

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Article Reviews

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

**No. 322**

Published on **19 September 2011**

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane N. Labrosse

Web and Production Editors: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

**Aurélié Élixa Gfeller. "Imagining European Identity: French Elites and the American Challenge in the Pompidou-Nixon Era." *Contemporary European History* 19:2 (2010): 133-149. DOI: 10.1017/S0960777310000056. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0960777310000056>**

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR322.pdf>

Review by **Michael Sutton**, Aston University

It was in April 1973 that Henry Kissinger – then Richard Nixon’s National Security Adviser – delivered his “Year of Europe” speech in New York. It met with a jaundiced reception in Western Europe. In particular, the contrast drawn by Kissinger between the “global interests and responsibilities” of the United States and the (mere) “regional interests” of the superpower’s European allies found no favour in Paris, as the French president, Georges Pompidou, and his foreign minister, Michel Jobert, were to make abundantly clear to Nixon and Kissinger at the bilateral two-day meeting they held in Reykjavik a month later. Pompidou died in April 1974, and so the responsibility of pursuing further the matter fell to his successor, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing. As for the U.S.-proposed “Year of Europe”, it never took place. On the other hand, in December 1974, at a summit meeting of the nine heads of state or government of the European Communities (EC) that took place in Paris, the process of European integration took a qualitative leap forward when it was agreed, first, on Giscard’s prompting, to create the European Council, thereby institutionalizing the holding of such summits and putting them on a regular basis, and, secondly, to provide for direct elections to the European Parliament from 1979 onwards. Since the idea of the European Council, with a remit extending to foreign policy and high politics in general, was largely of French provenance, the question naturally arises of whether the negative reaction in Paris in 1973 to the “Year of Europe” served as a catalyst to this leap forward by the EC a little more than a year and a half later.

Such is the general background to the impressively researched article of Aurélié Élixa Gfeller (European University Institute, Florence). She has availed of diplomatic archives on both sides of the Atlantic, and materials declassified at France’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the course of the past decade have been put to particularly good use. Gfeller’s answer to the question of whether Nixon and Kissinger defeated their own purposes, by

unwittingly provoking the EC's member states to collectively distance themselves from the United States, lies in the affirmative.

At the centre of Gfeller's attention is the *Declaration on European Identity*, which was a formal declaration agreed by the Nine at an earlier EC summit meeting, held in Copenhagen in December 1973.<sup>1</sup> She deems this declaration, which had been prepared in the framework of the nascent process of European Policy Cooperation (EPC), to have represented a decisive step forward in the history of European integration. It enabled opposition to the Nixon administration's clumsy initiative in respect of Europe to be channelled constructively into the assertion of a politically grounded European identity, thereby preparing the way for the hugely important EC summit of December 1974. And, as she demonstrates, the French input into the Copenhagen declaration, as well as into the Paris summit a year later, was considerable. In general terms, according to her wording in the Abstract, the article "demonstrates that renewed concerns about U.S. power spurred the French elites both to reappraise the value of collective European action in foreign policy and to foster a pioneering concept: a politically anchored – as opposed to a geographically circumscribed – 'European identity'" (133). There is, moreover, a further assertion by Gfeller, pertaining to the historiography of the European Union (EU), which is expressed at its strongest in the Abstract, namely that her article "challenges the dominant scholarly paradigm, which emphasises continuity between the 1960s and the 1970s" (ibid.) – that is, a paradigm emphasizing the continuity of French foreign policy in the early decades of the Fifth Republic, first under the presidency of Charles de Gaulle and, after 1969, in his shadow.

Gfeller's article has the great merit of indicating clearly that the strongly negative French reaction to the "Year of Europe" initiative amounted to far more than just a peeved reaction emanating primarily from one man, the mercurial foreign minister, Michel Jobert, whose relative independence of expression at the time was no doubt partly the result of Pompidou's terminal illness. In particular, in studying the role of the Quai d'Orsay in 1973 in preparing and proposing draft versions of, first, a joint EC-U.S. declaration (a declaration failing to materialize) and, secondly, the internal working paper that was eventually to be transformed into the EC's *Declaration on European Identity*, she shows how Kissinger's somewhat disdainful approach to Western Europe spurred the French foreign-policy establishment into forward-looking critical reflection on the EC's role in the world. In her scouring of the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, she draws up an impressive range of comments from many of those who wielded authority in the Quai d'Orsay a generation ago. Names – listed here simply in alphabetical order – include Jacques de Beaumarchais, Étienne Burin des Roziers, Geoffroy de Courcel, Henri Froment-Meurice, Jacques Kosciusko-Morizet, François Puaux, François de Rose,

---

<sup>1</sup> For the full text, see *Bulletin of the European Communities*, 12 (1973), 118-122. The declaration is also available online: [http://www.ena.lu/declaration\\_european\\_identity\\_copenhagen\\_14\\_december\\_1973-2-6180](http://www.ena.lu/declaration_european_identity_copenhagen_14_december_1973-2-6180)

René de Saint-Légier, and Jean Sauvagnargues. And their sort of thinking found echo in informed press commentary, notably in the influential newspapers *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde*. What Gfeller's analysis serves to explain, in the field of foreign policy, is the relative smoothness of transition in 1974 from one president to another, and, accessorially, from one foreign minister to another – from Pompidou to Giscard, and from Jobert to Sauvagnargues (a career diplomat, as has just been indicated).

