

*How World Politics Is Made: France and the Reunification of Germany*, by Tilo Schabert. Translated from the French by John Tyler Tuttle. The Eric Voegelin Series in Political Philosophy. Columbia, Missouri, University of Missouri Press, 2009, xix, 401 pp. \$54.95 US (cloth).

In this book, Tilo Schabert, a German political scientist, offers us a unique perspective on the events that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall which should be of equal interest to historians and political theorists. The original version in German, published in 2002, was revised for the French edition, which came out in 2005 and ultimately served as the basis for this more closely-knit edition, in English. The latter includes extensive notes and a cast of key ministers and counsellors from both Paris and Bonn which will be useful to readers unfamiliar with the French or the German political scene at the time.

The core conclusion is likely to attract a great deal of attention and debate as it runs contrary to a widespread opinion. According to the author, far from opposing or obstructing German reunification, French President François Mitterrand not only anticipated it but played a key role in the shape it ultimately took. The account is meticulously laid out in three parts, backed up by extensive archival material gathered directly from the offices of the French presidency, between October 1992 and May 1995, and supplemented by direct interviews of key players from both France and Germany.

The first part reveals how the German question took shape in Mitterrand's mind. Unlike his predecessor, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who did everything he could to speak out against reunification, Mitterrand accepted it and mentioned it regularly, from the very early 1980s, at times when his German counterparts could barely conceive it. He also believed that reunification would be driven by changes that were yet to happen within the former USSR. In Mitterrand's mind, reunification was a natural aspiration for the German people, but Moscow would be crucial in tipping the balance in its favour.

The second part provides us with a fuller picture of the climate that preceded the reunification process marked by France's concern over its economic sovereignty and Germany's dependence on its allies for its security in the event of a nuclear war. This part is particularly useful in reminding us how France's financial and economic ailments at the time were considerable and should have blurred any vision of a broader political horizon for Europe. This is a necessary reminder that German reunification took shape amidst difficult economic times and in spite of deeply rooted suspicions between nations, precisely because creative minds could look beyond these circumstances to imagine such a new horizon for Europe.

The third part walks us through the entire political process, from February 1989 to October 1990, which eventually led to the reunification. A final epilogue deals with an important extension of the final denouement: For Mitterrand, once reunited, Germany could not have remained militarily neutral and the new federation did become a member of NATO.

Throughout his vivid account, the author moves us back and forth, between backstage operations, often retelling the story of a same event from various angles, and what was revealed to the public eye in the guise of newspaper articles or memoirs, such as those of Margaret Thatcher, the ultimate opponent of the reunification process.

The book's most significant contributions, however, lie beyond the historical account. In fact, as the title suggests, its main point is to make us reflect on how world politics is made through a case study of a singular and momentous event, when radical shifts seem to thrust history forward, pushing aside an older world order to make room for a new one. Under such rapid and revolutionary conditions, what does it mean to be a visionary world political leader? What kind of control can such creative individuals exercise in the face of events they know they cannot fully orchestrate? How can the same event be told through so many contradictory narratives, as if it were scripted by a workshop of writers to be performed on different stages? These are all questions the author manages to address, thus providing considerable depth to the picture he draws for us.

Those who might disagree with the core historical conclusion or Mitterrand's portrait need to pay attention to the subtlety of Schabert's theoretical analysis. Not only does he make such classical notions as Aristotle's political prudence more legible to a modern reader, in this specific context, but he also makes a good case against other widespread readings of the same history. He also helps us identify key ingredients which allowed events set on an anarchic course to ultimately be integrated into an outline of order and be captured by the creative forces that make up the very fabric of what we generically call politics.

In this respect, the book will undoubtedly carry a resonance beyond the fall of the Berlin Wall, to more current momentous events on the international stage, namely the storm of demands for democratic change blowing across the Arab world. Comparisons are already being drawn with the radical changes that took place in Eastern Europe at the close of the twentieth century. But this book might very well allow us to think about some of the elements required to channel the current political upheaval into a new world order. Creative and visionary world leaders will need to work together to bring these democratic revolutions into the fold of a broader vision for a common world. To allow the horizon of such a common world to emerge, the sympathies for the aspirations of the peoples of the region expressed by many a politician and a commentator need to be genuine and seriously considered. Such a common world needs to be imagined beyond the simple, albeit legitimate, concerns over uninterrupted oil supplies or fears of massive migrations of populations knocking at the doors of a European Union bursting at its seams as it attempts to overcome the dire spectre of a major financial crisis.

Michael Nafi

*Centre de Sociologie des Pratiques et des Représentations Politiques  
Université Paris-VII*