

How Do Germans Think about Europe? (February 9, 2012)

Abstract

Jan-Werner Müller, an academic commentator, captures the voices of prominent German intellectuals and their views on Germany's role in Europe. Written at the height of the Euro crisis, he contends that German citizens generally are not Eurosceptic, yet other European powers should not expect a departure from ordoliberalism.

Source

What do Germans think about when they think about Europe?

Germany is Europe's paymaster. Even Franco-German summits are now really "German-German summits", Romano Prodi said recently. But is Germany also becoming Europe's political master? Many Europeans seem to fear it, but it would be wrong to say that Germany has developed fantasies of continental domination or become more Eurosceptic—at least any more Eurosceptic than the rest of the EU. There is a new German ambivalence about Europe, but that's because, after paying dearly for unification and suffering a decade of wage restraint and benefit cuts, the last thing Germans want is a "transfer union" in which they have to finance a load of supposedly lazy southerners. The Germans also worry about inflation: selective memory no doubt, but not completely irrational. Germany differs from the other member states of the EU in the particular economic ideology that holds sway there, and is supported by the country's elites—not just those on the right. Ordoliberalism isn't exactly the same as Anglo-American neoliberalism—it sees more of a role for the state. Many Germans believe it was responsible for the economic miracle of the 1950s (as well as the mini-miracle of the last two years). Ordoliberalism is what Angela Merkel wants for the Eurozone as a whole: rigid rules and legal frameworks beyond the reach of democratic decision-making. In this sense—but this sense only—Thomas Mann's nightmare of a German Europe, instead of a European Germany, might come true.

Less is probably known about German political culture outside the country than at any point in living memory. Germany watchers tend to be obsessed with finding signs of resurgent nationalism: what interests them is the way the country deals with its Nazi past, but in this respect united Germany has made all the right moves. Helmut Kohl, who has a history PhD, made awkward attempts to restore national pride by emphasising the positive aspects of his country's past. Gerhard Schröder, his successor, boasted that the Germans' earnest and sometimes tortured efforts to remember Nazism should be a source of pride for Germans and serve to reassure the country's partners. For all its ambiguities, the German attempt to admit its past has encouraged a trust that would have been unthinkable even ten years ago; this was evident in November, when Poland's foreign minister, Radek Sikorski, told an audience in Berlin that having an "inactive" neighbour that shirked its European responsibilities would worry him more than a Germany that exercised power. The country's memory politics haven't changed under Merkel, who cares more about the mechanics of power than she does about its symbolic expression.

Merkel has gone along with the political consensus that emerged in the 1990s from a weakening of both the post-nationalist left and the aggressively nationalist right. The years after reunification saw the decline of the staunchly pacifist left (its most prominent intellectual supporter, Günter Grass, had said that a united Germany would inevitably turn into a "monster"). The group's deepest fear was expressed on a steel-grey poster ominously announcing: "Germany is becoming more German." At the same time, the so-called New Right was making people nervous by calling for an "unashamed" pursuit of the

national interest. [...]

What emerged instead of the “national self-confidence” whose assertion always betrayed its absence, was a view that Germany should pursue its interests in alliance with the West in an enlarged European Union. The left’s dream of post-nationalism was over, but many on the left found that they could live with the idea of Germany becoming more assertive internationally, sending soldiers to fight wars (or to keep a more or less fictional peace) in Kosovo and Afghanistan, provided it wasn’t acting alone or serving purely German interests. And they felt more comfortable with a fatherland which, thanks to legislation brought in under Schröder, no longer based citizenship on blood lines. Yet the problem that gave rise to the German Question in the 19th century hasn’t gone away: too small to play a global role on its own, but far more powerful than any other European country, though not as powerful as all of them put together, Germany still hasn’t found its place.

One obvious answer is for it to assume the role of European hegemon, as the constitutional lawyer Christoph Schönberger recently suggested in *Merkur*—a liberal monthly with a small print run but vast influence. Schönberger blamed Germany’s unwillingness to take on that role at least in part on its elites’ inability to see the distinct democratic advantages of hegemony. Germany, he argued, could be to the EU what Prussia was to the German Reich, the largest state but not in a position to override the interests of smaller states, whereas in a potential federal Europe the smaller states would simply be outvoted.

