectivities or supports the domination of powerful actors. They fail to appreciate the substantive significance of culture and its organizational presence in the European Union. Moreover, because they treat social change as the product of actors pursuing their interests, the cultures in which these actors are embedded are assumed to be closed, internally consistent, and static. In other words, these perspectives do not acknowledge patterns of interaction and influence that cannot be explained solely as matters of power relations or functional interactions.²

In the perspective adopted in this research, the nation-state and the European Union are culturally constructed. The symbolic and social representation of the European Union and the nation-state are embedded in a social dynamic in which

individuals and groups act, exist, and confront each other, and in which the cognitive and the normative elements mingle. Between individuals, nation-states, local governments and the European Union, lie any number of interests and groups, such as political parties, unions, and business organizations. All of these groups depend on and conflict with each other.

This paper attempts to describe and explain the factors and perceptions that contribute to support or reject European integration as well as the meaning political and labor union leaders attach to the idea of European integration—including the interpretation of organizational preferences for the European Union in terms of intergovernmental or supranational perspectives.³ I am testing in this context the theory proposed by Smith (1991) on the role of the structure of opportunities and the constraints resulting from the process of European integration on the reproduction of national identity and the attachment to the state.⁴ The study analyzes the discourse on the nation-state and the European Union offered by the political, and labor union elite. I will give greater heed to the analysis of those perceptions that reflect discontent with the EU.

My approach is actor-centered. I analyze human beings acting within different national political parties, labor unions, and organizations, and their reactions to the European Union. This includes examining the dynamism generated by the many divergences within the national domain itself (inconsistencies between individuals and political organizations for example), as well as the contradictions inherent in widely valued cultural issues within the EU, such as standardization versus diversity or economic progress versus justice. The analysis focuses on French society.

My argument is organized in three sections: (1) interpretations of the European union; (2) the meaning of the European Union organization, and the dynamics of integration (including features, programs, and actions of the EU) that

contribute to reinforce or lessen attachment to the nation-state; and (3) concluding remarks, relating the empirical findings to possible theoretical explanations.

METHODOLOGY

In spring 1996, 1997 and 1998 I conducted qualitative research through formal semi-structured individual interviews in France. The many surveys on European integration, such as Barometer and Sofres, offer data on support for the EU, but do not provide in-depth information on the meaning of this support and on the nuances in attitudes towards the process of European integration.

This paper is based on in-depth interviews with 34 political leaders, 16 union leaders, and 8 business association leaders. To ensure the respondents' anonymity, I use the generic terms *political leader* or *union leader* instead of the specific position in the party or union. The concept of political leaders includes the top leaders of a party in the region, most of whom are also important national figures; these include general secretaries, congressmen, senators, mayors, and high-ranking officials. I interviewed leaders from five national parties: the center-left Parti Socialiste-PS (Socialist Party), the conservative center-right and Gaullist Rassemblement Pour la République-RPR (Alliance for the Republic), the center-right Union Démocratique Française-UDF, the Parti Communiste-PC (Communist Party), and right wing Front National-FN (National Front). The union and business leaders also include the top leaders of the union or association in each region. The union leaders belong to the three major unions: Confédération Générale des Travailleurs-CGT (Workers' General Confederation), Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail-CFDT (French Democratic Work Confederation), and Force Ouvrière-FO (Worker's Power). The leaders interviewed, through their functions within their party, union, or business association, were also linked to the establishment of policies regarding the European Union. I conducted the interviews in Ile de France (Paris and its suburbs), and in the Haute Garonne (the

majority of interviews were conducted in Toulouse and its suburbs). Leaders from other regions, such as Bretagne, Lorraine, Aquitaine, and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, were interviewed in Paris.⁵

In the interviews I asked respondents a battery of twenty-five open-ended questions about their views on the relations between France and the European Union and their identification with the process of European integration. Data from surveys (Eurobarometers 1989-1997) and scholarly analysis of surveys (Deflem and Pampel 1996, Anderson 1995) as well as government and EU documents provided additional materials for my interpretive analysis.

