Underlying deflation

Christophe Blot, Marion Cochard, Bruno Ducoudré and Eric Heyer

A look at the latest statistics on price trends indicates that the risk of deflation seems to have given way to renewed inflation in the major developed countries. So do we really need to fear the return of inflation, or are these economies still structurally deflationary?

First, note that the nature and scale of the economic crisis we have been living through since 2008 are reminiscent of what led to past periods of deflation (the crisis of 1929, the Japanese crisis of the 1990s, etc.). The recessionary pattern that began in 2008 has followed the same path: the shock to activity led to a slowdown in inflation – and sometimes lower prices or wages – in most of the developed countries. However, a fall in prices is not necessarily synonymous with deflation: this has to be long term and, above all, it must be anchored in expectations and a vicious cycle of debt deflation. But this deflationary scenario did not materialize. Far from sitting by idly, at the end of 2008 governments and central banks took fiscal and monetary measures to stabilize activity and limit the rise in unemployment. Moreover, independently of the response by economic policy, price trends were strongly influenced by changes in commodity prices. While the collapse in oil prices in the second half of 2008 accelerated the deflationary process, the rise in prices since 2009 has fuelled more general price rises and held off the risk of deflation. Moreover, business has partially cushioned the impact of the crisis by accepting cuts in margins, which has helped to mitigate rising unemployment, a key factor in the deflationary process.

In a study by the OFCE published in its journal of forecasts (Prévisions de la Revue de l'OFCE), we start from a wage-price model to develop a method for assessing the way that oil price dynamics and labour market adjustments affect changes in inflation. We show that if oil prices had continued their upward trend after they peaked in the summer of 2008, and if the adjustment on the labour market had been, in all countries, the same as in the US, then the year-on-year change in inflation in second quarter 2011 would have been lower, by 0.7 points in France to 3.4 points in the UK (Table 1). This confirms that these economies are still structurally deflationary.

Despite the central banks' repeated efforts at quantitative easing, they need not fear the return of inflation. The macroeconomic environment is still characterized by a risk of deflation, and therefore by the need for an accommodative monetary policy.

Impact of shocks on consumer prices

Year-on-year change

		2010				2011	
	Impact on the inflation rate…	Q1	Q2	Q3	T4	Q1	Q2
Germay	*… of the speed of productivity adjustment*	0.3	0.5	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.8
	… of the change in oil prices	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.4	0.4
	Total impact	0.3	0.7	0.8	1.0	1.2	1.3
France	*… of the speed of productivity adjustment*	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1
	… of the change in oil prices	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.3	0.5	0.6
	Total impact	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.4	0.6	0.7
Italy	*… of the speed of productivity adjustment*	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.1
	… of the change in oil prices	0.6	0.8	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.6
	Total impact	0.8	1.2	1.0	0.8	0.8	0.8
Spain	*… of the speed of productivity adjustment*	0.0	-0.1	-0.2	-0.2	-0.3	-0.4
	… of the change in oil prices	0.0	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.5
	Total impact	0.0	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.1
UK	*… of the speed of productivity adjustment*	0.7	1.3	1.8	2.2	2.8	3.1
	… of the change in oil prices	0.1	0.1	-0.1	-0.1	0.1	0.3
	Total impact	0.8	1.4	1.7	2.2	2.9	3.4
USA	*… of the speed of productivity adjustment*	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	… of the change in oil prices	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.0	0.2	0.4
	Total impact	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.0	0.2	0.4
Japan	*… of the speed of productivity adjustment*	0.6	0.8	0.9	1.0	1.1	1.2
	… of the change in oil prices	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.4
	Total impact	0.6	1.0	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.6

Source : National data, OFCE calculations.

Less austerity = more growth and less unemployment

Eric Heyer and Xavier Timbeau

The European Commission has just released its spring forecast, which anticipates a recession in 2012 for the euro zone ("mild" in the words of the Commission, but still -0.3%), which is in line with the OFCE's economic analysis of March 2012.

The brutal fiscal austerity measures launched in 2010, which were intensified in 2011 and tightened even further in 2012 virtually throughout the euro zone (with the notable exception of Germany, Table 1 and 1a), are hitting activity in the zone hard. In 2012, the negative impact on the euro zone resulting from the combination of raising taxes and reducing the share of GDP that goes to expenditure will represent more than 1.5 GDP points. In a deteriorating fiscal situation (many euro zone countries had deficits of over 4% in 2011) and in order to continue to borrow at a reasonable cost, a strategy of forced deficit reduction has become the norm.

