



The place of vocational training in François Mitterrand's idea of a European social space (1981-1984)

The issue, the period and the sources

The purpose of this article is to explore two closely related questions:

□ How did the theme of vocational training come to form part of François Mitterrand's idea of a European social space between 1981 and 1984?

□ Over this same period, what factors made vocational training - for young people in particular - a priority of French European social policy?

Why the focus on the period 1981-1984? Is this decision justified?

In 1981 the left came to power in France. After being out of government for more than 20 years, this event was in itself a significant political turning point (Berstein, 1998). And 1984, although of lesser importance, was also a turning point since François Mitterrand carried out a major change in government following a serious social crisis centred on the conflict in education (Bertinotti, 2001). On 17 July 1984, Laurent Fabius replaced Pierre Mauroy as Prime Minister, opening a new chapter in the history of the left.

And in the European Community, the years 1981-1984 were those of the 'agricultural budget' crisis, that is to say, the negotiations that began with the publication in June 1981 by the new Thorn Commission of the report on the 30 May mandate ⁽¹⁾, and ended temporarily, three years later, at the Fontainebleau European Council ⁽²⁾.

As regards European social policy - which obviously had to be used to cover vocational

training - these years coincided with the negotiations on the reform of the European Social Fund (ESF), 1984 being the first year in which the new directions agreed by the Ten were implemented under French and Irish presidencies. We should also remember that it was in 1981 that the issues of education and vocational training were brought together under the authority of a single Commissioner ⁽³⁾ - Mr Ivor Richard, who exercised this responsibility until 1984. The Community thus combined in a single portfolio the issues of employment, social affairs and the whole range of matters relating to education.

The sources that we have used to examine these three years are primarily a large number of contemporary French and European public documents, the abundant 'grey' literature on the period and these issues, and lastly - especially - the French Presidential Archives. These written sources have been supplemented by interviews with French figures active at the time.

1981-84: a difficult situation within the Community

The development of European social policy, and hence of vocational training projects, was largely governed by the situation within the Community. The first half of the 1980s was marked by a serious crisis in the Community. As a result of a number of challenges - enlargement, economic crisis and a whole range of reforms - Europe was in danger of bankruptcy. Its own funds were all but exhausted while the United Kingdom of Margaret Thatcher sought - successfully - to reduce that country's contribution to the budget. This situation led the Ten to ex-



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Between 1981 and 1984, during the budgetary crisis of the European Community, significant negotiations were held between the Ten in connection with the reform of the European Social Fund. At the same time, there was a major political change in France: the left - led by François Mitterrand - came to power. In the social field, François Mitterrand had a wide-ranging programme to propose to his European partners, which he summarised as the 'European social space'. The essence of this concept was: concerted reflation for economic activity (by increasing public deficits) and an attempt to make reduction of working time a priority for Europe.

Faced with the hostility of other Member States, this plan for a European social space had to be modified. However, this led to the inclusion of the notion of European vocational training. Finally, after several months of negotiation, the French became ardent defenders of European vocational training plans.

⁽¹⁾ EC Bull., 6-1981, 1.2.1.

⁽²⁾ EC 18th Gen. Rep., p. 22-23.

⁽³⁾ EC 15th Gen. Rep., 543, p. 228.



tend the budgetary rigour that they practised at home to the whole of the Community budget. Savings were made in the Common Agricultural Policy - which then accounted for almost 70 % of expenditure by Brussels - and in the other policy areas of the EEC, including social policy and therefore vocational training. The financial situation gave little scope for strengthening initiatives in these fields, let alone launching new ones. On the contrary, most of the discussions then conducted were aimed at rationalisation, that is, at deciding on priorities for the actions to be taken.

It was the Europe of 'tiny steps', the Europe of successive failures of European Councils - such as that of Athens in December 1983. The Europe of decisions continually postponed. The Europe of the British cheque and Mrs Thatcher's famous 'I want my money back'. It was also a Europe in which the Franco-German double act also suffered its own vicissitudes: the Giscard-Schmidt double act was succeeded by the Mitterrand-Kohl double act.

When the French left came to power, it was therefore faced with a situation within the Community that was in turmoil, to say the least. Nevertheless, it became responsible for French policy on Europe and for managing the social portfolios covered by this.

