



French and German Negotiation Styles

Ciprian-Beniamin Benea¹

Andra-Teodora Porumb²

Adina Săcara-Onița³

Received: December 10, 2024

Accepted: March 7, 2025

Published: June 2, 2025

Keywords:

Culture;
France;
Germany;
Negotiation;
Society



Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission.

Abstract: *France and Germany have played important roles in the last centuries, and they are two important players in the European Union; even if they are based on the same establishment - Roman Empire influence - they have grown up in quite different manners. This is due to their diverse cultures. One culture is cartesian, while the other is dialectical. This gives them distinction in the way of seeing the world, acting, negotiating, and building the state's institution and the relationship between the state and society. The paper intends to analyse these differences and how they impact the negotiation styles of people emanating from these cultures.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Two nations located on an old continent, sharing a common border are very different. The paper aims to present them in comparison and to shape differences, what generated them, and how they influence two cultures that underscore specific general behaviour and peculiar negotiating styles. Even the whole continent shares two common traits – as Roman law and Greek philosophy transcending Christianity – all countries, and in our specific case, Germany and France, developed along quite different paths, resulting in distinct world views reflected in different negotiating styles. There is a remarkable variety of customs, manners, and forms of social organization (Cohen, 2002, p. 10) which is reflected in peculiar negotiation styles; which is also true regarding Germans and French, too. Three key aspects of culture are of utmost importance (Cohen, 2002, p. 10): it is a quality not of individuals, but of the society where these individuals spring from; it is acquired through acculturation and socialization by individuals from their respective societies; each culture is a unique complex of attributes regarding areas of social life, including here *negotiation*, which is first of all a *social process*, beyond being the central function of diplomacy as a mean of promoting specific (national) interests.

2. GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

Both these nations belong to the Old Continent; they are close neighbours, sharing a common border of 450 km, a part of it being along the Rhine river with a length of some 200 km. Natural elements, rivers especially, are integrating factors from a social point of view; they promote human settlement and civilization's evolution, with people sharing common interests and developing in common interaction. But the effects of rivers upon the regions through which they flow tend to alternate between unifying regions culturally and politically, and making a political boundary of the same river.

¹ University of Oradea, Faculty of Economic Sciences, Universităţii Street, 1, 410087, Oradea, Romania

² University of Oradea, Faculty of Economic Sciences, Universităţii Street, 1, 410087, Oradea, Romania

³ University of Oradea, Faculty of Economic Sciences, Universităţii Street, 1, 410087, Oradea, Romania

As Mommson (1991) mentioned, the Italics and Greeks were brothers, while Celts, Germans and Slavs, were their cousins; in this context, in ancient times, Germanic tribes settled on both sides of the lower Rhine valley, while Celts went to its upper course. As Roman influence spread in Gaul, especially following Julius Caesar's conquering of Gaul, the Rhine river, even though it was bridged and crossed multiple times by this legendary historical figure, became for the first time along its course from Lake Constance to its mouth at Lugdunum Batavorum (present-day Leiden, in the Netherlands) the *border* of the Roman Gaul. Since then, people on both sides of the river – even though they have been very close from the geographical point of view – have developed along quite different paths; Celts, strongly influenced by Roman law, *centralized* administration and language, while Germans developing along a quite different path with multitude layers of overlapping authority. Furthermore, as a centralized France has been located in the Western part of Europe, protected by easy defensive borders but one, on its North-Eastern part, Germans located in the heart of Europe, have been divided along a *multitude* of tribes and authorities with sovereignty over much smaller geographical areas, with only one easy defensive border in the South-Western.

The location of both France and Germany frames their diplomacy, historical evolution, culture, and negotiators' behaviour. As France appeared as a nation-state four centuries before Germany (Ergang, 1971, p. 31), Germans arrived to often call themselves the delayed nation, *die verspätete Nation*. Before that, during the large span of time of the Middle Ages and after the Renaissance, the German nation was the core of the Holy Roman Empire established in 962 and covering an area from Hamburg to Rome, and from Aachen to Prague. The space of present-day Germany was formed by a puzzle of aristocratic ownerships and lands belonging to the church, with changing numbers, but always counting into hundreds. Looking at France, it spreads from one ocean to the Mediterranean Sea, but there manifests a latent cultural divide in this country: there is a more austere temperament in its northern part, while in the South-East the Latin character is more pronounced, this divide is marked by an imaginary line from Saint-Malo to Geneva (Chartier, 1997, p. 2819).

Germans over most of their history functioned within a multiplicity of associations, between larger and smaller states or ecclesiastical possessions and farmers, tradesmen, merchants, and silversmiths; every profession, and form of activity has its association (Smyser, 2003, p. 17). Within the shelter of those associations, an aristocrat, a merchant, a family or a small group might find the equivalent of personal autonomy (Smyser, 2003, p. 17).

In opposition to this evolution stands France's; with its centuries-old tradition of a centralized state radiating from Paris, the French nation imagines the State as the founder of the entire life of the nation, giving to French state almost a corporeal notion (Cogan, 2003, p. 13).