Table 1. The euro zone in 4 macroeconomic aggregates from 2009 to 2012

	2009	2010	2011	2012
GDP growth (%/yr)	-4,4	1,8	1,5	-0,4
Public deficit (% GDP)	-5,5	-5,5	-3,6	-2,9
Jobless rate (% active pop)	9,6	10,1	10,2	10,9
Fiscal impulse (% GDP)	1,7	-0,3	-1,1	-1,5

Sources : National accounts, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

This strategy is based on declarations that the 3% ceiling will be reached by 2013 or 2014, with balanced budgets to follow by 2016 or 2017 in most countries. However, these goals seem to be overly ambitious, as no country is going to meet its targets for 2013. The reason is that the economic slowdown is undermining the intake of the tax revenue needed to balance budgets. An overly optimistic view of the impact of fiscal restraint on activity (the so-called fiscal multiplier) has been leading to unrealistic goals, which means that GDP growth forecasts must ultimately be systematically revised downward. The European Commission is thus revising its spring forecast for the euro zone in 2012 downward by 0.7 point compared to its autumn 2011 forecast. Yet there is now a broad consensus on the fact that fiscal multipliers are high in the short term, and even more so that full employment is still out of reach (here too, many authors agree with the analyses made by the OFCE). By underestimating the difficulty of reaching inaccessible targets, the euro zone members are locked in a spiral where jitters in the financial markets are driving ever greater austerity.

Unemployment is still rising in the euro zone and has hardly stopped increasing since 2009. The cumulative impact on economic activity is now undermining the legitimacy of the European project itself, and the drastic remedy is threatening the euro zone with collapse.

What would happen if the euro zone were to change course in 2012?

Assume that the negative fiscal impulse in the euro zone is on the order of -0.5 percent of GDP (instead of the expected total of -1.8 GDP points). This reduced fiscal effort could be repeated until the public deficit or debt reaches a fixed target. Because the effort would be more measured than in current plans, the burden of the adjustment would be spread out more fairly over the taxpayers in each country, while avoiding the burden of drastic cuts in public budgets.

Table 2 summarizes the results of this simulation. Less austerity leads to more growth in all the countries (Table

2a), and all the more so as the fiscal consolidation announced for 2012 intensifies. Our simulation also takes into account the impact of the activity in one country on other countries through trade. Thus, Germany, which has an unchanged fiscal impulse in our scenario, would experience an 0.8 point increase in growth in 2012.

Table 2. Fiscal impulse of -0.5 GDP point in the euro zone in 2012

	GDP (%/yr)		Public deficit (% GDP)		Jobless rate (% active pop.)	
	2011	2012	2011	2012	2011	2012
2012, under current plans	1,5	-0,4	-3,6	-2,9	10,2	10,9
2012, if 0.5% GDP impulse		1,7		-3,1		9,7

Note: The impulse is the change in the structural deficit. The structural deficit is the public deficit excluding the impact of the economic cycle. A negative impulse reflects a restrictive fiscal policy. Here the public («administrations publiques», or "APU") deficit includes the central state, regional government and social security agencies.

Sources: National accounts, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

In the "less austerity" scenario, unemployment would decline instead of continuing to increase. In all the countries except Greece, the public deficit would be lower in 2012 than in 2011. Admittedly, this reduction would be less than in the initial scenario in certain countries, in particular those that have announced strong negative impulses (Spain, Italy, Ireland, Portugal and … Greece), which are the ones most mistrusted by the financial markets. In contrast, in some countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, the government deficit would shrink more than in the initial scenario, with the indirect positive effect of stronger growth outweighing the direct effect of less fiscal consolidation. For the euro zone as a whole, the public deficit would be 3.1 percentage points of GDP, against 2.9 points in the initial scenario. It is a small difference compared to more favorable growth (2.1%), along with lower unemployment (-1.2 points, Table 2) instead of an increase as in the initial scenario.

The key to the "less austerity" scenario is to enable the countries in greatest difficulty, those most obliged to implement the austerity measures that are plunging their economies into the vicious spiral, to reduce their deficits more slowly. The euro zone is split into two camps. On the one hand, there are those who are demanding strong, even brutal austerity to give credibility to the sustainability of public finances, and which have ignored or deliberately underestimated the consequences for growth; on the other are those who, like us, are recommending less austerity to sustain more growth and a return to full employment. The first have failed: the sustainability of public finances has not been secured, and recession and the default of one or more countries are threatening. The second strategy is the only way to restore social and economic – and even fiscal – stability, as it combines a sustainable public purse with a better balance between fiscal restraint and employment and growth, as we proposed in a [letter to the new President of the French Republic].

Table 1a. Details on the 4 macroeconomic aggregates for the euro zone from 2009 to 2012