Herfried Münkler, a Berlin academic and a prolific contributor to the national press, has taken a similar line. He dismisses concerns about the undemocratic nature of the EU. Europe, he insists, should become a global power player, and the precondition for that would be a centralised EU led by France and Germany, in place of the current ramshackle institution where instability on the periphery—code for Greece or Portugal—could make the whole thing collapse.

There is an obvious alternative to hegemony: more democracy in the EU, and Germany’s absorption into Europe—not necessarily in the form of a federal state. Jürgen Habermas keeps pushing for a proper European constitution. Europe has been a major concern for two decades now, but his main justification for supporting the EU has shifted somewhat. Initially he saw the purpose of European integration as preserving the postwar welfare state and giving the united continent enough weight to resist neoliberal globalisation. Now he praises Europe for “constitutionalising” relations between states, pointing the way to a “world society” in which polities interact on the basis of law as opposed to brute force.

Habermas has been one of the few supporters of the Lisbon Treaty, which, he believes, solves the problem of the EU’s legitimacy. Rather than striving for a federal state, he argues, Europeans should try to understand the unique nature of the EU as what Jacques Delors once called an “unidentified political object”. According to Habermas, Europe’s citizens, individually and as peoples forming nation-states, should be thought of as the “co-original” authors of Europe’s democratic constitution, which is de facto contained in the treaty, even if the word “constitution” is never used.

All this might sound not only vague but like an attempt to have it both ways: individuals should see the EU as their creation, but—don’t worry—nation-states will not be abolished. It’s not clear what follows from all this beyond the perennial demand for more power for the European Parliament, and the equally perennial hope that somehow out of 27 separate national debates a common public sphere might emerge. The only thing that’s really clear is what Habermas is against: a post-democratic “federalism of executives”, where governments hammer out deals behind closed doors, instead of opening up the process to a “rough” and “noisy” battle of opinions.

Many on the German left don’t agree with him. Fritz Scharpf, the doyen of German social science, has always insisted that a European Sozialstaat is a pipe dream; what the EU really does, he says, is force countries to abandon or at least renegotiate their own, historically conditioned social contract between

capital and labour, to the benefit of capital. What happened with Greece is a prime example. If currencies weren't renationalised, he warned in a recent debate with Habermas, there might well be civil war in Europe.

The philosopher Christoph Menke was less dramatic, but perhaps more devastating in his dismissal of Habermas's hopes for the European Union. Responding to an article which lambasted intellectuals for sleeping through the Euro crisis, Menke pointed out that, as a left intellectual, he was concerned about democracy, not the EU, which was merely a capitalist tool.

[...]

Germans feel that they have done extraordinarily well with this Modell Deutschland—and the financial crisis has not dented their confidence. On the contrary, good German ordoliberals, carefully promoting social welfare through regulated competition, have been much praised in contrast to the bad Anglo-Saxon neoliberals who did so much to encourage individual greed through deregulation. Not least, Germans think that they have earned their present good economic fortune thanks to their success in restraining wage demands and chipping away at the welfare state under the euphemism of “reform”. There are fears of inflation, the great historical trauma of the early 1920s and late 1940s—the other economic trauma, the austerity measures of the early 1930s which paved the way for Hitler, is virtually forgotten. Geldentwertung—“money losing value”—is a bugaboo for ordoliberals and surveys show that even the young are acutely anxious about inflation. Actually over the last ten years it has been significantly lower than it was in the old Federal Republic (though it might well be rational to fear inflation when nominal wages increase little).

Merkel has played on these anxieties, doing just enough to keep the euro going, while always remaining in line with ordoliberal orthodoxy, and always calculating short-term political advantage. [...]

The Germans are not interested in dominating the continent, but they're not Eurosceptic in a way that might lead to isolationism. Germany might be willing to endorse a grand European bargain and respond to Sikorski's plea for the “indispensable nation” to get its act together. It might even sign up for a combination of what Münkler and Habermas wish for, a Europe that is more like a state but in ways that European citizens can understand as their creation. What is much less likely, however, is that they will ever abandon ordoliberalism.

Source: Jan-Werner Müller, “What do Germans think about when they think about Europe?,” *London Review of Books*, February 9, 2012.

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