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Perceptions on the EU vary considerably, as it can be expected, according to the political parties and unions, but there are also sensible divisions within the same organizations, most particularly in the two main parties, the Gaullist RPR and the Socialist Party. In this section I address the perceived grievances and examine the feelings of loss of sovereignty and national identity.

The Socialist party's leadership is the most pro-European Union—as it was intended in the Maastricht Treaty—of all France's parties' leadership. This seems to influence the PS voters as well.⁶ According to a majority current within the PS, the European Union has supported a decisive move to economic expansion and has helped to maintain peace in Europe. The following quote summarizes the position of the socialist leaders I interviewed on this topic:⁷

For the Jospin generation, the EU is considered a historical attainment. Today, a major interest is on the economic role that the EU can play in the world's market. The EU can serve as a 3rd pole, with the Asian/Japanese pole and the U.S. However there are constraints resulting from this choice: loss of French sovereignty concerns us the most; related to this issue, we are still dealing with the question of what

decisions belong to the national level and which decisions should be taken at the European level. (Leader PS, Paris).

However, France giving up its sovereignty is a major reason to oppose further European integration⁸ by a minority current within this party, whose most visible figure is Chévènement, presently minister in the Jospin administration. This position is exemplified in the following quote:

According to the republican concept of the nation, sovereignty implies the defense of democracy. And the process of European union as it is carried out presently is undermining democracy. Democracy is being flouted by both, the independence of the European central bank and by the deregulation of the economy promoted by the EU, against whom the French parliament can do nothing, just to mention two major examples. (Leader PS, Paris [Provence]).

Erosion of cultural identity was a domain of concern mentioned by most PS leaders during the interviews. However, this issue has instigated also two major different interpretations, as illustrated in the two quotes below. Some of the leaders fear that in the process of European integration, a globalized culture heavily influenced by the United States, could end up obliterating national French culture. Others believe the opposite; that the European Union may help to preserve national identities against the US cultural invasion:

I am not against Europe. I think that a certain form of organization at the European level is needed. As everyone knows the world is a single interrelated economy. Therefore, arrangements which integrate states in certain aspects are necessary, but we should not do this by giving up our national sovereignty and even our national identity. Most people in EU institutions, particularly in the Commission, have an open policy regarding cultural identity. In this context we could end up with a

culture heavily influenced by the United States of America. (Leader PS, Paris).

I fear more an invasion of the U.S. culture than other European countries' influence on French culture. And this has nothing to do with a primitive anti-US attitude. It is in fact our own weakness, or demand, that allows for the multiplication of MacDonald's, or the penetration of U.S. movies, or the display/commercialization of US University t-shirts, and so on. That is why we must promote French culture and European culture in order to counterbalance the US cultural domination. (Leader PS, Toulouse).

The debate within the PS on European integration and monetary union also revolves around: (1) whether to accept the restrictions of the European integration process and, accordingly, applying policies of austerity that will affect the working class and the middle class; or (2) to pursue a kind of national protectionism to shelter those groups from the economic hardship that the adjustments to further integration require.

The conservative Gaullist party, RPR, is even more divided on the issue of European integration. In fact, the European Union has been the main cause of this party's dissension in the last two decades. Although the official party line tends to support the European Union—especially since the leader of this party, Jacques Chirac, was elected President—my interviews show that many leaders still perceive the European Union as a threat to French sovereignty and economic independence. There is a relatively strong current around two leaders, Philippe Seguin and Charles Pasqua, who are opposed to further European integration. This group is very critical of what they call “the Brussels' technocracy.” Their views at the end of the millennium are not, however, of a European organization's total rejection. They even see a certain organization-at the European scale “as necessary to ensure

the nation-state immortality” but they strongly emphasize the primordial role that the nation-state must continue to play in the French destiny.

In sum, most leaders of this party support the EU policies of free trade and other specific agreements on particular issues such as security and immigration, but they are concerned about giving up political and military power to the EU. The following quotes typify these views:

As long as we are dealing with economic agreements and the single market, the European Union is a great idea. I am, however, concerned about the project that came out of the Maastricht Treaty on political union. I do not see the need for a political union except perhaps to establish some specific agreements on immigration for example.