	GDP growth (%/yr)				Public deficit (% GDP)				Jobless rate (% active pop.)				Fiscal impulse (% GDP)			
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2009	2010	2011	2012	2009	2010	2011	2012	2009	2010	2011	2012
DEU	-5,1	3,6	3,1	0,3	-3,2	-4,3	-1,0	-1,1	7,8	7,1	6,0	5,5	0,7	1,2	-0,9	-0,3
FRA	-2,6	1,4	1,7	0,2	-7,5	-7,1	-5,2	-4,4	9,2	9,4	9,3	9,8	2,5	-0,7	-1,7	-1,7
ITA	-5,5	1,8	0,5	-1,7	-5,4	-4,6	-3,8	-2,8	7,8	8,4	8,4	9,4	0,8	-0,4	-1,0	-2,9
ESP	-3,7	-0,1	0,7	-1,1	-11,2	-9,3	-8,5	-6,5	18,0	20,1	21,7	23,5	4,1	-1,9	-1,2	-3,4
NLD	-3,5	1,6	1,3	-1,1	-5,6	-5,1	-5,0	-4,5	3,7	4,5	4,5	5,4	3,8	-1,5	-0,2	-1,9
BEL	-2,7	2,3	1,9	0,1	-5,8	-4,1	-4,0	-3,4	7,9	8,3	7,2	7,6	1,8	-0,3	-0,1	-1,4
PRT	-2,9	1,4	-1,5	-2,9	-10,1	-9,8	-4,0	-4,5	10,7	12,1	12,9	13,4	4,9	-0,6	-5,5	-3,0
IRL	-7,0	-0,4	0,7	-0,3	-14,4	-32,0	-10,1	-8,7	11,9	13,7	14,5	14,9	3,7	-4,1	-2,5	-3,0
GRC	-2,3	-4,4	-6,2	-5,3	-15,8	-10,6	-9,3	-7,3	9,5	12,5	17,2	19,5	3,4	-7,9	-5,6	-5,3
FIN	-8,4	3,7	2,8	0,7	-2,5	-2,5	-1,2	-0,9	8,8	8,4	7,8	7,5	0,4	-1,5	-1,1	-1,1
AUT	-3,6	2,5	3,0	0,4	-4,1	-4,4	-3,4	-3,0	4,8	4,4	4,2	4,5	0,4	0,6	-0,5	-1,2

Note: DEU Germany; FRA France; ITA Italy; ESP Spain; NLD Netherlands; BEL Belgium; PRT Portugal; IRL Ireland; GRC Greece; FIN Finland; AUT Austria.
Sources: National accounts, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

Table 2b. Fiscal impulse of -0.5 GDP point in the euro zone countries in 2012

	DEU	FRA	ITA	ESP	NLD	BEL	PRT	IRL	GRC	FIN	AUT
GDP growth rate (%/yr)	1,1	2,2	1,4	2,6	2,1	1,8	0,7	2,8	0,2	1,9	1,8
Difference with Table 1a	0,8	2,0	3,1	3,7	3,2	1,7	3,6	3,1	5,5	1,2	1.4
Of which: - direct impact	0,0	1,2	2,4	2,9	2,5	0,9	2,5	2,5	4,8	0,6	0,7
- impact *via* trade	0,8	0,8	0,7	0,8	0,7	0,8	1,1	0,6	0,7	0,6	0.7
Public deficit (% GDP)	-0,7	-4,6	-3,7	-7,5	-4,3	-3,4	-5,2	-9,7	-9,4	-0,9	-3,0
Difference with Table 1a	0,4	-0,2	-0,9	-1,0	0,2	0,0	-0,7	-1,0	-2,1	0,0	0,0
Jobless rate (% active pop.)	5,1	8,8	7,9	21,6	3,8	6,7	11,6	13,3	16,8	6,9	3,8
Difference with Table 1a	-0,4	-1,0	-1,5	-1,9	-1,6	-0,9	-1,8	-1,5	-2,7	-0,6	-0,7

Sources: National accounts, OFCE calculations and forecasts.

A letter to President François Hollande

by Jérôme Creel, Xavier Timbeau and Philippe Weil [1]

Dear Mr. President,

France and the European Union are at a crucial economic juncture. Unemployment is high, the output loss to the financial crisis since 2008 has not been recovered and you have promised, in this dismal context, to eliminate French public deficits by 2017.

Your predecessor had committed to achieving the same objective a tad faster, by 2016, and a distinctive feature of your campaign has been your insistence that the major burden of the coming fiscal retrenchment be borne by the richest of taxpayers. These differences matter politically (you did win this election) but they are secondary from a macroeconomic viewpoint unless the long-run future of France and Europe depends on short-run macroeconomic outcomes.

In the *standard macroeconomic framework*, which has guided policy in “normal” and happier times, fiscal multipliers are positive in the short run but are zero in the long run where productivity and innovation are assumed to reign supreme. In such a world, giving your government an extra year to reduce public deficits spreads the pain over time but makes no difference in the long run. When all is said and done, austerity is the only way to reduce the debt to GDP ratio durably – and it hurts badly:

- The fantasy that short-run multipliers might be negative has been dispelled: a fiscal contraction depresses economic activity unless you are a small open economy acting alone under flexible exchange rates and your own national central bank runs an accommodative monetary policy – hardly a description of today’s France. Since France 2012 is not Sweden 1992, the prospect of a rosier fiscal future is not enough to outweigh the immediate recessionary effects of a fiscal contraction.
- To add insult to injury, if the financial crisis has lowered economic activity permanently (as previous banking or financial crises did, according to the IMF), public finances are now in structural deficit. To insure long-term debt sustainability, there is no way to escape fiscal restriction.
- On top of this, the consensus now recognizes that short-run fiscal multipliers are low in expansions and high in recessions. As a result, accumulating public debt in good times and refraining from running deficits in order to control debt in bad times is very costly: it amounts to squandering precious fiscal ammunition when there is no enemy and to scrimping on it in the heat of combat.