As a consequence of these two different historical evolutions, French negotiators highly wanted to defend the position of the state, reaching an agreement being for him of secondary importance; while Germans focused on the peculiarity of any proposal to fit in a logical framework and they are inclined to work hardly to reach consensus. German geography and their specific culture of associations compelled Germans to find ways to identify common solutions and to avoid isolation.

For a French being isolated is not a problem – on the contrary – for a German, it is the most must-avoidable situation. French are characterized by a culture of opposition to the dominant norms – and so being isolated is a quality – while Germans are in search of consensus through compromises – so being isolated is for them avoidable almost at all costs. Their different history, which was influenced in the greatest part by their geography, has shaped the evolution distilled in these differences.

3. POLITICAL CULTURE AND PHILOSOPHY

France, by its history, “has developed a reflex of revolt” (Nora, 1992, p. 2998), which is connected to ancient Gaul culture characterized by curiosity, and audacity, but which can be followed by a quick changing of mood; reflex of revolt is linked to a formalistic and hierarchical style passing through a “divine right” monarchy, a statist bureaucratic centralization down to all social relations to couples and families; France is “the land of command”! (Nora, 1992, p. 2998) At the same time, French political culture is characterized by a permanent oscillation between servility toward authority and sporadic repulsion towards it (Knapp & Wright, 2001, pp. 202-203).

In contrast, Germans share a culture based on a tradition of *divided authority* (Smyser, 2003, p. 67) marking especially German evolution during Holy Roman Empire; as a consequence, Germans believe that a collective construction is a strong barrier against a possible concentration of power and decisions in a single place, individual, or party (Smyser, 2003, p. 63).

Even transport networks in these two neighbouring countries reflect two different political cultures: in France, Paris is the capital which concentrates all motorways and railroads, beyond being at the same time the principal banking, administrative and political centre, Paris behaving like a spider which controls the evolution of movement of this network, while in Germany one cannot tell which is the most important transportation hub. Munich and Frankfurt are more important than Berlin, Frankfurt is best connected to global finance, Munich (Bayern) and Stuttgart (Baden-Wurtemberg) to research and development with applications in industry, while Hamburg and Bremen facilitate the global connection of Germany to the world economy; Berlin is connected to centralization of Germany during the second part of the nineteenth century and to present day political (partial) centralization.

French are inspired by reluctance to compromise and missing of a backup plan in case French fail to persuade their counterparts with their opening arguments (Cogan, 2003, p. 12) addressed in a Cartesian logical manner and clear presentation (Cogan, 2003, p. 49) with audacity, conversational ability, wit, elegance of expression (Bell, 2001, p. 159). So it is possible that if the other party doesn't follow their point, they can retreat into isolationism, which does not bother them too much, while this is the most avoidable result for a German.

In contrast to this manner, German listens carefully and after that, he presents the arguments framed by a *Gezamtkonzept* (a general framework) in a very clear manner to avoid any misunderstanding and to come to an agreement without unnecessary delay (Smyser, 2003, p. 17). For Germans, the search for consensus and social peace (Wilson, 1999, p. 18) is a core guiding principle in every negotiation; they do not negotiate for their own sake!

If French are audacious, having a taste for confrontation and aggressiveness in verbal exchanges (Cogan, 2003, p. 19), German counterparts could be – and always are – less vocal, but they are tough, purposeful, determined, assertive, haughty and unbending (Smyser, 2003, p. 19).

We can say that the French are Cartesians, which means that French negotiators emphasize rationalism to the point of abstraction, which generates a deductive mode of reasoning; they identify basic principles, and afterwards, they deduce content, the approach being a top-down one, from the general to particular. Great emphasis is put on logical and clear presentation, giving them the feeling that they are right, even in such cases that others around them may not agree; they don't care about being right, and *alone* at the same time (Cogan, 2003, pp. 48-52).

Contrasting this, lacking political focus, German philosophy has focused on the internal process of the mind, on the logical rationalism pointed out by Leibnitz and on moral issues far from the world of politics. But it influenced the way Germans see the world, as Fichte indicated that the idea was more important than the thing, subjective thought leading better to truth than objective observation, which is peculiar to Anglo-Saxons. Furthermore, Hegel strengthening the importance of ideas saw the movement of Spirit and the progression of history as an advance dominated by dialectic, and that what is real is the rational.

French stresses linear logic while German is dialectic, both placing deductive reasoning on a higher stage than inductive reasoning. For Germans, nothing can be real without a concept to make it real; that for *Gesamtkonzept* is at the core of German negotiating style; everything must fit in this general framework. As Heine put it, France and Russia controlled the land and England the seas, Germans owned “the realm of dreams” (Stern, 1987, p. 3).