(Leader RPR, Paris [Alsace]).

The mechanisms of decision in Brussels affect negatively France more often than not. In France, we have a concept too idealistic of the Union policies. In a non-integrated Europe, France occupied a privileged position: agriculture, nuclear power, weapon industry . . . In all these domains the European integration and the German or British pressures tend to normalize our country. In other words to strip French people from their national culture. (Leader, RPR Paris).

The regulations established by the European Union are not well received here in France. The role too preponderant of the Commission and the many and very technical regulations that are produced in Brussels are too overwhelming. (Leader RPR, Toulouse).

Although there are several different interpretations within the RPR regarding the meaning of the EU, one could define the two major splits between a pragmatic

line, seeing the European Union as the best alternative to insure French prosperity and international influence (which visible figures are Chirac, Juppé, and Balladur); and a tendency (whose leaders are Séguin and Pasqua) very concerned about French sovereignty, which opposes integration beyond agreements on economic issues. Among the RPR voters, the latter seems to have the strongest influence. Indeed, the support for the EU among the RPR voters is less than 50 percent (Sofres 1996).⁹ In other words, the differences within the RPR regarding the process of European integration are more along a continuum between two poles than a clear cut binary opposition. But, these differences, in terms of degree of acceptance of how much Europe should influence France's internal affairs, hold contrasted meanings when votes are cast concerning the European Union.

The Union Démocratique Française is a confederation of center-right parties¹⁰ that are largely supportive of the European Union, and, as such the leaders emphasized the need to push for further integration. Under the leadership of Giscard D'Estaing the confederation elite has been historically largely committed to work within the frame of the European Union. This support for the EU is stronger than ever under the present leadership of François Léotard.¹¹ Only a minority is opposed to the present process of European integration. The following is a typical concern of this dissenting group, expressed by one of its leaders:

The creation of a monetary power so called independent, that is to say separated from the political power, will prevent the states from establishing any corrective measures to control given circumstances and could bring about the end of the European democracies. (Leader UDF, Paris).

Although this group is relatively marginal within the UDF elite, it has influence in the UDF electorate. Indeed, the 1992 referendum and later surveys show that the support of UDF voters for the EU has been consistently around 60%

(Sofres 1996), considerably less than one would believe by listening to most UDF leaders.

The Communist Party considers the economic measures recommended by the EU to have affected negatively the French workers. This party will support only a European integration which includes clear commitment to a more social Europe. For instance, the respondents from the Communist Party stated explicitly that if the policies were more socially oriented, they would certainly support more EU integration. The following quotes are representative of the views expressed by the PC leaders I interviewed:

The EU agricultural policies have negatively affected France. The European integration has weakened our powerful agricultural tradition based on family farming. This has happened because of the capitalist ideology predominating within the EU. (Leader PC, Toulouse).

We always acted against the type of European construction currently happening, in particular against the economic criteria. The negative aspects of European integration definitely are more numerous than the positive ones, because there is an over-determination of the economic and financial criteria. (Leader PC, Paris).

The finality of the European integration is not European but global, which implies submission to the US conceptions of the free market economy and the commercialization of culture. (Leader PC, Toulouse).

In brief, the leaders of the Communist Party are all strongly opposed to the present process of EU. They would like to see that the best social measures in force in certain member countries be included in all the social directives of the EU. Leaders of this party would like also to protect the French parliament from direct

influence of the EU “to safeguard French democratic institutions.” At the same time, they would like to see more power vested on the European parliament.

The Front National is the most anti-European Union of the French political spectrum. This right-wing party is the most vocal regarding a possible loss of sovereignty and French identity as a result of European integration, and it is opposed by principle to any form of European integration. The leaders from the FN do not agree with any form of confederation and will prefer intergovernmental agreements on specific programs and issues:

The process of European union, as it is conceived, is eroding French culture. There is a strong wave of Anglo-Saxon influence on the population. To lose cultural references is to lose cohesion and a means towards progress as well as individual power. Within the EU there is a dangerous drive towards deculturation, unique thought, and the politically correct unique lifestyle. (Leader FN, Paris).