The socialist project and the notion of a European social space

If the programme documents published in the late 1970s and early 1980s are to be believed (Parti Socialiste et al, 1973; Parti Socialiste, 1978 and 1980), the French Socialists had an ambitious plan for Europe. At the heart of this project was the creation of a huge social programme.

This aim was heavily ideological. For the French Socialists, those around François Mitterrand and the man himself, the better established the social dimension of the European Community, the more easily could the Socialists' political aims be achieved in France. In many respects, this attitude can be summed up in the phrase: 'Communitising the common programme' (Saunier, 2001). In other words, transferring the substance of the programme adopted by the Socialist Party and its Communist ally in the early 1970s to the European level.

In concrete terms, these social proposals had three clear priorities: making a concerted effort at Keynesian reflation; pushing for a reduction in the working week to 35 hours at the European level; and encouraging social dialogue at all Community levels, in particular relaunching the tripartite conferences that were much discussed at that time as a way of improving the working conditions of European employees through framework agreements signed by the social partners.

These three points formed the heart of the social Europe project of the French left at the time it came to power. François Mitterrand meant nothing less when he suggested to his partners, in June 1981, just a few days after he took over the Élysée Palace as French President, that what he termed a 'European social space' ⁽⁴⁾ should be created.

In reality, vocational training accounted for very little in this European social space.

The programme statements of the Socialists remained practically silent on this field. The manifesto adopted by the Socialist Party in preparation for the first elections to the European Parliament in 1979 contained only four lines on the subject, which was accorded no priority ⁽⁵⁾. Although the French memorandum which Paris put before the Ten in the negotiations of October 1981 was supposed to be very specific, it contained few references to vocational training: barely six lines, while the section on social policy comprised some 80 lines. From these six lines it appears that efforts were to be focused on the long-term unemployed and training in the new technologies ⁽⁶⁾. This last point, as will be seen, was nonetheless important.

However, while it was only just present in European documentation, the subject of vocational training was highly visible in domestic Socialist proposals and in the field of national education. The Socialist Plan for National Education (Mitterrand, 1978) adopted in 1978, for example, made vocational training a major element of the far-reaching reform of national education which the left intended to carry out. Given the deteriorating labour market situation, this document set out a number of tasks for vocational training: enhancing competence in the new technologies; making state expenditure active rather than passive (it was better to pay more

⁽⁴⁾ National Archives, 5AG4-2231: Résumé écrit de l'intervention de M. Delors au cours du conseil conjoint Eco Fin Social du 11 juin 1981, 11 June 1981;

National Archives, 5AG4-2231: Texte non officiel de l'intervention de M. Auroux au conseil Eco Fin Social du 11 juin 1981, 11 June 1981;

National Archives, AA64-12581: Conférence de presse de M. François Mitterrand, Président de la République Française, l'issue du conseil européen de Luxembourg, Présidence de la République, Service de presse, 30 June 1981; EC Bull. 6-1981, 1.1.5.

⁽⁵⁾ 'The extension to all European workers of the opportunity for vocational training, where this is necessary in order to pursue their activity, and in particular for their promotion.' (Manifeste socialiste pour l'élection européenne ... , 1978; p. 4.)

⁽⁶⁾ EC Bull. 11-1981, 3.5.1.



for workers' successful retraining than to shell out unemployment benefits); and finally allowing every young person to have a better chance of getting a good first job. These emphases were important because they were to crop up again later at the European level.

For a long time the French left had been concerned with educational matters. Many of its activists and its elected members were teachers. The opposition to the Government of François Mitterrand had great fun denouncing the 'Teachers' Republic'. However, despite this marked interest in vocational training, schools remained in the eyes of the Socialists in the early 1980s the crucible in which citizens and, by extension, workers, were largely moulded. Vocational training was regarded with suspicion: sending pupils and students on training courses when they had finished their education, or even during their education, meant bringing business into schools, something which the French left viewed as alien. This fear partly explains the typical French distinction between 'vocational training' and 'vocational education', that is, between courses for workers (continuing education) and vocational courses for pupils and students (initial education).

