

Is nationalization a trap or a tool of industrial policy?

By [Jean-Luc Gaffard](#)

The closure of the Florange blast furnaces in the Moselle region by ArcelorMittal and the French government's hunt for a buyer led it to temporarily consider nationalizing the site, that is, not only the production of crude steel, but also the cold forming line. The threat of nationalization was clearly wielded with a view to forcing the hand of the Mittal group so that it would sell the operations to another firm. If a nationalisation like this had been carried out, it would have been a penalty-nationalization, *i.e.* a sanction of behaviour by the Mittal group deemed contrary to the public interest. Apart from this unusual feature, it would have also raised issues about competition.

The project around the Mittal site is reminiscent in some ways of the nationalization of Renault in 1945. It would be hard to argue, however, that any reproaches would be along the same lines. There would clearly be no question of the nationalized site being made a showcase for a social policy designed to spur the country's growth. The goal was less ambitious. It involved neither more nor less than a transfer of ownership from one private group to another. This would, of course, have been a first in the use of the weapon of nationalization. Any comparison with the French government's support for Alstom in 2004 doesn't hold: in this latter case, the point was to save a company that might go bankrupt as a result of risky acquisitions, and not simply to replace it with another company. Moreover, the problem was confined to the company in question, with no global or even sectoral implications. Comparisons with the support of the Obama administration for the automotive industry in 2009 are also out of place, as that involved saving a company that was being forced into

bankruptcy in an industry generally considered strategic.

The reality in the case of Florange was and remains that no potential buyer thought they would be able to keep the blast furnaces operating in an environment marked by falling demand for steel, in particular in the wake of the crisis in the automobile industry. That is why, whatever happened, the buyer would demand to keep the rolling mill too. This requirement would be in its best interest: the blast furnaces could not be taken over except on the condition that they could supply the activity immediately downstream on the same site. If this condition had been met, it would undoubtedly have posed a problem for the Mittal group, as it currently provides the steel for the mill in Florange from its Dunkirk site, so the new situation would have caused it difficulties, including in terms of jobs. In other words, a temporary nationalization with a view to a transfer of ownership would interfere with competition between private entities. It is far from clear that this was in line with the general interest.

The occasionally argued thesis that Mittal's strategy was the act of managers who were merely obeying the shareholders and who were advocates of an economy without factories or machines does not really hold water in light of the nature of the firm's activity and the degree of integration of the different production sites. One could, however, make the hypothesis that Mittal's strategy involving the closure of the blast furnaces in Florange amounted to a plan to ration supply that was designed to prevent a collapse of steel prices and boost already low margins. This hypothesis might be credible if the demand for steel depended primarily on its price, whereas it is obvious that the decline observed is the result of the global crisis and particularly the slump in sales in the automotive and construction industries. In other words, a fall in steel prices today would not lead to higher demand and ensure the continued operation of all the blast furnaces. It is much more plausible to assume that, in the current

macroeconomic environment, the transfer of ownership that was considered would simply have resulted in changing market shares rather than increasing the market's size.

In fact, there could only be real doubt about both the legitimacy and the capacity of the public authorities to arrange the most appropriate configuration for the market, or even the breakdown of the jobs to be saved or destroyed. Furthermore, if a decision to nationalize had indeed been taken in a situation like this, any determination of fair compensation would have proven difficult and prone to litigation.

In short, the nationalization under consideration could hardly have been an effective tool of industrial policy. It is not for the public authorities to arbitrate between private interests to determine who owns what, including when certain sites are to be closed. This type of arbitration is the responsibility of the competition authorities. Industrial policy, in turn, should interfere as little as possible with the division of market shares between the various competitors. At most it could ensure the survival of companies whose activity is considered strategic and who are going through a difficult period due to the global situation or to industrial choices that have proved erroneous or simply more expensive than expected.

In this situation, it is not surprising that the government did not follow up with the nationalization project and instead supported the compromise of simply requiring that Mittal undertakes to make investments to modernize the site and to maintain the blast furnaces in running order with a view to equipping them with highly efficient technology in terms of carbon dioxide emissions, leading to a gain in competitiveness, as part of the European Ultra-Low Carbon Dioxide Steelmaking project ([Ulcoss](#)).