To weaken the state is to weaken France. It means to deny thousands of years of history. By weakening the state we also affect the ways of life of citizens, because the state is the organizer of the society and insure a mission regardless of the laws of the market, such as justice, social protection, and public service. (Leader FN, Toulouse).

The opposition to the European Union in the FN revolves around the rejection of what they see as a “European super state that will destroy the French state,” and French culture, as the previous quotes exemplify, but also to the aperture of Europe to “Third-World immigrants,” and the opening of European borders to foreign goods from the US, Japan, and other Asian countries. In brief, they oppose most aspects that a form of European level organization imply as well

as the consequences of globalization. They will go as far as suggesting the re-negotiating of the Treaty of Rome, and repealing the Maastricht Treaty.

Of the three main French unions, two of them, CFDT and FO, are ideologically in favor of further European integration. In fact, these unions were engaged in pan-European affairs even before the European construction began. The notion of borders in people's everyday lives in large industrial areas, such as the Lorraine and the Nord/Pas-de-Calais, has historically been rather vague. Workers' solidarity in those areas reached beyond borders in the first part of this century. For instance, a united front made up of French and German workers was constituted in the forties to oppose the Nazis. FO, in particular, originated as *Résistance Ouvrière* [Workers Resistance] during the German occupation of France.

Consequently, when the European Coal and Steel Community was born, in 1951, these unions were already used to collaborate across borders. The political parties had more problems to adapt to this new situation. For example, the ancestor of the PS, the SFIO, almost split in two when this treaty was proposed. CFDT and FO have now relatively well established organizations at the European level.

However, the support of these unions' leadership for more European integration today is not unconditional. They are concerned about too much focus on free market economy in the recent treaties, as the following quote attests:

Due to French policies' adjustment to the requirements of the EU, the public sector, which used to guarantee job security, is being reduced at a time when people are hit by the crisis, are left jobless, and without the help and support they could rely on in the past. Precariousness is generalizing. Public health—a traditional pillar in post-world war French institutions—is being little by little dismantled. (Leader CFDT, Paris)

The other big union, the CGT, in large part because of its direct link with the Communist Party—and the ideological involvement of this party during the cold war on the side of the Soviet Union—was never structured at the European level. This union is more blatant than the other unions in its criticism of the EU. The leaders of the CGT are very concerned about the EU emphasis on what they see as “monetary policies” and the overall free market orientation. The CGT opposed the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, and opposes today further European integration that does not explicitly consider social and economic policies that favor the working class. The quote below typifies the CGT views on the process of European union:

The Treaty of Maastricht is an example of an excessive emphasis within the EU on free market economy. The monetary union is the most specific example of this tendency. It imposes criteria of convergence on the political and monetary level, obliging France to respect certain economical parameters concerning such things as exchange rates, inflation rates, and budget deficit, which then forces the government to reduce the public budget. However, France has a unique system in Europe: a public service that plays an important role in economic and social redistribution. When the state cannot play that role anymore, it stops serving the society. There is an expectation from the state for public services which is less and less fulfilled. (Leader CGT, Paris).

All the leaders of the three main unions express a concern over the neglected social policies of the EU. However, the differences lie on strategic approaches. The majority of leaders from the CFDT and FO push for modifications of the existing treaties such as the Maastricht and Amsterdam treaties, but consider it important to work at the European level as well as at the national level. While the CGT and a minority of leaders within the CFDT are more radical in their criticism of the EU,

and the fact that Amsterdam did not produce substantial changes in social policies constitute for them more evidence of the EU's insensitivity to workers' demands. Indeed, the meeting in Amsterdam aimed at including some policies in favor of the workers, but the final treaty did not meet unions' expectations.

French political and union leaders are very attached to their constitutional system, public service (which they consider excellent), and social welfare system. In fact, the view of the republican state as playing a fundamental part in economic redistribution and social organization transcends rifts among the different political components. Even neo-liberal proponents such as Jacques Chirac (current president of France) stated his support for this conception of the state in a speech, shortly after his election: "We have a social model that we want to keep."