Until little more than a decade ago, the significance of the *Declaration on European Identity* tended to be overlooked by historians of European integration. Only as from 1998 did serious attention begin to be paid to the 1973 declaration. Since then, preceding Gfeller, interested scholars have included – in the approximate chronological order of their relevant publications – Luisa Passerini (University of Turin), Marie-Thérèse Bitsch (College of Europe, Bruges), Bo Stråth (University of Helsinki), Wolfgang Schmale (University of Vienna), and Sophie Huber (Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva).<sup>2</sup> In keeping with this growing interest, there was a further analysis of the declaration in the second half of 2009 when the Paris-based quarterly periodical *Relations internationales* devoted two special numbers to the topic *La Communauté et l'Union européenne à la recherche d'une identité depuis 1957*.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the second of these numbers contains an article by Georg Kreis (University of Basel) which explores in a wide-ranging fashion the Copenhagen declaration's genesis and significance.<sup>4</sup> In this article, Kreis includes a helpful survey of the literature as well as an explanation of how in Western Europe the term “identity” became as from the beginning of the 1970s a fashionable, newfangled concept for discourse about international relations; he underlines too, if only briefly, the importance of the American factor, and it is here that Gfeller's nearly contemporaneous article throws considerable new light.

---

<sup>2</sup> See inter alia: Luisa Passerini, *Identità culturale europea: idee, sentimenti, relazioni*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1998; Luisa Passerini (ed.), *The Question of European Identity: A Cultural Historical Approach*, Florence, European University Institute, HEC Working Paper 1998/01, 1998; Marie-Thérèse Bitsch, Wilfried Loth, Raymond Poidevin (eds), *Institutions européennes et identités européennes*, Brussels, Bruylant, 1998; Bo Stråth (ed.), *Europe and the Other and Europe as the Other*, Brussels, Presses Interuniversitaires Européennes – Peter Lang, 2000; Wolfgang Schmale, ‘Körper – Kultur – Identität: Neuzeitliche Wahrnehmungen Europas – Ein Essay’, *Wiener Zeitschrift zur Geschichte der Neuzeit*, 1 (2001), 81-98; Sophie Huber, ‘What does it mean to be European? Questions and answers in the early 1970s’, in Francis Cheneval (ed.), *Legitimationsgrundlagen der Europäischen Union*, Münster, LIT Verlag, 2005, 287-301; Sophie Huber, *Polyphonie sur l'identité européenne. Aux origines d'un discours identitaire, 1962-1973*, doctoral thesis, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, 2009, forthcoming (Graduate Institute Publications / Presses Universitaires de France).

<sup>3</sup> *Relations internationales*, no. 139 (2009), 3-104, and no. 140 (2009), 3-125.

<sup>4</sup> Georg Kreis, ‘L'émergence de la notion d'« identité » dans la politique de la Communauté européenne. Quelques réflexions autour de la Déclaration du sommet de Copenhague de 1973’, *Relations internationales*, no. 140 (2009): 53-72.

To this reviewer's mind, however, Gfeller's analysis does not lead to the overarching conclusion she herself draws, namely that the mid-1970s marked a radical break with the heritage left by de Gaulle's presidency of the Fifth Republic in the matter of France's approach to European integration. An important shift, yes; a radical break, no. The continuities she establishes between the Pompidou and Giscard presidencies extend backwards in time too, and more so than she would appear to acknowledge. Gfeller asserts that the *Declaration on European Identity* was "the first attempt by EC governing elites to define jointly the European project in broader political and cultural terms" (144). This statement may be casuistically defended inasmuch as it was the first attempt to do so formally in an established EC forum, but it is to overlook an earlier French-inspired attempt, that embodied in the so-called Fouchet proposals of 1961-62, which were discussed by the then EC Six outside any proper EC framework. The Fouchet proposals are indeed mentioned by Gfeller, but arguably she underplays their significance, even if it is true that de Gaulle aimed to establish a "Union of States" that would have shackled rather than enhanced the EC as it then existed (143-144). In any case, the different versions of the Fouchet proposals – most of them strongly Gaullist or French in design – referred to the future European union in both political and cultural terms (with, for example, references in the proposed preambles not only to human dignity, liberty and equality, but also to Europe's spiritual patrimony). De Gaulle himself conceived of his desired European union as one that would have a "*personnalité*" in its own right; and here it may be remarked that his use of this word was not untypical of his generation and time. But Gfeller attaches great importance to the "discursive" shift represented in the 1970s by the introduction of the word "identity" into political thinking about Europe and its place in the world (134). The use of this word was innovative at the time, but, in terms of substance, it is hard to see that its meaning represented much more than that which had earlier been denoted by "personality", at least when the latter word was endowed with clear historical or civilization-type attributes, as was certainly de Gaulle's own usage, rather than being restricted to a purely legal sense (encapsulated in the French term "*personnalité morale*").

The continuities between de Gaulle's approach to the European question as reflected in the Fouchet proposals of 1961-62 and the large role subsequently played by France in the persons of Pompidou and Giscard, between 1972 and 1974, in creating the institution of the European Council were greater than the discontinuities. To return on this matter to the recent numbers of *Relations internationales* devoted to the question of European identity, reference may be usefully made to the article by Georges-Henri Soutou (University of Paris IV), in the second of the two numbers, which deals with this question of continuity and provides a corrective to any view that French policy in respect of European integration was marked by a radical rupture in 1973-74.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Georges-Henri Soutou, 'Le présidents Charles de Gaulle et Georges Pompidou et les débuts de la coopération politique européenne : du Plan Fouchet au Plan Fouchet *light*', *Relations internationales*, no. 140 (2009): 3-17.

Yet even if Aurélie Élisabeth Gfeller has over-egged her overarching conclusion, she has written a fascinating and illuminating article on the transatlantic fall-out from the Nixon administration's "Year of Europe".

**Copyright © 2011 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.**

---

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).