It increasingly looks like, that we are living, since the financial crisis, in a *“new normal” macroeconomic environnent* in which fiscal multipliers are still positive in the short run but non-zero in the long run because of **two conflicting effects**:

- A primal fear of French and European policy makers – fed by the outstanding historical work of Carmen Reinhardt and Kenneth Rogoff and the difficulties encountered by Italy, Spain or Greece to roll over their public debt – is that bad things might happen when the debt to GDP ratio steps over 90%. For instance, the sudden realization by investors that, past that level, there is no easy way to bring debt back to "normal" levels without inflation or outright default might lead to a rapid rise in sovereign interest rates. These high rates precipitate an increase in the debt to GDP ratio by raising the cost of servicing the debt and impose intensified deficit reduction efforts that further shrink GDP. Thus, crossing the 90% threshold might lead to a one-way descent into the abyss. This implies that fiscal contraction, although recessionary in the short run, is beneficial in the long run. Fiscal pain now is thus an evil necessary for long-run prosperity and debt sustainability. According to this narrative, we may survive – but only if we stop dancing right away.
- An opposite danger is that fiscal contraction now – in a context of public finances damaged (except for Greece) not by fiscal laxity but by the slowdown in economic activity engendered by the financial crisis since 2008 – might cause a social, political and economic breakdown or durably destroy productive capacity. Fiscal contraction is thus recessionary both in the short run and in the long run. Short-run fiscal expansion is then a necessary condition for long-run prosperity and debt sustainability. In this narrative, we may survive – but only if we keep dancing!

The advisability of your proposal to reduce the public deficits to zero by 2017 depends, Mr. President, on which of these two dangers is the most intense or the most difficult to thwart. Should you be more concerned that loose fiscal policy may hurt long-run growth by increasing the cost of debt service, or should you fear instead first and foremost that strict fiscal policy may harm output durably by leading to social unrest or by reducing productive capacity?

To answer these portentous questions, whose answer is not a matter of ideology or of economic paradigm, we urge you to look at the evidence:

- The sovereign rating of countries with large deficits and debts, like the US and the UK, has been downgraded without any adverse effect on interest rate. This suggests that markets understand, seemingly better than policymakers, that the key problem with EU public finances nowadays is not deficits and debt per se but the governance of the euro zone and its fiscal and monetary policy mix. With a lender of last resort – the euro zone has none –, managing a national debt crisis would be easy and straightforward. The counter-argument that it would lead the ECB to monetize public debts, in sharp contrast with the statutes of this institution and its duty to reach price stability, is invalid: the ex-ante ability to monetize debt would reduce risk premia by eliminating self-fulfilling runs on national debts.
- Ugo Panizza and Andrea Presbitero have shown that there is no convincing historical evidence that debt reduction leads to higher economic growth. Hence the statement that public debt reduction is a prerequisite to economic growth is at worse an assumption, at best a correlation, but in any case not a causal relation supported by data.
- Twenty years of Japanese stagnation remind us that deflation is a deadly and durable trap. Under-activity pushes prices down slowly but surely. Paul Krugman and Richard Koo have shown how real expected interest rates feed a spiralling of deleveraging when deflation locks into prices expectation. If deleveraging extends to the banking sector, it adds a credit squeeze to the contraction.

- One of the pernicious drawbacks of fiscal austerity is the destruction of human capital by long unemployment spells. Young cohorts entering now on the job market will undergo a problematic start and may never recover. The longer unemployment remains over its natural rate, the larger the frustration stemming from a bleak future will grow.
- Beyond human capital, firms are the place where all sorts of capital are accumulated, ranging from social capital to immaterial assets such as R&D. Philippe Aghion and others have argued that this channel links short-term macroeconomic volatility to long-term growth potential. Moreover, in a competitive world, underinvestment in private R&D impairs competitiveness. Hence, austerity, by making output more volatile, has a negative long-term impact.
- What is true for private immaterial assets is even truer for public assets, that is to say assets that generate flows of public goods that individual incentives fail to produce. Typically, so-called golden rules neglect such assets which are by their very nature hard to measure. As a result, the pursuit of quick deficit reduction is usually carried out at the expense of investment in assets which have a high social profitability and are essential to ensure a smooth transition to a low carbon economy.

Drawing on these facts, please let us suggest you a four-pronged strategy:

1. You should argue that fiscal austerity is bad for both short-term *and* long-term growth and remind Mrs. Merkel that, as a result, it should be handled with the utmost care.
2. Slowing down the pace at which austerity is imposed on EU countries is vital – both to reduce unemployment in the short-run and to maintain the long-run prosperity

without which the reduction of debt-to-GDP ratios will be impossible.

3. You should acknowledge that the fears of your predecessor were well-founded: in the absence of a lender of last resort or without debt mutualization, slowing down austerity does expose sovereign debt to the risk of rising interest rates by provoking the self-fulfilling anxiety of creditors. But the experience of the US shows that the best way to deal with this danger is to have a full-fledged central bank that can act as a lender of last resort. The Maastricht Treaty should be amended fast in that dimension. Endowing the ECB with growth as a second mandate is not essential.
4. Mrs. Merkel is right that allowing the ECB to bail out States is a sure recipe for moral hazard. You should therefore agree, as a complement of the modification of ECB statutes, with her insistence that a Fiscal Compact governs Europe but you should strive for a Smart Fiscal Compact. This Smart Fiscal Compact should aim at enforcing the sustainability of public finances in a world where the long run is not given but depends on the short-run fiscal stance. It should draw its strength from legitimate European political institutions endowed with the power to control and enforce the commitment of each country to fiscal discipline. This task will require pragmatism and evidence-based economic policy – rather than budgetary numerology and simple-minded rules.