The monetary union together with observable isomorphist developments within the European Union—such as expansive environmental policies, some basic demographic variables, expanded human rights, and closer than ever structure of the economy,—has been interpreted by opponents of the European Union (i.e. De Villiers 1992, Seguin 1998) as evidence that the EU unilaterally and hierarchically imposes policies on the member states; hence, undermining national sovereignty.

The attachment to national sovereignty is often coupled with a perceived threat to national identity. The French state—which is viewed as a stable and fundamental social institution—is connected, in the interviewees' perceptions, to the myths and symbols that constitute French cultural identity. Language is often mentioned as a basic cultural marker:

There is a linguistic risk in the process of European integration: Will English be the European language? The growing influence of American culture will be facilitated by the widespread use of English. The main line of defense, as we stand, is our language. France has to resist the growing influence of Anglo-Saxon culture. (Student, Toulouse).

Language is seen as a symbolic expression fundamental as a tool, not only of communication, but also for national unity. As studies have shown, this interpretation is very common in other societies as well. For instance, Edwards (1985, p. 17) notes that “the symbolic value of language, the historical and cultural associations which it accumulates and the natural semantics of remembrance all add to the basic message, a rich underpinning of shared connotations.”

The negative perceptions on the EU among French leaders can be briefly summarized as follows: France's economic situation has been affected by the measures decided by the EU. France is becoming more and more a follower of Germany, and the country is losing national autonomy, sovereignty, and national identity.

In this section we have seen the plurality of views expressed by French leaders on the relations between France and the EU. In the next section I examine the different understandings among political and labor union leaders of what the organization of the European Union should be, and which aspects of the European integration process' dynamics have contributed to reinforce an attachment to the nation-state as the central socio-political institution.

THE MEANING OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

When people are supporting or rejecting the EU, they are basically supporting or rejecting a given idea they have of the EU. There is not a clear-cut and homogeneous interpretation of what the European integration implies. Here, I focused first on attempting to comprehend the respondents' positions regarding support for an intergovernmental, confederate organization or for a supranational, federal form of organization. Then, I present the factors and policies that contribute to shape the meaning of the European Union.

I found the following trends:¹² 74 percent thought that a form of confederation was the best alternative for the European Union, while 26 percent supported a federation. The interviewees who were more inclined to support a federation belonged to the Socialist Party and the union FO.

Furthermore, the concept of a confederation, as it is understood by the respondents, has many shades and degrees of integration. A major tendency within the RPR favored intergovernmental agreements linked to the economy and certain specific policies, while the confederation tendency within the PS and the UDF supports a closer association, including foreign policies, cultural policies, defense, and economic policies. This view is shared by the union leaders from FO and the CFDT.

The leaders of the PC and CGT have similar views on the most appropriate form of organization for the EU. They will support a rather loose confederation with agreements that include economic and social policies, and autonomy for the French government in foreign and cultural policies.

The plurality of interpretations on what form the European Union's organization should take shows the difficulties of creating a political union. However, most of the people interviewed tend to view the EU more as some kind of confederation of nation-states than as a federation. Most interviewees were very skeptical about a federation of the European Union.

The nation-state still constitutes the main referent for most French leaders. This is such that even when addressing specifically European Union issues common to most members of the European Union, they find concrete expression only within the national state.¹³ The campaign and results of European elections in the media or otherwise are always portrayed in terms of national matters. In elections to the EU parliament, national concerns determine opposition or support of the electorate for a given candidate or party.

These views and the attachment to the national state are based on both concrete and symbolic experiences that the institutions of the EU themselves have not dispelled, if not contributed to reproduce.

The debates within the EU are conducted mostly in terms of national interests. Through the Council, the nation-states remain the major actors in EU agreements. The main policies of the EU are decided by the leaders of the member countries, through the council, acknowledging and reaffirming the sovereign statehood as a crucial element in the EU policies. The Commission, although able to produce an enormous quantity of texts and recommendations, has not yet the power to lead.

