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How do you analyze the present status of symbolism in Franc-German relations?

On September 4th, 2013, French President François Hollande and German President Joachim Gauck visited Oradour-sur-Glane, a French martyr village of the Second World War whose population was massacred by an SS division during the Liberation. During the ceremony, the two heads of state stood together in silent commemoration, holding each other's hand. By so doing, they reproduced a symbolic gesture which had resonated strongly in 1984, that of President François Mitterrand and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl holding hands in front the memorial to the battle of Verdun. These elements illustrate a more general fact: over the last couple of decades, Franco-German relations have been maintained within an idealistic atmosphere which celebrates "reconciliation" and "friendship" between the two countries. These celebrations take the form of grandiloquent speeches, spectacular political gestures, and commemoration rituals which are intended to give a particular meaning to Franco-German cooperation. This article analyzes the historical importance, current status, and possible future developments of this reconciliation symbolism.

As noted by Rosoux, the habit of making sense of Franco-German cooperation by displaying symbols of reconciliation emerged during the early 1960s (Rosoux 2002). The first spectacular gesture took place when German Chancellor Adenauer officially visited France in July 1962. He and French President de Gaulle attended mass together in Reims cathedral. This place had been deliberately chosen. In the French imaginary, Reims cathedral evokes both the birth of the French nation (it is the place where most kings were crowned) and its mutilation during the wars with Germany (it had been destroyed by German artillery in 1918). Six month later, on January 22, 1963, de Gaulle and Adenauer signed a Franco-German friendship treaty which officially proclaimed reconciliation between the former "hereditary enemies".

The symbolism of Franco-German reconciliation has hardly changed over time. It has taken three main forms. The first is the myth of a Franco-German "original union". In the early 1960s, Charles de Gaulle was fond of referring to the empire of Charlemagne, which he presented as a symbol of the original union between both countries. Since then, a "Charlemagne Prize" has been awarded every year since 1950 to individuals who contribute to the rapprochement between both countries and/or to European integration.

The second leitmotif is the image of the Franco-German "couple" ("Tandem" in German). This is mainly displayed by the French Presidents and German Chancellors through choreographed body movements. A typical example is the image of German Chancellor Angela Merkel laying her head on François Hollande's shoulder during the demonstration against terrorism which took place in Paris on 11 January 2015. As noted by Nourry, this symbolic tradition not only takes place during Franco-German ceremonies, but is also currently "played out" during EU summits and international conferences (Nourry 2005).

The third major component of this political theater is "Franco-German youth" (expressed as a singular noun). The Elysée Treaty of 1963 instituted an organization, the Franco-German Youth Office, which aimed at bringing together the largest number of young people. Since its creation, this Office has funded meetings between more than eight million participants. These young people participate in most Franco-German symbolic ceremonies. During the Verdun ceremony of 1984, for instance, they accompanied Kohl and Mitterrand when the two leaders planted peace trees on the former battlefields of Verdun. More recently, during the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the First World War, one French teenager and one German teenager read out a "peace message" in front of Presidents François Hollande and Joachim Gauck.

More often than not, these three symbolic elements are intermingled. A good example of this is de Gaulle's speech at Verdun in 1966 where he presented Franco-German rapprochement as a "re-conciliation" in the etymological sense of the term, i.e. a "return" to an original union. Firstly, de Gaulle observed that France and Germany used to be in harmony under the rule of Charlemagne. He then noted that unfortunate events had broken this state of harmony. Finally, de Gaulle concluded with a happy ending. Thanks to the fraternization of young people, he argued, France and Germany were about to be reunified again (Rosoux 2002: 41).

The question of the political meaning of this symbolism of reconciliation has given rise to significant debate within the scholarship. Firstly, several authors have adopted a "realist" stance in the sense of the realist theory of international relations. They have analyzed these symbolic practices as a mere communicational discourse, arguing that for the most part, particular symbolic acts of reconciliation reflect the need to legitimize and provide a moral veneer to decisions driven by material interests. For instance, Buffet has observed that this symbolism of reconciliation has never had any impact on defense relations. During the Cold War, for instance, French nuclear doctrine planned to use West German territory as nuclear battlefield in the case of a Soviet attack. Since then, Buffet argues, "it has become apparent that the relationship glories in symbolism: while the hard facts of operational and doctrinal nuclear concertation are worked out with Britain or even the US, Franco-German defense relations revolve around symbolic parades and the creation of goodwill-furthering joint brigades which are operationally

parades and the creation of goodwill furthering joint brigades which are operationally useless, and stripped even of their symbolism with the abandonment of conscription in France” (Buffet and Hauser 1998: 203).