Failing to reduce deficits in Europe may end in a debacle. However, reducing them cold turkey is a sure recipe for disaster. Believing that old tricks like deregulating job markets will bring back economic growth lost in the recession is delusional, as the ILO warned in its last report. The possibility of brutal switches in economic or social trends rules out half-measures. The creeping build-up of long-term disequilibria requires prompt and decisive action in the short run. What is true for France is even truer for our main neighbors: the whole EU needs room for maneuver, and it needs it fast for the sake of its future.

Yours faithfully.

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Let’s negotiate a global carbon price signal – quickly!

By Stéphane Dion [1] and Éloi Laurent

Two decades after the Rio Conference, and just as a new climate conference is opening in Bonn on Monday 14 May 2012, we must admit to collective failure in combating human-induced climate change. We cannot escape serious climate disruption if we continue down this same path. We must change direction, and we must do it quickly.

The International Energy Agency forecasts warming of over 3.5°C by the end of the 21st century if all countries respect their commitments, and by more than 6°C if they content themselves with their present policies. At that level of warming, climate science warns us that our planet will become much less hospitable for humans and all other forms of life.

At the Durban Conference in December 2011, the countries expressed their grave concern about the gap between their commitments and achieving the objective of a 2°C limit on increased global warming (relative to the pre-industrial era). They promised to re-double their efforts to bridge this gap. But they failed to make any commitment to achieve more stringent targets. We are thus facing an increasingly untenable gap between the urgent need for action and the inertia of international negotiations.

The developed countries are refusing to strengthen their climate policies so long as the other major emitters don't do the same. But the emerging economies, particularly China and India, with annual GDP growth rates of 8 to 10%, will not accept in the foreseeable future targets for the reduction of the volume of their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. On the other hand, these countries might be more open to the idea of setting a price per ton of CO2 that was standardized at the global level, from which they would derive revenue, and which their economic competitors would also be required to levy.

We believe that the best instrument for the international coordination needed to combat climate change is a global carbon price signal. This is why we are proposing that the forthcoming negotiations focus on this crucial goal.

Here is what we are proposing (for more detail, see, in French, http://www.ofce.sciences-po.fr/pdf/dtravail/WP2012-15.pdf and, in English): every country would make a commitment to introduce, in their respective jurisdictions, a carbon price aligned with a scientifically validated international standard, in order for the world to achieve or at least come as close as possible to the objective of keeping global warming below 2°C. Each country would decide whether to extract this levy through taxation or through a system of ceilings and trading in emissions permits (a "carbon market").

Governments would be free to invest, as they see fit, revenues from the carbon emission levy and from the corresponding elimination of fossil fuel subsidies. They could, for example, invest in research and development in clean energy and public transportation, etc. They could also choose to address social inequalities with respect to access to energy.

Developed countries would be required to set aside part of their revenues to help developing countries introduce policies to mitigate emissions, to adapt facilities and to create carbon sinks (by means of reforestation, for example). The contributions of each country would be based on what their respective GHG emissions represent relative to the total emissions of all the developed countries.

Under this international agreement, countries would have the right to levy border taxes on products from countries that have not established a carbon price in accordance with the international standard. The message would be clear to all large emitters: if you do not levy a carbon tax on your products before you export them, the other countries will do so in your place, and it is they who will collect the revenues. Each country will understand that it is in its own commercial interests to comply with the international agreement, to tax its own emissions and to use the corresponding revenues as it sees fit.

In this way, the world would have available an instrument that is vital to its sustainable development. At last, carbon emitters would be required to pay the environmental price for their actions. Consumers and manufacturers would have an incentive to choose lower-carbon-content goods and services and to invest in new emission-reducing forms of technology.

We need to negotiate a global carbon price signal, and quickly. What better place to do this than at Rio, where the problem of climate change was first recognized by the international community 20 years ago?

[1] Stéphane Dion is a Member of the House of Commons of Canada; as Canada's then Minister of the Environment, he chaired the 11th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in Montréal in 2005 (COP 11).

Italy: Mario Monti's challenge

By Céline Antonin

From his arrival in power on 12 November 2011, Mario Monti has explicitly set out his aims, which are structured around three points: fiscal discipline, growth and equity. Will he meet the challenge?

Mario Monti succeeded Silvio Berlusconi at a time when investors' lack of confidence in Italy was growing continuously, as was seen in the widening gap with German bond rates and the sharp increase in CDS prices.

Ici graph

To meet his first objective of fiscal discipline, in December 2011 one of the government's first measures was to adopt an austerity plan, which came to 63 billion euros over three years. This plan, the third in a single year, has the evocative name of *Salva Italia* (Save Italy) and aims to achieve a near balance of the public books by 2013 (see Italy: Mario Monti's wager in French).