In addition, the European Union's lack of leadership role in international affairs, even in the European continent, also undermines the importance of the EU as a viable organization. Two recent examples are the Balkans crises and Ireland; because of the cacophony that characterizes the EU in foreign affairs, the EU could not play a decisive role in preventing the war in ex-Yugoslavia, and later, in the establishment of a peace accord in Bosnia. It was almost totally absent in the North-Ireland's peace process. Beyond Europe, the EU has played a limited role in the Middle-East, and it is not acting as a united voice in Africa. In fact, during the nineties the EU has stepped aside almost everywhere in the world, leaving the leadership to the United States.

This is not due to a lack of interest for international affairs among European leaders, but to the particular organizational structure of the EU. As long as the European Union will be only a club of governments negotiating issues as they come along, it will not be able to face the problems that lie ahead and to produce a sense of leadership that will portray itself as a viable and important organization in the countries members' population and their political leaders.

The monetary union constitutes the latest major issue that has contributed to instigate negative feelings regarding the EU among a faction of French leaders, particularly the labor union leaders. In the monetary union project there is an

emphasis on financial agreements, but no social policies are included to minimize or counterbalance the effects of economic restructuring. As this labor union leader suggests:

In order to get the Euro, Europeans would have to accept to be governed by an all-powerful central bank which will impose free market policies. The monetary union will be paid by an increase of unemployment, aggravation of the crises, and exclusion of many people from the main stream. In brief, it is a Europe in extreme free market oriented that has been prepared for us. (Union Leader CGT, Toulouse).

Indeed, the criteria considered to establish the monetary union (inflation, equilibrium of the budget, interest rates, and respect of change parities) were solely monetarists. Neither the situation of the job market, nor the economic activities (including industrial policies) were even mentioned. Furthermore, since the Euro is controlled by an independent entity, the European Central Bank, the so-called "democratic deficit" has increased while the technocratic conception has been enhanced. The sages in power at the Central bank, whose technocratic interpretation of the world is heavily influenced by a capitalist ideology, will adapt themselves to the dynamism of the most powerful economy and will tend to direct the European economy according to monetarist interpretations.

The monetary union also represents the abandonment of an important marker of French identity, and therefore a concern over national identity arises. To abandon the Franc in favor of a European currency represents symbolically a big step for the French people. It equally instigates concerns for national sovereignty. Specially that the majority of the leaders interviewed, believed that the Euro, and, particularly, a rigid reading of the criteria, was a German project. The interpretation reflected in the following quote is rather widespread among political leaders from both the right and the left of the political spectrum:

Look at the model of the European Central Bank: Germany. Germany, because of its economic weight is already dominating Europe, and in an integrated Europe it will be worse because we will not have anymore a powerful state to protect us from the laws of the market, or from the commercialization of culture, or from any other arrangements that will affect our existence as French people with a particular history. (Leader RPR, Toulouse).

In fact, although Germany has played a central role in influencing the model of monetary union, the decision of providing Europe with a single currency was not just a German idea. It was first suggested by the French government in 1988, and in 1992, following German reunification, Mitterrand strongly pushed Kohl and the other members of the EU to create the Monetary Union as soon as possible. Indeed, the German unification, which was not expected so soon, rushed and modified the process of European Union as it was conceived since the 1960s. The process of European integration was initiated in the fifties, when Germany was subjugated and divided. France and England were losing their empires, and no one in Western Europe could be hegemonic in a space rather frozen by the cold war. In 1992, the German reunification has given rise to fears that a too-strong Germany might want to lead Europe or even break apart from Western Europe and switch its energies to Eastern Europe. To ward off this danger Mitterrand asked Kohl, who accepted, to firmly tie Germany to the European Union by establishing a monetary union.