Evolution of the project: increasing emphasis on vocational training for young people

Reflation, 35 hours and social dialogue were the three priorities of the French negotiators and the main topics of Socialist statements on the Community in summer 1981. Only rarely did the question of vocational training appear as such. In fact the left-wing Government only addressed this question through industrial restructuring. Although Jacques Attali ⁽⁷⁾ – the special adviser to the President of the Republic, a sort of Elysée think tank – did refer to the matter on occasion, it has to be said that vocational training is more or less absent from archive documents for this period.

Given this obvious lack of interest, how did it come about that French diplomacy made the issue of vocational training one of its key positions?

Three factors can provide an explanation.

Firstly, and most importantly, there was the failure of the European social space as pro-

posed initially by François Mitterrand. A general reduction in working hours, and even concerted reflation of the economy, made no sense at that time to Margaret Thatcher or Helmut Schmidt. These policies might even be counter-productive at a time when they felt that priority should be given to combating inflation. Social dialogue was also not on the agenda. Thatcher's United Kingdom was even then engaged on a fierce battle with the trade unions, while the German Government wanted negotiations to remain at the national level. In short, in autumn 1981, the French Government could already see that it was a failure and realised that it had to adapt its approach and review its positions. This review was to have two major consequences:

❑ On the one hand, former priorities were either abandoned or adapted to the political power relationships of the day (Saunier, 2001). A reduction in working hours thus became an adjustment in working hours. In other words, the reduction in the working week to 35 hours was no longer a priority, and the French now agreed to discuss other measures – part-time working, early retirement, etc.;

❑ On the other, the French negotiators sought to build on what already existed in the Community, the *acquis communautaire*, that is to say, on what stood some chance of being accepted by all the Ten. In the case of social policy, vocational training was the obvious choice. At that time, the Commission was in fact already running several pilot projects in the field and was used to dealing with such issues under the ECSC ⁽⁸⁾.

The failure of the 'communitisation' of the common left-wing programme thus helped – paradoxically – to promote vocational training at the European level since the French Government changed its priorities and chose to champion it.

The second factor which can provide an explanation was an internal French matter. The idea was that action by the European Community could be a useful adjunct to the urgent need for vocational training which the Government was then deciding to address and resolve. This too was a remarkable change. The Socialist Government's policy of reflation, which was restricted in scope and effect, quickly reached its limits. As early as autumn 1981, it became ap-

⁽⁷⁾ Jacques Attali devised a number of detailed projects for the President of the Republic for greater European integration. One point was devoted to setting up an aggressive, innovative industrial policy, which would not seek merely to preserve along the lines of the action taken in the case of the European iron and steel industry. The special adviser suggested that such a policy should include a vocational training programme for new technologies. National Archives, 5AG4-2231: Attali, Jacques, Conseil européen du Luxembourg (29-30 juin 81), 29 June 1981.

⁽⁸⁾ Pierre Morel – adviser to François Mitterrand on Community matters – suggested in a note of November 1981 that documents prepared for the Commission should be used to get Europe moving, i.e. to start concrete discussions. Projects therefore needed to be split into medium and long-term. The European social space, which the other partners rejected, could only be a long-term project. On the other hand, it was possible to move in the right direction by using short-term projects. Pierre Morel suggested support for the employment of young people, which the Commission regarded as involving vocational training. National Archives, 5AG4-2232: Morel, Pierre, Préparation du Conseil européen de Londres (26-27 novembre): entretien avec Monsieur Thorn, Présidence de la République, 7 November 1981.

⁽⁹⁾ On the economic aspects of the policy of the French Socialists see the following articles: Asselain, 2001; Saunier, 2002.

⁽¹⁰⁾ The number of people unemployed doubled in the EEC between 1978 and 1982. The phenomenon primarily affected young people. In 1982, almost 17 % of French young people in the labour force were unemployed, and the rate was 40 % in the whole of the Community of 10.



⁽¹¹⁾ Bertrand Schwartz studied at the Ecole Polytechnique and was an engineer in the Mining Corps. He was commissioned by the Prime Minister in May 1981 to prepare a report on the social and occupational integration of young people in difficulty. This report was the basis for most occupational integration policies in the early 1980s.

⁽¹²⁾ Order No 82-273 of 26 March 1982, on measures to provide 16-to-18-year-olds with vocational training and to facilitate their social integration. Available from Internet: http://www.legislation.cnaf.fr/textes/ord/TLR-ORD_82273_26031982.htm.