Related to education, France has a system of respected training institutions for people who will have positions in France’s state institutions and international negotiation teams; they are called *grandes écoles* and we can encounter here ENA (*École Nationale d’Administration*) or Sciences Po; in Germany, members in international negotiations are respected and experienced negotiators, with a large background in Germany’s minister of foreign affairs, who could be doubled by representatives from different Germany’s lands and business community, with special interests in a specific negotiation. Even the typology of negotiators reflects the historical evolution and philosophical framework of these two nations. For example, in France, the president does not have to consult (and deal with the legislature) if he wants to, which is not the case in Germany. In France, which is a normative country, “there is the *rule* and how it is applied” and this stems from its long history of administration and the rationalist mode of thinking (Cogan, 2003, pp. 111-112). In most cases, French start the discussion; the French interlocutor will often begin by making a speech, seizing the floor; for French, it is important to demonstrate that one’s thinking is well founded, and not (necessarily) to arrive at an agreed solution. In contrast, Germans prepare in the minute details everything, listen carefully, and try hard to find a common solution fitting the *Gesamtkonzept*; they do not talk or negotiate for its own sake.

Furthermore, the French need a comfortable negotiation atmosphere, while the Germans can start immediately. This is because French culture is a culture of a higher context, related to Germans’ culture - more focused on what is discussed, not how it is done. In a culture of higher context – as is the case of French culture – most of the information is “in the person” or physical context where communication develops; in lower-context culture – as is in Germans’ case – most of the meaning and information is to be identified in the message itself. Higher-context communication expressively uses language, while in a lower-context cultural framework, language is instrumental (Avruch, 1998, p. 64). So, relationships are crucially important in high-context culture, while in lower-context the content is at the forefront (Hall, 1976).

Of course, Germans want to build long-term relationships, but they start from the content and keep contact in the aftermath of a negotiation; for the French, on the other hand, building a relationship is far more important, and after that comes the development of further subjects in different fields of interest.

As France is a society of authority, its negotiators seek to get others to accept their point of view, while Germans are inclined to search for grounds that would support consensus. While for the French appearance is important (as in clothing, for example), Germans want to know the content; even proving an argument is, in most cases, done elegantly by a French, while Germans try to argue in a logical manner fitting in their general framework.

4. ENTERTAINMENT

In a negotiation with the French, they bring all aspects of their culture: yet for them, *food* is a vital part of their culture, France has a special relation to food (Ory, 1997, p. 3750). As Germans don't like to bring emotions in a negotiation and try to keep a positive spirit (Smyser, 2003, p. 83), for the French, the emotional tenor of negotiations is important (Cogan, 2003, p. 472); and it manifests in the culinary area, too. "The taste for gastronomy is innate in the race" (Rouff, 1984, pp. 18-19) and it contrasts with German food, which is consistent, but massive, heavy, and thick, like German thought. Yet they are proud of their (white) wine, beer, and music; they cannot use such occasions to impress others with the length of their culinary heritage, but they do the best with what they have (Smyser, 2003, pp. 117-118).

5. CONCLUSION

Taking account of the importance these two countries have at European and global levels – Germany, especially through their products, and France due to its political and cultural influence – the paper wants to present the historical and cultural differences between these two societies and to make us aware of the importance of understanding the background of these differences.

As the negotiation is, first of all, a social process, it is important to identify such main traits, and their base, and to understand them, to help other nationals in dealing with people/negotiators springing from these two countries.

A successful negotiation involves not only reaching an agreement but also upholding the agreed-upon details and fostering a long-term relationship. Understanding the cultural backgrounds of negotiation partners from France and Germany can be key, not just for achieving success in the negotiation itself, but for laying the foundation for future collaboration and development.

References

- Avruch, K. (1998). *Culture and Conflict Resolution*, Washington DC: USIP Press.
- Bell, D. A. (2001). *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Chartier, R. (1997). La ligne Saint-Malo-Genève. In P. Nora (éd.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, vol. 2, Paris : Gallimard, pp. 2817-2850.
- Cogan, C. (2003). *French Negotiating Behavior. Dealing with La Grande Nation*, Washington DC: USIP Press.
- Cohen, R. (2002). *Negotiation across Cultures. International Communication in an Interdependent World*, Washington DC: USIP Press.
- Ergang, R. (1971). *Emergence of National State*, New York: Van Nostrand.
- Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond Culture*, New York: Anchor Books.
- Knapp, A., & Wright, V. (2001). *The Government and Politics of France*, 4th edition, London: Routledge.
- Mommsen, T. (1991). *Istoria romana*, vol. I, București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică.
- Nora, P. (1992). La génération. In P. Nora (éd.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, vol. 3, Paris : Gallimard, pp. 2975-3015.
- Ory, P. (1997). La gastronomie. In P. Nora (éd.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, vol. 3, Paris : Gallimard, pp. 3760-3762.

- Rouff, M. (1984). *La Vie et la Passion de Dodin-Bouffant, gourmet*, Paris : Stock.
- Smyser, W. R. (2003). *How Germans Negotiate. Logical Goals, Practical Solutions*, Washington DC: USIP Press.
- Stern, F. (1987). *Dreams and Delusions*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Wilson, P. H. (1999). *The Holy Roman Empire*, New York: Palgrave.