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What European "Power" ?

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A few years ago people were scrutinising the "enigma of European power", the key to which they thought was "power through norms".^[1] Currently we would rather tend to wonder about the "enigma of European impotence". Of course the first explanation of this contrast can be found in the economic and financial crisis, in the failure of European States to meet the standards they themselves had enacted and in the differences found within their Union. However a good introduction to the ambiguity of the idea of power can also be observed.

FORMS OF POWER

Philosophical definitions of power

"Power" can be set against the idea of impotence or weakness. But it can also refer to the classic distinction, which goes back at least to Aristotle, between potentiality and actuality. It can be said that the successive treaties, from Rome to Maastricht, contained a potential Europe that has not developed into reality. All living organisms contain the germ or power for development which will result in the production, maturity or fulfilment as actualisation of their nature.

Without necessarily using such as finalistic concept, we can, with Bergson, consider that all organisms must face the problem of identity and change, reconciling the past with the future, the interior with the exterior or, in other words, their endogenous development with their exchanges with their environment. The optimal combination of stability and evolution, opening and closing, is the key to evolution that will create power. A healthy organism can reconcile remembering and forgetting, conservation and imagination, opening and selection, to the extent of its own dynamic and energy. This is what appears to have been lacking, over these past few years, faced with the double obstacle of fragmentation by renationalization and dilution by globalisation.

Sociological and political concepts

Let's return to a definition that is closer both to sociology and politics, and consider Europe or, more precisely, the European Union, as a player. Its power

can be defined like an essence, or like a range of possessions: size, population, resources. But this type of power is almost nothing without being used. We say "almost" because, and this is particularly true in the case of Europe, its dimensions and resources can force respect and contribute to its security. "When a good man is armed and defends his property, what he owns is at peace" (even though it is coveted or envied) says the Gospel. That is what is known as the "law of anticipated reactions" on which deterrence is based. Seduction and deterrence can, up to a certain point, be of an "existential" nature, in other words automatic, even involuntary.

That's somehow how enlargement happened. It has been said that the Union has acquired an empire in spite of itself.

Charles de Gaulle did indeed extol "Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals" and Jean Monnet saw the building of a regional entity based on a combination of federalism and functionalism merely as a beginning, intended to spread gradually. But their successors (with the exception of the German authorities for Poland) did see enlargement at best as a necessary evil which it was difficult to get out of, something which, I rather than increasing Europe's power, risked reducing its cohesion. According to the Anglo-European diplomat Robert Cooper, if the United States constitutes liberal imperialism, the European Union represents an "imperial liberalism", more exactly than the United Kingdom for which it was first pronounced, the formula of "an empire acquired in a moment of absent-mindedness".

Power: a matter of relations

It remains that power is neither an essence nor a possession, but rather a relation. It consists of getting

¹. This article was published in the "Schuman Report on Europe, the State of the Union". Éditions lignes de repères, Paris, 2012

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the other to do something he otherwise would not do, or preventing him from doing something we do not want him to do and, moreover, preventing him from preventing us from doing something we want to do, or from forcing us to do something we do not want to do. Defensive power and offensive power combine but are not identical: any excessive accent on one can endanger the other.

Montesquieu and Rousseau both insisted on defensive power and extolled federalism or a confederation of small states, which would be as impossible to conquer as they were to do any conquering themselves. However, this makes it difficult to protect allies or, under modern conditions, to intervene against genocides or crimes against humanity.

Of course, however, military force, whether defensive or offensive, is only a particular case of power. Although force and ruse are two of the means (theorised in the opposition of lions and foxes by Machiavelli, or of the soldier and the financier by Pareto), seduction and conviction or conversion (ideological, philosophical or religious) are two others. Joseph Nye invented, popularised and used (ad nauseam, one is tempted to say) the distinction between hard power and soft power. The former includes military as well as economic pressure, used for its own ends or as a means by which to blackmail, at the service of a political objective. The latter can go from the attractive power of example, through seduction, whether aesthetic or affective, to the intellectual or rhetorical power already mentioned, of convincing, converting or leading.