The second objective, to restore growth and enhance the country’s competitiveness, is addressed in the *Cresci Italia* plan (“Grow Italy”) adopted in stormy conditions by the Council of Ministers on 20 January 2012. This plan calls for further reforms, including to simplify administrative procedures (tendering procedures, business creation, digital switchover, etc.) and to liberalize the regulated professions, energy, transportation, and insurance, and in particular to enhance labor market flexibility. The ease with which the austerity measures contained in this second plan were adopted was matched by their poor reception, in particular with regard to discussion of the amendments to Article 18 of the Labour Code, which provides protection against dismissal for employees and workers in firms with more than fifteen employees.

Finally, with respect to equity, progress is still slow, especially in the fight against tax evasion and against the underground economy.

Italians knows that these measures will be painful: the financial daily *Il Sole 24 Ore* announced that the annual increase in taxes for an average family living in Lombardy will come to 1,500 euros per year, and almost 2,000 euros for a family from Lazio. Yet up to now the people of Italy have displayed great awareness of the national interest, accepting the cure of fiscal consolidation in a spirit of resignation. As for the financial markets, they initially relaxed the pressure on the country, with the gap in long-term government rates with Germany falling from 530 to 280 basis points from early January to mid-March 2012. Mario Monti’s actions are not the only explanation: the ECB’s purchase of bonds in late 2011 and its two 3-year refinancing operations (LTRO) of the banking system for a total of 1,000 billion euros, which greatly benefited Italy’s banks, definitely helped to ease the pressure on rates. Moreover, the success of the plan for the exchange of Greek debt with private creditors also contributed to easing rates.

The situation is still fragile and volatile: the weakness Spain showed regarding fiscal discipline was enough to trigger a renewed loss of confidence in Italy, as the interest rate differential with Germany on long-term bonds began to rise again, reaching 400 basis points in early May 2012, as did CDS premiums (graph).

So what are the prospects for the next two years? After a recession that began in 2011, with two quarters of negative growth, Italy is expected to experience a difficult year in 2012, with GDP falling sharply by 1.7% as a result of the three austerity plans approved in 2011. Their impact will continue to be felt in 2013, with a further contraction in GDP of -0.9% [1]. In the absence of additional austerity measures, this will reduce the country's deficit, but less than expected, due to the multiplier effect: the deficit will fall to 2.8% of GDP in 2012, and to 1.7% in 2013, i.e. a pace of deficit reduction that falls short of its commitment to balance the public finances by 2013.

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[1] The IMF forecast is more pessimistic for 2012, with growth of -1.9%, and more optimistic for 2013, at -0.3 %.

Competitiveness and industrial demand: The

difficulties facing the French-German couple

Jean-Luc Gaffard

The obsession with competitiveness has returned to centre stage with the election campaign. This reflects the reality that French companies are indeed suffering a loss of competitiveness, which is behind the deterioration in foreign trade for almost a decade. This loss is clear vis-à-vis the emerging markets and explains the trend towards relocating abroad. It is also clear vis-à-vis firms from other developed countries, mainly in the euro zone and in particular German companies. This latter situation is especially serious, as it challenges the coherence of European construction (cf. OFCE, note 19: Competitiveness and industrial development: a European challenge in French).
The gap in competitiveness that has emerged with Germany is clearly based on non-price competition. One of the reasons for this is Germany's superior business model, which is characterized by the maintenance of a network of local businesses of all sizes that focus on their core business and on the international fragmentation of production. This model is especially suitable for business development that is targeted at global markets, and it largely protects the countries hosting these companies from the risk of deindustrialization.

It would, nevertheless, be a mistake to ignore that this development is also the product of an adverse change in price competitiveness. This reflects labour market reforms in Germany, which lowered the relative cost of labour, as well as strategies that are based on the segmentation of production and the outsourcing of intermediate segments, which have also contributed to lowering production costs.
Germany has thus managed to virtually stabilize its market

share of global exports by increasing their level in the European Union (+1.7% in the 2000s) and even more so in the euro zone (+2.3%), while France has lost market share in these same areas (3.1% and 3.4%, respectively).

Two developments have particularly hurt France's industry. Its network of industrial SMEs has fallen apart. They were hit less by barriers to entry than by barriers to growth. All too often SME managers have been inclined or encouraged to sell the enterprises to large corporations rather than to ensure their growth. This is due both to the lack of genuine partnerships with these corporations and to the difficulties experienced in obtaining permanent financing from the banks and markets. For their part, the large industrial firms, both those operating on a multitude of local markets and those in the international markets, have chosen to focus on acquisitions and on the geographical decentralization of both their operations and their equipment and services suppliers. This strategy has been designed to meet geographical shifts in demand and to deal with the demand for immediate profitability set by volatile shareholders, but this has come in part at the expense of the development of local production networks. This process involved a vast movement of mergers and acquisitions that primarily drew on financial skills. The financial institutions were, in turn, converted to the universal banking model, abandoning some of their traditional role of being lending banks and investment banks. These concomitant developments have proved disastrous for overall competitiveness, particularly as hourly labour costs in industry were rising simultaneously.