Among the many possible combinations of the diverse conceptions of the EU, two major strategies stand out: a minimalist strategy (more or less neoliberal) which is above all interested in creating a free market zone, and another, more inclusive strategy, which in addition to economic integration, pursues social and political unity. For now the minimalist neoliberal tendency is clearly dominating

the process.¹⁴ Policies on social issues have not been applied with the same intensity as purely economic policies. For instance, the social charter proposed since 1992 and included in the Treaty of the Union as protocol, has been accepted in principle by most states (at that time, Denmark and the United Kingdom, for different reasons, opted out), but in practice many of the recommendations of the charter have not been applied in all the countries with the same vehemence, as revealed in the interviews with labor union leaders (see also Gibb 1998, Kluth 1998, Leibfried and Pierson 1995, Springer 1994). Obviously, although European Union officials often refer to solidarity among the citizens of the EU, in practice the struggle against inequalities and for social justice has not been the object of much dedication in recent years. Indeed, at the Dublin summit, held in December 1996, participants did not even discuss reforms aimed at obtaining complete freedom of movement of people within the union nor other social issues, such as changes in the domain of social benefits, that originally were included in the Irish draft (*El País* 1996).¹⁵ The latest intergovernmental meeting at Amsterdam in June 1997 was not successful in convening concrete social policies. Only a commitment to work on reducing unemployment was decided.

CONCLUSION

A plurality of perceptions characterizes the French people's relations with the EU. Whether they are based on rational ideas or irrational sentiments, these perceptions nonetheless generate opposing discourses regarding the meaning and relevance of the European Union in the French society.

Contrary to many issues, which have historically divided French society along party lines, the debate on the European Union divides the main political parties and, to a lesser degree, the labor unions. The extensive interviews demonstrate

that there are numerous contradictions within any given party's leadership, despite its official stance.

These findings reinforce the methodological notion that the relations between the member countries and the EU cannot be analyzed as if the nation-states were monolithic and homogeneous. The different positions held by the leaders within the same country show that conflicts and confrontations within the EU are not always along national devotion and origins. There are national actors who pressure their own state to apply policies made at the European Union level, as well as actors at the local and national level who tend to reject the propositions of the EU.

My research also reveals that the main debate among French leaders (excluding those from the FN) is no longer about being "for" or "against" European integration. It focuses instead on the issue of subsidiarity: the policies and the particular tenets of the policies that should be decided at the European Union level.

The only position that France's political and labor union leadership share is a strong attachment to some form of interventionist and protectionist European Union. In this respect, France's leadership differs from the Germany's and United Kingdom's leadership, who, in varying degrees, favor deregulation and free-trade.¹⁶

The idea of sovereignty revealed in the interviews indicates that nationalist principles are still engraved deeply in the French political and union elite's consciousness. Economic difficulties and concerns regarding cultural identity are explained by most of the respondents as the result of domination by the other countries in the EU's programs and arrangements, and particularly by Germany. This shows that some of the theories developed to explain the rise and

consolidation of nationalism in the 19th century can be revisited in the context of the European Union. Especially relevant are Smith (1991) on the sense of belonging, and Greenfield (1991), on the idea of *ressentiment*. A little more than half of the French leaders interviewed expressed a strong attachment to a common history associated with the French state and its territorial boundaries, as well as a mix of admiration and distrust toward Germany.

These views are reflected by the type of EU organization that respondents favor. Although there is not a single specific articulation, the bulk of the French elite are strongly inclined towards an intergovernmental organization of the EU. At the most, some type of loose confederation seems to be the preferred form of organization for now. Very few of the political leaders, either from the left or the right, seem to be ready to accept real transfer of sovereignty to the European Commission or the European Parliament. The old Gaullist slogan, "a Europe of nations,"¹⁷ is often mentioned by Gaullists, but also by many socialists I interviewed, including the prime minister Lionel Jospin (Le Monde 1998). Most French political leaders are associated with a centralized state¹⁸ and fear that in a federal form of organization, the French state could lose its prerogatives.

These interpretations are not alien to the specific characteristics of the French state and the habits and perceptions of people acting within it. Historically, the centralizing role of the state in France has contributed to create a sense of national cohesion. In fact, the state has played such a decisive role in defining the civil society that social demands have been traditionally directed towards it. Consequently, today, the state is not only viewed as a political structure, but it is also part of people's representation of what France is.

The structure of opportunity offered by the European Union has not contributed to change this view. Indeed, the European Union has been basically an association where macroeconomics have been played out. At the same time some of the regulations coming from the EU are perceived by approximately half of the respondents as invading French cultural identity and undermining French sovereignty.

