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Ostermann, Falk, *Security, Defense Discourse and Identity in NATO and Europe. How France changed foreign policy*

(Routledge, 2018), pp. 216, ISBN: 9781138585409

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In this book adapted from his doctoral thesis, Falk Ostermann focuses on analysing French foreign and defense policy during the mandates of Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy. His ambition is to determine whether there has been a change in its identity by analysing the speeches of the two Presidents and the French Parliament on NATO, European defence and Franco-American relations (p. 1–4). In this, Ostermann seeks to develop an original posture within the academic debates about the meanings and implications of the country’s return to NATO’s command structure (p. 10–11).

The first chapter is devoted to the presentation of the author’s theoretical, methodological and empirical choices. The latter adopted a post-structuralist theoretical perspective by combining the discourse theory of the Essex school and the interpretative approach to capture small-scale changes that may affect the identity of French foreign policy (p. 17). This concept of identity is central to Ostermann’s analysis, which he defines as “a specific set of ideas and relations that is characteristic of a social collective and, here, of a particular policy field [...] an intersubjective social structure that emerges out of discursive practice” (p. 13). It is accompanied by another core concept, hegemony, presented as a situation in which a discourse is considered true and valid by a discursive community (p. 19). The idealtypical mechanisms of social logic, political logics and fantasmatic logic, then make it possible to understand how one policy has been preferred to another through the construction of hegemonic discourses (p. 23–25). The reader may regret here a lack of deepening on the question of the threshold from which a speech can be effectively regarded as hegemonic. This vagueness thus leaves a doubt on the arbitrary side of its determination. The interpretive policy analysis comes for its part to supplement the discourse theory of Essex school by the use of linguistic and discourse analysis techniques that are the process of *naming*, through the use of a specific vocabulary, and *framing*, allowing the agent to make sense of a complex reality (p. 26–27).

Despite some heaviness, this chapter demonstrates the richness and originality of Ostermann’s theoretical reflection which paints a very complete picture of the state of the art on discourse analysis. Although his approach seems particularly convincing, it is not exempt from a few limitations. Indeed, Ostermann considers that policies and discourses are “mutually constitutive”, the former being constructed through

“discursive practices” (p. 32). Nevertheless, it seems difficult to decorrelate discourse from the effective practice of foreign policy by its agents, despite its performative dimension. His analytical input therefore remains necessarily limited and must be considered as a complement to other theoretical approaches to foreign policy, as Ostermann himself pointed out at the end of his book (p. 153).

The chapter concludes with the selection of the author’s case studies and primary sources, who adopts a qualitative data analysis approach. Ostermann then justifies the choice of his two types of documentary corpus: the speeches of the French Presidents of the Republic, and the parliamentary debates during the three periods studied, namely the failed attempt at reintegration between 1995 and 1997, the actual return between 2007 and 2009, and finally the military operation in Libya from 2011 to 2012 (p. 33). While the choice of presidential speeches makes sense with regard to the prerogatives of executive power in foreign and defence policy, that of the parliamentary debates is less convincing given the author’s primary objective: to analyse change in French foreign policy. Parliamentarians have certainly acquired control over French foreign operations since the constitutional reform of 2008, but this remains limited and exercised *a posteriori*. Their ability to influence what belongs to the *domaine réservé* (reserved domain) of the President of the Republic is therefore questionable and deserves a more developed justification than that provided in the excursus on the general characteristics of French foreign policy discourse (p. 42–44). As regards the use of presidential speeches, another criticism may also emerge: that of considering the state as a monolithic actor embodied in the figure of the President of the Republic, at the expense of the analysis of its internal dynamics.

In the following three chapters, the theoretical framework developed by Ostermann sheds light on the selected case studies in a particularly original fashion. The symmetry between the parts of each chapter facilitates the comparison between the periods studied and makes it possible to better grasp the changes at work. The detailed presentation of the sources at the beginning of each chapter, as well as the richness of the empirical corpora, are also remarkable.

Chapter 2 is thus dedicated to the failed attempt at reintegrating NATO command structures during the presidency of Jacques Chirac (p. 45). Ostermann painstakingly delineates NATO-related divergences between each political current: if the right-wing and the centre were initially rather favourable to a full participation in an Alliance considered transformed since the end of the Cold War, the left and the radical left were much more reluctant, even hostile to this rapprochement (p. 47–50). These different readings of the end of the bipolar order and its consequences thus engender discourse confrontation on the political line to adopt. This is particularly noticeable in the perception of the United States, which is initially more positive for the right than for other political currents (p. 52). European defence integration is for its part perceived from the right to the left of the political spectrum as a way to strengthen French power on the international stage (p. 54). French *grandeur* (greatness) is then portrayed in its European, and no longer in its national dimension only, in the same way as the Gaullist doctrine is presented from an autonomist and cooperative perspective at the community level (p. 55–57). This reading is once again not shared by the French radical left who think of defence at the national level (p. 60). From these observations, Ostermann concludes that French reintegration is conditioned by the will of the right, when in power, to Europeanise the Alliance, despite the scepticism of the left about NATO’s ability to reform (p. 62–64). These divergences