At the other end of the theoretical spectrum, some authors have taken a less critical stance and have suggested that these symbolic gestures reflect the actors’ sincere commitment to the moral project of reconciliation. For instance, journalists usually emphasize the “friendship” between French and German government leaders: Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing and Helmut Schmidt, Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl, Nicolas Sarkozy or François Hollande and Angela Merkel, etc. Besides, some historians have argued that Franco-German rapprochement started at the private level first before reaching the top of the pyramid by capillary diffusion (Defrance and Pfeil 2005). In both cases, the argument states that the “actors” (in the social science sense) are not real “actors” (in the theatrical sense). In Paul Veyne’s famous phrase, they would “believe their myths” (Veyne 1992).

Recently, a third current of opinion has emerged which tries to analyze these social practices in a different way (Rosoux 2002; Nourry 2005; Delori 2007; Krotz and Schild 2013). Instead of asking what lies behind this reconciliation symbolism (in other words, what motivated the actors), it tries to understand what the symbolic practices actually do. This literature stems from the assumption that those discourses and gestures can be understood as “speech acts” in the sense of Austin (Austin 1962). However, these authors add an important component to Austin’s theory. They argue, against a purely linguistic interpretation, that words do not have power per se. Their performativity depends on a series of sociological factors such as the identity of the speaker, and their resonance with the context (in this case, social memories of wars).

This literature reaches three main conclusions. Firstly, it rejects the view that reconciliation symbolism has revolutionized political relations between France and Germany. In fact, cooperation between the two countries began in the 1950s, in the context of European integration. At that time, French and German political leaders made few incursions into the field of symbolic politics. When they did so, their attempts remained unnoticed and were thus without major political significance. For instance, in March 1950, German Chancellor Adenauer proposed the creation of a “Franco-German Union” but the French government of the day did not even respond to this proposal. Throughout the 1950s, the most important steps towards cooperation took a deliberately “cool”, pragmatic form: the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (1950), the discreet return of the Saar region to Germany (1955), the creation of the European Economic Community (1957), etc.

Secondly, this literature has shown that the symbolism of Franco-German reconciliation has had some impact, however modest, on how political actors conceive of the relationship between France and Germany. Before the early 1960s, cooperation between the two countries was mainly understood as a fortunate consequence of European

integration. This emerges, for instance, in the Schuman Declaration of May 9, 1950. Although Robert Schuman briefly mentioned the objective of “Franco-German reconciliation”, he mainly referred to other “greatnesses” (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991) or “worlds” (Latour 2002) such as “Europe”, “peace”, or “security on the continent”. The Rome treaties of 1957 made few changes in this respect. Although they implied a strengthening of bilateral Franco-German cooperation, they said very little about its meaning. When they did so, it was always presented as a means of advancing towards other moral horizons: “an ever-closer union among European peoples”, “economic and social progress”, “peace and liberty”, etc.

In the early 1960s, however, French and German policymakers began framing matters in a different way. Through the notions of “Franco-German reconciliation”, “the Franco-German couple/Tandem”, and that of the development of a “Franco-German union”, bilateral cooperation between France and Germany ceased to be understood as an instrument for a greater good and became a desirable end in itself as a symbol of the forthcoming union of both countries. This move from the “realm of technology” to the “realm of morality” (Latour 2002) is not trivial. Indeed, it initiated a change within the dynamic of European integration by legitimizing what specialists in the field call the Franco-German special partnership, a key idea drawn upon several times in the history of European integration. To cite only a few examples, the Franco-German “special relationship” played a part in drafting the Common Agricultural Policy in the 1960s (Pinder 1998), initiating the institutional reform that led to the direct election of European Parliament in 1979 (Cole 2001), and setting up monetary union in the early 1990s (Nourry 2005).

Thirdly and finally, this literature has observed that these reconciliation symbols have had an impact on public opinion. Indeed, quantitative studies reveal that mutual representations changed in the early 1960s, i.e. precisely when this symbolism became institutionalized (Rabier 1968). More precisely, qualitative studies suggest that this symbolism has been performative in its precise and narrow space of signification. On the one hand (negatively, so to say), the level of cultural exchanges remains low. In spite of notable governmental efforts, young people in both countries prefer learning other languages (in particular English and Spanish). Consequently, French and German people know little about each other. They have a stereotyped image of the other country and they show little desire to learn more. On the other hand, most studies show that positive stereotypes have largely replaced negative ones (Rabier and Inglehart 1984). Now, this ambivalent finding can be interpreted as an effect of the Franco-German political theater. Indeed, the symbolism of Franco-German reconciliation says little about the actual cultures and societies of France and Germany. However, it has generated a set of positive clichés and myths which surface in public polls.