There are two requirements for restoring the competitiveness of French companies and thereby encouraging the country's re-industrialization. The first is to allow immediate control of labour costs and the restoration of profit margins; this could be helped in particular by tax measures that would adjust the financing of a portion of social protection. The second requirement is to promote the reorganization of industry through the creation of a network of stable relationships between all those involved in the industrial process, especially by the use of aid that is conditioned on cooperation between large and small firms in "competitiveness clusters".

This medium-term effort will nevertheless largely remain ineffective if cooperative policies are not implemented across Europe. These policies need both to stimulate supply through the implementation of technology development programmes and to boost internal demand wherever it is clearly insufficient to satisfy production capacity.

Plea for a growth pact: the sound and fury hiding a persistent disagreement

By Jean-Luc Gaffard and Francesco Saraceno

The emphasis on the need to complement fiscal restraint by measures to boost growth, which is rising in part due to the electoral debate in France, is good news, not least because it represents a belated recognition that austerity is imposing an excessively high price on the countries of southern Europe.

Nevertheless, there is nothing new about invoking growth, and this may remain without consequence. In 1997, as a result of a French government intervention, the Stability Pact became the Stability and Growth Pact, but this had no significant impact on the nature of strategy, which remained fully oriented towards the implementation of strict monetary and fiscal rules and a constant search for more flexible markets.

Last week, Mario Draghi, along with Manuel Barroso and Mario Monti, were worried not only about the recession taking place in Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands and Great Britain but also about the need to respond formally to a request that may come from a new French government. They too are arguing for a negotiated Growth Pact, while taking care to note that it must consist of a common commitment to carry out structural reforms wherever they have not yet been made. This position echoes the February letter of the eleven Prime Ministers to the European authorities. In other words, nothing is to change in the doctrine that determines the choice of Europe's economic policy: growth can be achieved only through structural reform, in particular of the labour markets.

There are two grounds for criticizing this position. It is far from sure that structural reform is effective, unless, that is, it is wielded in a non-cooperative spirit to improve the competitiveness of the country that undertakes the reform at the expense of its trading partners, as Germany was able to do with the Hartz reforms. Secondly, widespread reform, including where this is justified in terms of long-term growth, would initially have a recessionary impact on demand [1], and hence on activity. Reform cannot therefore deal with what is actually the immediate top-priority requirement, namely stemming the spreading recession.

The real challenge facing Europeans is to reconcile the short term and the long term. The solution proposed so far, general fiscal austerity aimed at restoring the confidence of private actors, which would be complemented by structural reforms intended to increase the potential growth rate, just doesn't work. This can be seen by developments in Greece, as well as in Portugal and Ireland, which are model students of Europe's bailout plans, and also in Britain, Italy and Spain. The fiscal multipliers remain firmly Keynesian (see Christina Romer, and Creel, Heyer and Plane), and any "non-Keynesian" effects on expectations are limited or nonexistent.

Growth can neither be decreed nor established instantly, unlike the deflationary austerity spiral in which more and more European countries are currently trapped.

Growth is likely to materialize only if fiscal consolidation is neither immediate nor drastic – in fact, only if the consolidation required of countries in difficulty is spread over time (beyond the year 2013, which in any case will be impossible to achieve) and if the countries that are able to carry out a more expansionary fiscal policy actually do this in such a way that at the European level the overall impact is neutral or, even better, expansionary. This strategy would not necessarily be punished by the markets, which have shown recently that they are sensitive to the requirement for growth. Otherwise, steps should be taken by the ECB to deal with the constraints imposed by the markets. This short-term support must be accompanied by substantial medium-term investment made through European industrial programs financed by the issuance of Eurobonds – which would mean, finally, a European budget on a scale large enough to handle the tasks facing the Union. This method of coordinating short- and medium-term choices would be an important step towards the establishment of the kind of federal structure that alone will allow the resolution of the "European question".

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[1] R.M. Solow, Introduction to Solow, R.M. Ed. (2004), *Structural Reforms and Macroeconomic Policy*, London: Macmillan).

The middle class: baseless fears or genuine hardship?

By Louis Chauvel

The term "middle class" is one of those social science concepts that provoke controversy due to its complex definition and dynamics and the political debate it generates. The fact that it is surrounded by sharp controversy should not therefore come as a big surprise. In a note by the OFCE – where a multifaceted definition of the middle class is proposed [1] – we review several dimensions of the social malaise afflicting this social group, which is often considered to be relatively privileged, in an effort to understand the actual situation.