All these forms of strength or power (one can, like H. Morgenthau, the theorist of "power politics", identify these two concepts or, like Aron, distinguish them by using power for domestic political life and strength for international relations) are clearly not merely one way. What counts is the result of the dialectic of two wills. But there is more: purely bilateral relations are exceptional. In a complex and interdependent world, true power consists of manipulating this interdependence or, better still, defining the rules of the game, determining or influencing the nature of the system, or the limits of legitimate problems. Power can be found in norms, as

mentioned at the beginning of this article, but with the difference that it can never impose itself alone and by itself, it depends on the respective interests and weight of the players, at the same time as on their values.

EUROPE AND POWER

It is here that Europe unquestionably benefits from a critical size which gives it, more than the states comprising it, the possibility of taking part in the definition of the rules of diplomatic-strategic negotiation or negotiations involving economic and social exchanges. This is what it does to a certain extent for international trade but not, unfortunately, for defence.

Two basic problems remain, one more general and the other more particularly acute for the European Union. These are the relations between the various dimensions of power and that of the degree of unity or cohesion enabling a collective yet pluralist player, such as the European Union, to act efficiently.

What relations between the various forms of power?

The first problem could be said to be that of the rate of exchange or of loss of energy between the various forms of power. Everyday experience, particularly that of military intervention, shows that the power to destroy is different from the power to build, the power to constrain does not bring with it the power to persuade. Machiavelli wondered whether it was better to have great riches or good soldiers and he chose the latter because, with them, one could always rob the rich neighbours whereas nothing could replace military virtue. To what extent is this still the case in our technical age? Will drones never replace the power given through acceptance of sacrifice or death? Decades ago the political scientist Kenneth Waltz, who defended the stability of the bipolar world in the name of the idea that "whoever can do most can do least", received an answer from another political scientist, Karl Deutsch, who said that a man's power to knock out a man did not give him the power to teach him to play the piano. I added that the first man could always go to a piano teacher and threaten to beat him up if he did not teach the second to play the piano, but that it was a very risky, short-term method. Another

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possibility, more plausible and less risky, was to pay for his piano lessons, but a cost would be involved here too.

Economic power, military power and political power can go side by side, but they can also divide, or even counterbalance one another and, in any case, they involve choices ("butter or guns?"). During the cold war we had Europe, a great economic power but with low military power, the USSR, military superpower, known as the "poor power" and the United States who alone benefited from every aspect of power. But this position of "hypermight" has itself been shown to be fragile and undermined on the one hand and arousing distrust and opposition on the other. Europe could, if it were willing to take the risk and pay the cost, benefit from its middle position which makes it less suspect of having imperial ambitions, at world level at any rate, to gain a balance between the various forms of power which would enable it to aspire to a greater role, consisting of influencing world power in the direction of balance and moderation.

The challenge of unity and cohesion

But can it and will it, even if the current crisis is surmounted? What handicaps it in a general way, which is cruelly underlined by the present crisis, is the imperfect, even ambiguous and shaky nature of its unity. As pointed out by Jean-Louis Bourlanges, the years in which, after the creation of the euro, we should have advanced towards political Europe if we were not to move backwards, are precisely those during which, in the public opinion of several of its various countries, we witnessed a rise in Euroscepticism, not to say Europhobia. May we add, as he would most certainly do, that in the dialectic of relations between governments and supranational institutions, the former (even those

who are keen to see the euro and the common market survive) have done all they could to reduce the role of the second, and have achieved their aim, at least as far as the Commission is concerned. We would also add that the gap between economic health and policy in the various Member States has widened instead of narrowing (this is the case independently of the new enlargements, opposition between North and South appearing to be just as important) and, last but not least, that all these phenomena are directly linked to more general factors such as globalisation and immigration.

The result is that Europe's ability to take decisions, its power and action, are severely challenged by the multiple nature of the levels involved (governments, European institutions, public opinion and various economic constraints and, above all, the markets, which appear to be having the last word).

Under these circumstances European power would appear to have regained its virtual rather than actual nature. Faced with the evidence of impotence and the risk of catastrophe, only a rebound in solidarity, simultaneously political, social and Euro-pean, overcoming at the same time individual selfishness and the absolute power of the markets, can give Europe any chance of regaining a sense of its vocation and its power.

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