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

As noted above, Franco-German symbolism has been surprisingly stable for the last decades. However, some recent dynamics are likely to become perpetuated in the course of the next five years.

The first of these is the diversification of historical references. Until a recent period, the authors of Franco-German reconciliation symbolism meticulously avoided referring to the Second World War. Indeed, most ceremonies took place on memory sites of the First World War: Reims in 1962, Verdun in 1966 and 1984, Versailles in 2003, etc. Things have changed over the last five years. In 2004, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder participated for the first time in the ceremonies commemorating the Liberation of France. More recently, the French and German Presidents have commemorated the massacre of Oradour-sur-Glane (see above). Given the importance of the Second World War in the current memory debates in France and Germany, this new symbolic tradition will probably become perpetuated at some point in the foreseeable future.

The second recent trend is the increasing ritualization of this symbolism. Sociologists and anthropologists define rites as embodied symbolic practices which are repeated over time in order to state what a given society holds to be sacred. Those body choreographies displaying the Franco-German couple obviously fall into this category. This ritualization dynamic also emerges from the fact that French and German political leaders have adopted the habit of celebrating the reconciliation itself (instead of working with the conflictual past as they used to do until the 1980s). Whereas the first anniversaries of the Elysée treaty had gone completely unnoticed, the 40th and 50th anniversaries led to some important ceremonies. In January 2003 (the 40th anniversary), for instance, all French and German MPs met in the chateau of Versailles. Parallel to this, a Franco-German “youth parliament” held a session in the German Bundestag in the presence of French president Chirac and German chancellor Schröder. On September 2012, François Hollande and Angela Merkel even commemorate nothing less than the “Speech to German Youth” given by Charles de Gaulle 50 years before!

At first sight, the ritualization of this symbolism suggests that current political leaders lack imagination. I have personally made such a comment in a previous publication (Delori 2007). However, a closer investigation may lead to a different assessment. Indeed, anthropologists and sociologists teach us that political rites – like those displayed at a domestic level – have ambivalent effects. On the one hand, they are noticeably powerless when it comes with giving content to public policies or providing an accurate image of a given community. On the other hand, political rites succeed in shaping a powerful sense of belonging (Durkheim 1912). Several reasons have been put forward in order to explain this ambivalent performance. Whatever the explanation, this ambivalent performance is noticeable in the case of Franco-German relations. On the one hand, French and German people now little about the actual cultures and societies of France and Germany. On the other hand, they show strong attachment to the general principle of Franco-German cooperation (see above).

What are the structural long-term perspectives?

In the long term, I believe that Franco-German symbolism will normalize. By this, I do not mean that French and German political leaders will stop thinking of the bilateral relationship as “special”. Nor do I mean that they will cease putting forward evocative symbols. Rather, I assume that that they will give a more normal form to this “special relationship” and symbolism. Most special relationships rely on memories which are largely positive (Danchev 1996). For instance, the special relationship between Britain and the United States relies on a historical narrative which emphasizes the military solidarity between the two nations during the Second World War (Baylis 1984). To a certain extent, French and German political leaders took this path when they stopped working with the past and began celebrating reconciliation instead. If they want to go further in this direction, however, they will probably have to find more evocative events than the Elysée treaty (which they regularly commemorate) or de Gaulle’s speech to German youth (see above).

At first sight, the task seems an awkward one as Franco-German storytellers do not have at their disposal a history of cooperation comparable to that linking Britain and the United States. However, some elements of recent Franco-German history may fuel a renewed symbolic enterprise. A decade ago, a number of memory entrepreneurs tried to promote the (significant) memory of those German antifascists (approximatively 1000) who fought in the French Resistance (Delori 2007). They argued that this historical episode coincided with the grammar of political symbolism (it put forward a myth of origin) whilst resonating with the memory debates in both countries (the debates on the responsibilities in the crimes of the Second World War).

There are many other examples of the kind. During the First World War, for instance, some German young people refused conscription. Instead of killing their French counterparts, they decided to launch a “war against the war”. They organized sabotage actions against those trains which carried the conscripts to the front, distributed antimilitarist brochures in the trenches, and organized a (symbolic) “international day against war”. In 1938, one of the leaders of this antimilitarist movement – Willy Munzenberg – created the “Franco-German Union”, an association which aimed at drawing attention on the dangers of Hitlerism and Stalinism. This kind of historical episode may constitute an alternative to the old(fashioned?) myth of Charlemagne’s empire, the long drawn-out commemorations of the Elysée treaty, and classical “messages of peace” addressed by “Franco-German youth” to the French and German presidents (see above).

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