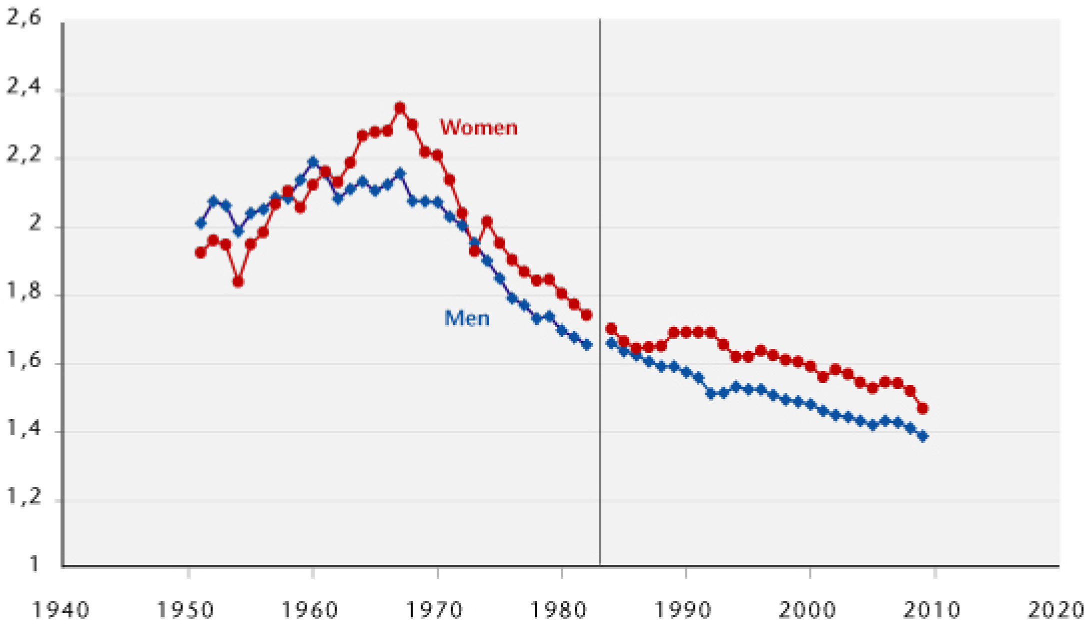
Two theses are considered here:
– on the one hand, the thesis of the middle class maintaining its former status, the strengthening of the protection its members enjoy and confirmation of their economic ascent [2] – a thesis that makes the "fear of decline" that haunts them a paradox;

– on the other hand, the thesis of an objective increase in social problems that were previously limited to people in lower strata (employees and workers, two social groups whose hourly wages are similar), with the upwards diffusion of the problems through capillary action now less blocked [3].

Proponents of the optimistic thesis, that of maintenance, argue that "contrary to popular belief", the fall in status of the middle class is a "fiction", as this social group "simultaneously embodies a 'France holding its own' and a 'France that's rising'" (Goux and Maurin). In this view, fear of decline is a psychological reaction of the middle class with no real cause.

In the Note, which upholds a different view, we review several aspects of this analysis to understand the objective basis for the malaise of the middle class. We show that the increasing difficulties faced by lower strata – for example, the risk of unemployment – are seeping into the intermediate middle classes, who can no longer be said to be protected. This is an element of the “theory of the lump of sugar at the bottom of the cup of coffee”: while the upper and middle parts of society still seem intact, erosion is continuing through the capillary-like action of the immersed part and, if nothing is done, it threatens inevitable deterioration.

Ratio between the net annual full-time salary of the intermediate professions and that of manual workers (men and women, separately)



Note: An in-depth examination shows that over the last 50 years workers and employees have experienced similar changes in wages.
Source: DADS data, private and semi-public sector.

The relative standard of living of the intermediate middle class peaked in what the French call the “Trente glorieuses”, the three decades of post-war prosperity: since the end of this golden age, stagnant wages and incomes, the reduction of wage differentials with the lower classes holding jobs (see chart), the unprecedented risk of unemployment, the numerical expansion of diplomas to numbers that go well beyond the space available in the intermediary professions, and the consequent devaluation of education, etc., were a number of the problematic issues analyzed in this paper that highlight the existence of a very real malaise. It is thus possible to show that, in terms of diplomas, the intermediate middle class population increasingly consists of a share of potential managers (based on their level of education) who have not actually managed to enter the upper middle class, due to a lack of sufficient places, and on the other hand survivors of the intensified competition, a reflection of the growing number of people with the same level of education who have fallen into the lower classes.

In this note, we therefore consider the cause of the destabilization of the project of “middle class civilization” (Alexandre Koyré) that had emerged in the context of the growth and modernity that marked the 1960s to 1980. The corresponding social dynamics were not based simply on the numerical expansion of the intermediate middle class, but also on a coherent social and political project that has now become unstable. What are the ways to reconnect with this dynamic? How would it be possible to escape the vicious circle whereby the middle classes disintegrate and we develop policies targeted at those most in need without seeing that they feed the fall of groups that were previously better situated but that haven’t been supported? The answer lies in productive investment in sectors with long-term promise. Without coming to terms with the real causes of the malaise of the intermediate middle class and dealing with the root problems, we may be preparing ourselves for a difficult decade.

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[1] The middle class is defined in their plurality as falling into the upper middle classes, comparable to the “executives and intellectual professions” who make up about 10% of households, and the intermediate middle classes, which corresponds to the 20% located immediately below, and thus

close to the intermediary professions as defined by the INSEE.

[2] D. Goux and E. Maurin, 2012, *Les nouvelles classes moyennes*, Seuil, Paris. Most of these ideas were already presented in S. Bosc, 2008, *Sociologie des classes moyennes*, La Découverte.
[3] L. Chauvel, 2006, *Les classes moyennes à la dérive*, Seuil, Paris.