Finally, it should be noted that the assumption of a continuous association, although plausible, is not guaranteed. France's role in the European Union depends on the political make up of the government and the parliament. Until now, the political divisions within France have not affected significantly the central role that the country has been playing in the EU, although a revival of the PC on the left would make it more difficult for France to support further European integration, and particularly policies of free trade. An even greater opposition and possible obstacle to further integration can arise from the right of the political spectrum. Even though in the near future a significant growth of the RPR seems improbable, a convergence among the forces opposing the EU within this party, small movements (such as De Villiers' *Mouvement pour la France*), and the *Front National* could make the participation of France in the EU an element of discord, and could contribute to stall the process.

Notes

¹ The work of Wilson and Smith (1993) on cultural change in Europe and Kourvetaris (1996) on attitudes, are among the few studies that do take into consideration the cultural processes of European integration.

² Myths and symbols are abstract representations of an imaginary community as well as

expressions of concrete social relations (such as the social needs of different social groups and classes). This conceptualization includes the political and geographical delimitation of a community in relation to the exterior.

³ This research attempts to be a useful addition to the important quantitative work done on variations of support for the European Union (Eurobarometers 1987-1998, Deflem and Pampel 1996, Gabel 1998, Kourvetaris 1996, SOFRES 1992, 1996).

⁴ Smith proposes the theory of structure of opportunities and the constraints of the state to explain nationalism in national minorities. I apply this idea to the relations between the leaders from France and the European Union.

⁵ When the person interviewed is from one of the mentioned regions but has been interviewed in Paris, I will indicate the province of origin in brackets.

⁶ In the 1992 referendum on the Treaty of the Union, according to a Sofres poll (*Le Monde*, 25 September 1992), 74% of PS voters approved the ratification of the Treaty, while 92% of the PC supporters voted against it. 58% of the UDF voters voted in favor of the Treaty, 67% of the RPR electorate voted against the Treaty. But this is not really a clear indication of support or rejection of the European Union. I was present in France just before the elections, and I could observe that the debate was largely influenced by domestic issues and was heavily influenced by expressing support for/or defeating Mitterrand.

⁷ All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁸ When using the concept "further integration" it means basically the idea of more political integration as it was laid down in the 1992 Treaty on the Union (also referred to as the Maastricht Treaty).

⁹ These surveys basically measure people's satisfaction with the EU and whether they support further European integration.

¹⁰ The two largest parties within the confederation are the Parti Republicain-PR (Republican Party) and the CDS (Christian Democratic Party).

¹¹ This inclination was reflected in the 1992 National Assembly vote to approve the constitutional amendments required to ratify the Maastricht Treaty (77 out of 89 UDF deputies voted in favor of the changes), as well as in the interviews I conducted in 1996, 1997 and 1998.

¹² These numbers are presented as trends perceived in the groups interviewed. Their explanatory power relies on the fact that the people interviewed are representative of the positions in the different parties and unions. The percentages do not add up to 100% because some people were not sure of their position. I found no significant differences between men and women regarding this issue.

¹³ Habermas (1992) proposes similar arguments regarding the connection between universal values and the nation-state.

¹⁴In fact, the Treaty of Maastricht already had revealed a conception of Europe more technocratic than democratic, and expressed the primacy of economics over politics and social issues. The central bank will be the only European institution with the power to affect all the countries of the Union and no institution will be able to counterbalance this power. It should be noted, however, that the Maastricht Treaty extended the powers to the Parliament by reinforcing its capacity of amending projects proposed by the Council in several domains and by bestowing on the parliament the right of veto on several themes (consumers' protection, transports, telecommunications, energy, education, etc.). This is called the codecision-making process.

¹⁵ Ireland occupied the EU presidency from July to December 1996.

¹⁶ Germany's policies might change with the newly 1998 elected government.

¹⁷ The term *nation*, as De Gaulle and the other politicians use it today, means *nation-state*.

¹⁸ The administrative decentralization, which was made in progressive steps during the second half of this century, did not create much change to the centralized structure of the French state.

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