⁽¹³⁾ 25 October 1982, speech to the International Council for Adult Education. Available from Internet: http://www.discours-mitterrand.org/rep_file/821025.htm [cited 11.5.2004]. 14 November 1984, meeting on the social and occupational integration of young people. Available from Internet: http://www.discours-mitterrand.org/rep_file/831114.htm [cited 11.5.2004]. There are references to Europe in these speeches. On 25 October 1982, for example, he declared: 'I should like the actions of France [in the field of training for women and men] and some others to be integrated into action on a European Community scale.'

⁽¹⁴⁾ National Archives, 5AG4-21PM: 'Intérêts vitaux' de la France en matière européenne, 6 June 1983.

⁽¹⁵⁾ In late 1982, a note from the Secretariat General of the Interministerial Committee - the French body responsible for coordination between Ministries in Community matters - summed up perfectly the French attitude in this respect. It pointed out that the priority given to vocational training was shared by several Member States which, like France, believed in the goal of giving each young entrant into the labour market vocational training or initial experience of work. This priority should be supported by the ESF, the statutes of which should be modified to allow for this new role, and some resources should be redeployed. National Archives, 5AG4-2236: Action en faveur de l'emploi des jeunes, SGCI, 24 November 1982.

⁽¹⁶⁾ National Archives, 5AG4-24PM: Une nouvelle étape pour l'Europe: un espace de l'industrie et de la recherche, 12 September 1983.

⁽¹⁷⁾ National Archives, 5AG4-27PM: Espace social européen. (Schéma d'intervention: Matignon), 23 June 1984.

⁽¹⁸⁾ National Archives, 5AG4-2233: Delors, Jacques, Tentative de définition d'une position commune franco-allemande sur les problèmes européens, Ministère de l'Economie et des finances, Le ministre, 29 octobre 1981; National Archives, 5AG4-2233: Comptendu des conversations franco-allemandes du 4 novembre 1981, Ministère de l'Economie et des finances, Dir. du Trésor - Serv. des Affaires internationales - Sous-Dir. des Affaires multilatérales, 4 November 1981.

⁽¹⁹⁾ National Archives, 5AG4-2232: Réforme du règlement du fonds social européen, SGCI, Secrétariat Général, 13 November 1981.

⁽²⁰⁾ National Archives, 5AG4-2391: The economic and social situation in the Community (Commission Communication to the Brussels European Council, 29 and

parent that stimulation of demand in an open European market largely benefited foreign rather than French goods ⁽⁹⁾. The result was obvious: a growing gap in the balance of trade, leading to weakening of the franc and a number of devaluations. The French authorities then set out to tackle the fact that European, and particularly French, industry was outdated, incapable of meeting increased demand and outstripped by its main competitors, notably the United States and Japan. There was significant obsolescence both in traditional sectors of the economy - coal, steel, shipbuilding, textiles, etc. - and in the new technologies, from information technology to robotics by way of biotechnologies. In the former case, the solution was painful industrial restructuring, while in the latter, what was needed was more investment and above all a better-trained workforce.

Increased unemployment, especially among young people ⁽¹⁰⁾, was closely linked to this finding on the state of the European industrial fabric, despite macroeconomic measures taken by the Socialist Government, and also led to some rethinking. The crisis in the economy was not due to temporary factors. It was structural.

This twofold finding - youth unemployment and the need to modernise French production - led the Government to strengthen and develop the vocational training policies introduced in the 1970s (Cedefop, 1999; p. 29 et seq.), with particular emphasis on the new technologies. This policy took several forms:

□ the creation of 'local missions' in 1982 - following the publication of the major report by Bertrand Schwartz ⁽¹¹⁾ - the purpose of which was to provide young people with better information about the range of vocational training available to them ⁽¹²⁾;

□ the IT for All plan, launched in 1983, one of the aims of which was to provide each French schoolchild with a computer to help their transition to working life; and an IT programme for the young unemployed, also adopted in 1983;

□ various inter-occupational agreements, especially those of September 1982 and October 1983. The former revised the arrangements for funding vocational training, and the latter introduced specific measures for

the block release training of young people - skills contracts, retraining contracts, relief from social security contributions, etc. All of this gave rise in February 1984 to the adoption of a significant piece of framework legislation which reshaped the entire structure of vocational training in France;

□ lastly, the Socialist Government took steps to encourage training within companies. Within three years, between 1981 and 1983, the number of in-company training courses rose from a few thousand to almost a hundred thousand. This was a minor revolution in the Socialist framework of the time.

