

The Europeans, the Crisis and the World

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The economic and financial crisis, which has been in full swing in Europe for the last four years has established in most of these countries expectations that are marked by a distinct note of pessimism. In the spring Eurobarometer 2012¹, 60% of those interviewed believed that in terms of the impact of the crisis on the employment market “the worst is yet to come” (cf. map 1). Of course pessimism is at its highest in the countries most affected by the crisis: Portugal (78%), Greece (77%), Spain (72%), Italy (62%) but the opinions of the most prosperous countries such as Finland, Luxembourg and even the UK are also marked by a high rate of pessimism. At 59%, France still lies within the European average. However seven countries, including five in Central and Eastern Europe avoid these morose forecasts to some extent: Slovakia (49%), Latvia (49%), Denmark (45%), Austria (44%), Estonia (44%), Romania (42%) and Bulgaria (40%). In these more “optimistic” countries, the unemployment rate is relatively low (Austria and Denmark) or also high (Latvia, Bulgaria). Economic and social indicators of well-being are not the only means to illustrate what the Europeans think of the crisis. Of course the attitude of the most impoverished social categories is marked by pessimism: 66% of the unemployed, 61% of workers, 65% of those who left school at 15 or under believe that “the worst is yet to come” but this also applies to 51% of students and 58% of executives. In 2012, pessimism about the effects of the crisis seems to be “the best shared thing in the world”. In all age categories and in all social classes pessimism rules. It peaks (71%) amongst Europeans who believe that “globalisation is not an opportunity”. The overall attitude to globalisation is often more decisive in understanding the opinion of the crisis than categories of sex, age and social class.

If we leave the area of the perception of the effects of the crisis on employment behind and try to define its impact on the daily life of European households, the disparity between countries in the centre and the north of Europe and the countries in the south and the east is high. When asked “whether their present situation prevents them from anticipating projects in the future” and whether it forces them to “live on a day to day basis”, 35% of those interviewed in Europe answer that this is the case for themselves and their families. In eight countries this response corresponds more or less to half and even more of the population: Greece (68%), Malta (67%), Cyprus (55%), Hungary (54%), Bulgaria (54%), Portugal (53%), Spain (49%) and Ireland (49%). However in seven

1. *Eurobarometer Standard 77*, Spring 2012, “The Europeans, the European Union and the Crisis”.

countries nearly half of those interviewed declare “that they have a long term vision of what their household would be like in one or two year’s time”: Sweden (54%), Luxembourg (51%) Germany (50%), Denmark (50%), the Netherlands (50%), Austria (47%), Finland (47%). Only the countries in the centre and the north of Europe, which have been spared from the crisis somewhat, foresee a relatively positive scenario vis-à-vis their future, whilst the countries in the south and the east, which have often suffered greater economic and financial turbulence, put forward much weaker, more uncertain forecasts.

Given this crisis, the effects of which are perceived with an acute sense of concern, Europeans do not feel totally helpless since a majority of them believe that the national and international institutions can “act effectively in response to the effects of the financial and economic crisis.” Amongst these institutions feature the European Union and the national governments, which are deemed to be the most effective. The European Union and the national government are also quoted by 21% of those interviewed, then follows the IMF (15%), the G20 (14%), the USA (7%). When Europeans are asked to estimate the effectiveness of the action taken by some of these players since the start of the economic crisis, 37% believe that their government’s action has been effective, 36% opt for the USA and 33% the European Union. As far as the latter is concerned (cf. map 2: “The EU’s effectiveness in countering the crisis”), its action is lauded more outside of the eurozone (39% against 32% across all of the zone euro countries), particularly in three countries of Eastern Europe - Poland (50%), Bulgaria (54%) and Romania (58%). However it is in Greece (14%), Cyprus (13%), Spain (22%) and in the UK (22%) that the European Union’s action is judged most severely. Except for the UK all countries are more than reticent about the real or supposed virtues of globalisation.

It is clear that attitudes regarding the major “Other” in globalisation are decisive in the way Europeans perceive and take on board the crisis, Europe and the world². Most of the European countries which see globalisation negatively are at the top of the pessimism hit-parade as far as the crisis is concerned: Greece, Portugal, Romania, Latvia, Italy and Spain are all countries which see the effects of crisis on households extremely negatively and also believe that globalisation is not an “opportunity for economic growth” (cf. map 3 “Globalisation represents an opportunity for economic growth”). Although 56% of those interviewed in Europe believe that globalisation “represents an opportunity for economic growth,” only 44% of the French think so – only the Greeks are less in number to see it as an “opportunity”. Although we can see how the default of the Greek economy has led to this perception, it is not as easy to understand the reasons for the negative opinion the French have of the possible economic virtues of globalisation. The French are amongst the most negative, together with the countries most sorely affected by the economic and financial crisis (Greece, Portugal, Italy, Spain) and their opinion is extremely different from the opinions of the countries in the centre and north of Europe, where the vision of globalisation as a vector of economic is the most developed. 87% of the Danes, 82% of the Swedes, 76% of the Dutch, 71% of the Finnish, 70% of the Hungarians, 68% of the Slovaks, 64% of the Estonians, 63% of the Belgians and Germans, likewise 62% of the British share the feeling that “globalisation represents an opportunity for economic growth”.

The same applies to globalisation, as far as appreciating whether it “helps towards development of poor countries” is concerned. Although 45% of Europeans share this opinion (64% of the Danes, 62% of the Swedes, 61% of the Slovaks, 60% of the Estonians, 54% of the Dutch, 54% of the Finns, 53% of the Czechs, 51% of the Austrians), only a large third do so in Greece (34%), in Latvia (37%), in Spain (37%) and in France (34%).