thus partly explain the failure of France’s return to integrated command during the cohabitation phase between the right wing president and the Socialist executive in 1997 (p. 69–70). But it is also and above all explained, according to Ostermann, by the evolution of the perception of American domination by the right in power which was disappointed by the negotiations on NATO reform and its articulation with the European defence project (p. 71).

The analysis developed in this chapter is particularly convincing and helps shed new light on this period of the Chirac presidency. However, it is risky to only consider this time frame to analyse the evolution of the posture of the executive power relative to NATO and the United States during Chirac’s mandate. Indeed, the 2001–2003 time frame seems just as important on this point: following the attacks of September 11, Jacques Chirac was the first head of state to go to the United States and declare the “friendship” and the “solidarity” of the French with the American people. France did not hesitate then to invoke Article 5, before the crisis of 2003 during which we can observe again a distancing from the United States. This pivotal period would have certainly deserved to constitute a case study on its own that would have been interesting to compare and articulate with the previous and the subsequent ones.

Chapter 3 presents for its part the successful reintegration of NATO military structures during the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy (p. 75). Ostermann emphasises here that the meaning of reintegration is once again not the same according to political trends: if the right considers that it does not affect the autonomy of France and that it will encourage the European defence project, the left is fiercely opposed and considers that it would mean an alignment with the United States (p. 75). The executive power depicts the return to integrated command as an opportunity for France to regain its place in decision-making and to increase its room for manoeuvre (p. 77). The “Western family” metaphor is then regularly used in presidential speeches to evoke the “common transatlantic values”, while underlining the institutional progress of the CSDP (p. 82, 84, 89–91). According to Ostermann, “pragmatism” prevails during this identity change period for France.

In this chapter, the contribution of the left-wing discourse analysis is considerably reduced by the fact that they did not find themselves in power, contrary to the first case study, and that they were in minority during the vote of confidence in the Assemblée Nationale. Thus, while it is interesting to dissect the democratic debate, it risks diverting the study from its initial objective. In this respect, the analysis of the radical left’s speeches seems superfluous considering that they were a parliamentary minority during the periods studied and they neither were in power.

In Chapter 4, Ostermann develops his last case study on France’s choice to intervene in Libya with NATO (p. 130). After a brief historical overview on the events and the initial French refusal to use NATO, the author explains the evolution of its stance in the light of the European Union’s immobility and the maintenance of political control of the operation outside the Alliance (p. 131–133). According to Ostermann, the French trans-partisan discourse becomes at this time more and more critical and sceptical towards a European Union still in its infancy in security and defence fields (p. 136–138). It would then be possible to observe a “de-unionization” of French defence and security policy in favour of a NATO portrayed in a utilitarian way (p. 138–141). French pragmatism emphasised in the preceding chapter only

accentuates in the discourses analysed during the intervention in Libya, so far as to consider the compatibility of the French and NATO nuclear doctrines (p. 144–146).

However, one should not exaggerate the importance of this last statement which exclusively emanates from parliamentary discourses and take it with caution when it comes to analysing French deterrence policy which still remains independent from the Alliance.

Furthermore, if this chapter succeeds in clarifying the evolution of French discourses during the war in Libya, the chosen analytical angle nevertheless obscures the Franco-British-American dynamics at work. It appears that an articulation with the other studies on the operation in Libya seems necessary to comprehensively understand the choices made during this period that may have affected French foreign and defence policy.

Ostermann concludes his study with an observation: there has been a “pragmatism” of French foreign and defence policy, engendering a “de-complexification” of its identity, moving it away from original Gaullism. French CSDP policy has thus been “de-unionized” in favour of bilateral or multilateral cooperation logics, whereas within NATO influence takes precedence over autonomy when it comes to Gaullism (p. 160–162). In his epilogue, Ostermann considers that this new identity has persisted during the mandate of François Hollande, while it is possible to observe a new pro-European momentum with the election of Emmanuel Macron (p. 164–168). Thanks to this book, the reader undeniably has the keys to analyse the recent declarations of the President of the Republic on this matter. Ostermann’s theoretical approach thus distinguishes itself from other analyses of French foreign policy by carefully detailing the significance of key concepts: Gaullism, *grandeur* ... for each actor who employs them in a given context. It is certainly one of the strengths of his work which is an excellent complement to existing studies on this question.