With this set of measures the Government set out on a huge plan of action to promote vocational training. In 1982 and 1983, François Mitterrand also gave a number of speeches on the topic ⁽¹³⁾. The proclaimed objective was very simple: no young person should leave the education system without suitable vocational training. The view taken by the team surrounding François Mitterrand was that the European Community could play a role in this field. Pierre Morel, the technical adviser responsible for Community matters, pointed out, for example, that it was in the vital interest of France to use European support to modernise French industry; this modernisation should in his opinion include the strengthening of vocational training policies on a European scale ⁽¹⁴⁾. However, it was still necessary to persuade the other partners and to adopt the requisite regulations within the ESF ⁽¹⁵⁾. Europe should act as a lever to strengthen domestic policies.

The third and final factor explaining the French shift towards support for vocational training largely derives from the previous one and can be summed up as the proclaimed goal of stopping the 'decline' in European industry. The Socialist Government, in both its statements and its proposals, therefore set about highlighting the structural obsolescence of the economy of Europe by comparison with its main competitors. This obsolescence was revealed by successive oil crises and placed Europe in danger of missing out on what was widely called the Third Industrial Revolution, that of information. Paris therefore suggested that its partners should act voluntarily to establish an audacious common industrial policy ⁽¹⁶⁾. This idea was shared by the Commission and several Member States, notably Italy. Self-evi-



dently, the emphasis was on vocational training for young people, who were the future workforce of modernised European industry: 'The race that has begun puts on the line the ability of our education and training system to adapt rapidly to the technological and economic changes that are taking place' ⁽¹⁷⁾.

Having gone through a political and economic modernisation in the early 1980s, the French Socialists clearly chose the arena in which this race would be run. It would be Europe.

The negotiations

Three factors pushed the French to make vocational training one of the sticking points of their proposal to relaunch European integration. These were the need to adapt to Community power relationships, the need to take account of national goals, and the desire to stop the economic decline of Europe.

The negotiations turned out as follows.

In the winter of 1981-82, the French representatives started discussions with their German partners. Although the Germans were reluctant to develop new policies - which were likely to prove costly - they stated that they were prepared to examine, one after the other, the reform of the ESF and of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) ⁽¹⁸⁾. This was a first step. France then drew up a number of proposals aimed at these reforms, in which vocational training and the new technologies figured prominently ⁽¹⁹⁾. Although the French suggestions were initially approved by the Commission ⁽²⁰⁾, this body was slow to draft concrete proposals. It was not until autumn 1982 that Brussels published a first set of measures, some of which were very far-reaching ⁽²¹⁾.

This delay may explain why the first major agreement on policy was reached directly between the Ten at a European Council meeting, in Brussels in March 1982. The Heads of State and Government made a commitment to give each young person, within five years, vocational training suited to the new conditions in the labour market ⁽²²⁾. Nevertheless, despite this political impetus from the highest level, it was another year before it was translated into concrete decisions on the ESF. In the meantime, this commitment had come up against the thorny prob-

lem of the budget, which was not at all easily resolved: given the crisis throughout the Community in the resources available to it, how could new policies be introduced? How, while every effort was being made to restrain European expenditure, could a large-scale Community social policy be implemented? This was the background to the negotiations that began within the Committee of Permanent Representatives and the Council of Ministers. The 'European compromise machine' was not slow in linking reform of the ESF with that of the ERDF. Eventually, a compromise was reached between Paris and Bonn, which then had the presidency of the Community ⁽²³⁾. France agreed to abandon quota management of the ERDF but succeeded in return in not having the ESF regionalised and in having its expenditure concentrated on an objective rather than an area. It was this compromise that allowed the Council of Ministers in June 1983 to reach an initial agreement, confirmed in October 1983, after consultation with the European Parliament ⁽²⁴⁾. The first large-scale reform of the ESF was introduced, under the terms of which almost 75 % of the funds were concentrated on three types of action for the young unemployed, specifically:

- ❑ education in the new technologies;
- ❑ use of the new technologies in vocational training;
- ❑ funding of specific action to promote the occupational integration of young people.