The same applies also to the idea that globalisation can “protect us from price increases”. Only 26% of Europeans believe that globalisation helps protect us from

2. The opinion data relative to the perception of globalisation are excerpts from *Eurobarometer Standard 73*, “Public Opinion in the European Union” November 2010.

inflation. But this diagnosis is severest in France: only 12% of the French think that globalisation helps to counter price increases, 76% believe the contrary. France is amongst the 27 in the EU where belief in the anti-inflationist virtues of globalisation has fallen the most. A strong majority of Europeans (60%) also believe that “globalisation increases social inequalities”. But again the perception of globalisation which “takes away”, “worsens” and which provides nothing positive, beats all records in Greece (81%) and in France (76%). Unlike some countries with a liberal tradition (the UK, the Netherlands) or those in Eastern Europe, which grant some virtues to economic opening (Romania, Lithuania), France and Greece see globalisation as a process that is only to the benefit of the large trans-nationals and absolutely not the citizens. This view dominates in the European Union where 62% of those interviewed agree with the idea that “globalisation only benefits the major trans-nationals and not the citizens.” Only the Romanians (48%), the Danes (46%), the Dutch (45%), the Swedes (45%) and the Maltese (38%) do not fall within this majority. But as per usual this impression is overwhelming and affects more than three quarters of those interviewed in Greece (81%) and France (77%) as well as in Slovenia (79%). In the opinion of an often extremely wide majority of French, globalisation appears to have no virtues at all.

Interviewed at a decisive electoral moment in May-June 2012, 60% of the French said that “for a country like France globalisation represents a danger because it threatens its businesses and its social model.” Only 39% of those interviewed believe that globalisation is an opportunity because “it opens up markets abroad and promotes modernisation” (Post-electoral survey, after the Presidential election 2012 CEVIPOF, by Opinionway on 18th May to 2nd June 2012). This positive vision of globalisation only wins a majority within the higher, qualified social categories and which enjoy a high standard of living - amongst practising Catholics who know what a trans-national company is and finally amongst Nicolas Sarkozy and Eva Joly’s electorate.

Table 1: the perception of globalisation in France.

Question : For a country like France, is globalisation rather:

	A chance, because it opens the foreign markets and promotes modernisation		A danger, because it threatens its businesses and its social model
	39%		60%
Leading executives., independents	56%	18-24 years	55%
Higher education graduates.	52%	Workers	72%
vote Sarkozy	62%	Public sector workers.	65%
vote Joly (Green Party)	54%	vote Mélenchon	82%
Practising Catholics.	52%	vote Hollande	62%
6000€ and +	53%	vote Le Pen	80%
		No religion	64%

Source : Opinionway survey CEVIPOF, 18th May-2nd June 2012

However within the popular classes, in the public sector and also amongst the young, people who do not practice a religion and voters on the left and the far right ... it is the view that globalisation poses a threat that wins the day.

The dominant idea of globalisation as a threat, which is an integral part of the “French particularity” requires explanation. The feeling of a *deminutio capitis* runs deep in a country which for centuries has been accustomed to having “the leading role”. In December 2010 already 62% of the French interviewed on the position their country occupies in the “world economic competition” believed that France was “faring badly”. In the same survey³, 16% of the Australians, 17% of the Dutch, 18% of the Germans, 21% of the Brazilians, 28% of the Chinese, 44% of the British, 50% of the Americans, 51% of the Poles and 55% of the Italians think that about their country. French pessimism and the feeling of impotence are fed by the nostalgia of a “powerful past”⁴. Another source of pessimism is “*revolutionary passion*” which of all passions remains resolutely French and which – to quote François Furet, fosters “*an infinite ability to produce children and men who hate the social and political regime in which they are born, hating the air they breathe, whilst they live on it and they have never known anything else*”⁵. The economic, social and political regime is now turning towards the outside but many French reject this and demand protection. In an IFOP survey undertaken for *La Croix* in April 2012, 60% of those interviewed believe that from an economic point of view “*the opening of France and Europe’s borders to goods from countries like China and India and the opening of these countries to French products*” is a “*bad thing for France*”. From this standpoint a wide majority of the French both on the left and the right demand the implementation of strict protectionist policies.

This globalised world, which is rejected, resembles France and its model less and less. The hiatus between the world and France is particularly difficult to overcome in a country that is supposed to be universalist. But this universalism finds it increasingly difficult to position itself in the globalised world. This difficulty is more acute because the French universal model is anchored in an extremely strong national identity, which, in its unity, is relatively incapable of taking on diversity. As Mona Ozouf notes, the political nation *à la Française* is “*self-confident and dominant, (and) has never favoured the cultural nation*”⁶. For this political nation all types of pluralism are “*either aesthetic archaism or political subversion.*” Often allergic to domestic diversity, France adopts the same attitude to diversity on the outside. But globalisation is the vector of great cultural, economic, financial, judicial and even political diversity. For all of these reasons France possibly finds it all the harder to take the world as it is, to take opening as it comes and otherness for what it is: it is simply otherness and not a threat to its identity *per se*.

3. Survey « Regards croisés sur la mondialisation dans dix pays », by IFOP for *La Croix* amongst a sample of 6023 people representative of inhabitants aged 18 and over in ten countries. Survey undertaken between 8th to 23rd December 2010.

4. Cf. Pascal Perrineau, Le pessimisme français : nature et racines, *Le Débat*, n°166, September to October 2011, p. 79-90. Interview with Pascal Perrineau, La France in the boudoir, <http://www.parislike.com/FR/snoopy-pascal-perrineau.php>.

5. François Furet, La passion révolutionnaire au XXe siècle. Essai sur le déclin du communisme, *La Révolution française*, Gallimard, 2007, p.951.

6. Mona Ozouf, *Composition française. Retour sur une enfance bretonne*, Gallimard, 2009, p.14.