Thus, while retaining budgetary discipline - the agreement allowed for no major increase in the Fund - the concentration of ESF resources on vocational training went in the direction of French demands. Paris, which immediately asked the ESF to support a number of initiatives for the occupational integration of young people in the national territory, saw this as the first step - albeit timid - towards the establishment of a true European social space, that is to say, a Europe capable of supporting the jointly defined social policies of Member States.

Although it is possible to regard these negotiations as a French victory in that Paris succeeded in having some of its priorities taken up at the European level, it can also be argued that European thinking influenced the French left. This was true in many fields, including vocational training and social af-

30 March 1982), EEC, Commission, 22 March 1982.

(21) Especially the idea of a social guarantee of jobs for young people. National Archives, 5AG4-2236: Volet social de la session conjointe du Conseil (15 et 16 novembre 1982), 24 November 1982.

(22) EC Bull. 3-1982, 1.3.5.

(23) National Archives, 5AG4-21PM: Compte rendu succinct du Conseil Affaires Sociales du 2 juin 1983 - Réforme du Fonds Social Européen (FSE), Ministère de l'Economie et des finances, Dir. du Trésor - Serv. des Affaires internationales - Sous-Dir. des Affaires multilatérales, 3 June 1983.

(24) 17th Gen. Rep., 305, p. 142.

(25) EC Bull. 3-1982, 1.3.5.

(26) National Archives, 5AG4-21PM: Compte rendu succinct du Conseil Affaires Sociales du 2 juin 1983 - Réforme du Fonds Social Européen (FSE), Ministère de l'Economie et des finances, Dir. du Trésor - Serv. des Affaires internationales - Sous-Dir. des Affaires multilatérales, 3 June 1983.

(27) 17th Gen. Rep., 305, p. 142.



fairs. A good indication of this change is to be found in the programme document published by the Socialist Party for the 1984 European elections. By comparison with the document published in 1979, vocational training occupied a far more prominent place (Parti socialiste, 1984).

From 1984, the ESF was thus devoted entirely to its new priorities, confirming an orientation introduced a few years earlier.

Conclusions

Given their desire to create an ambitious Community social policy, the French Socialists quickly came to see vocational training in the early 1980s as an absolute necessity, even though it was far removed from their initial concerns. This observation also applied to other closely related fields, such as the mutual recognition of qualifications.

What can be concluded from these developments in the context of the broader history of vocational training on a European scale?

Using the categories drawn up by Professor Wolf-Dietrich Greinert to distinguish between the different types of vocational training system used in Europe (Greinert, 2003, 2004), we can clearly see where the French example described above fits in. It is a normative model in which the state plays an unquestioned regulatory and stimulatory role - except, perhaps in the case of agricultural vocational training. It should be noted that the existence of alternative vocational training models appears to play no part in the implementation of Community decisions in

the French case. As far as Paris is concerned, although the goal of vocational training deserves to be common, its implementation is a matter for Member States, although it may be desirable for professionals in different countries to exchange 'ideas'.

It would seem that a normative framework is therefore insufficient to explain some Community developments, since Member States do not directly take it into account in establishing their positions - although this may change in the course of negotiations. On the other hand, if we focus - as we have done in this article - on a study of decision-making, the notion of a 'horizon of expectations' appears more appropriate. Despite having training models that are necessarily distinct, the Ten - and now the Twenty-five - have succeeded in arriving at common objectives and methods. These little everyday miracles of Europe - to borrow the expression of an American journalist - may seem surprising (Pond, 1990). In reality, the explanation lies in the tension between diversity and necessity. Although European 'diversity' might be thought irremediably problematic, it fades - without entirely disappearing - in the face of 'necessity'. In the example discussed here, it can be seen how the notions of 'decline' and competition between blocs, which are often called upon in the context of the building of Europe, have been the driving force behind the definition of common objectives for vocational training. In this field, as in others, the capacity of Europe to integrate lies above all in the definition of common interests. Convergence, and in particular the convergence of education systems, is merely one consequence of this.

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