The nationalization under consideration was indeed a trap in

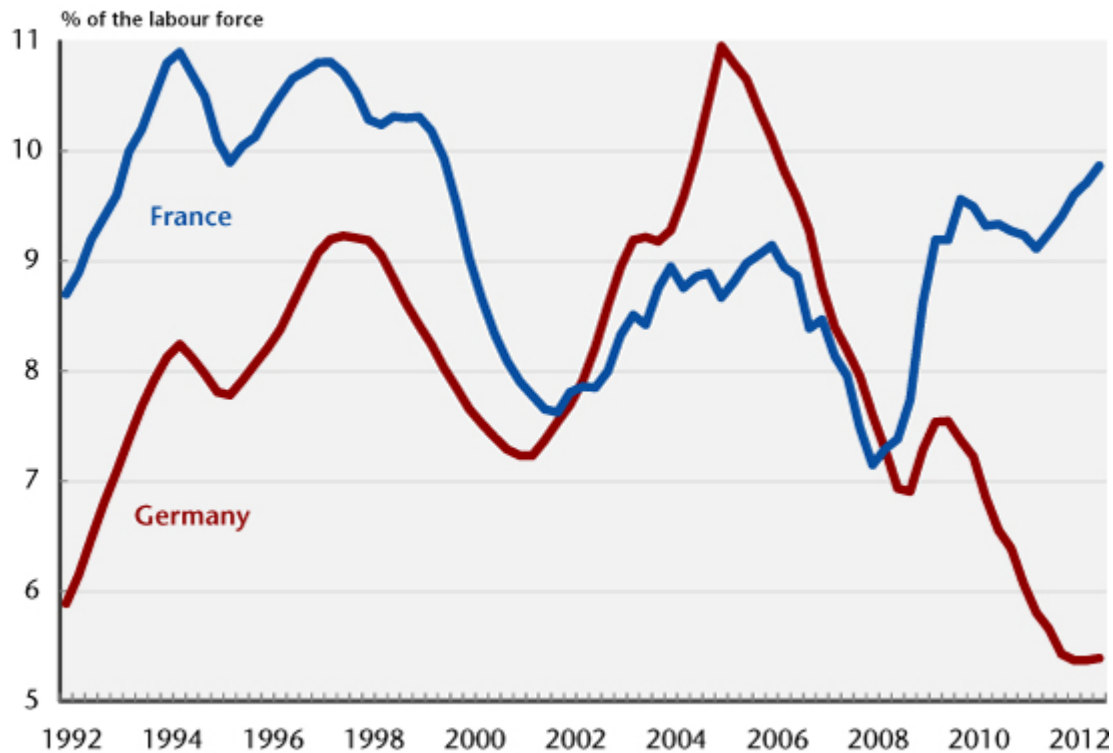
every sense of the word. The political and media battle about the fate of the Florange site revealed, in fact, an error in the government's analysis. The difficulties being experienced by the French steel industry result from a lack of demand, which is in turn the result of a policy choice of generalized austerity. Trying to resolve this macroeconomic problem with a microeconomic solution was, at a minimum, risky and shows the inconsistency of the short-term and medium-term decisions being taken on economic policy.

Higher unemployment in France, greater poverty in Germany

By [Eric Heyer](#)

Will France be the new Greece, as *The Economist* has argued? Should French reforms be accelerated and be modelled on those implemented in Germany ten years ago? For German public opinion, for its authorities and for a large number of economic experts, the answer is obvious. Not only does Germany have a lower deficit, but unlike its French neighbour it has also managed to significantly reduce its unemployment rate. Starting from a similar level in the early 2000s (close to 7.7% at end 2001), the unemployment rate now stands at 5.4% of the labour force in Germany, 4.5 percentage points below the level in France (Figure 1).

Figure 1 : Changes in unemployment
in Germany and France over the last 20 years

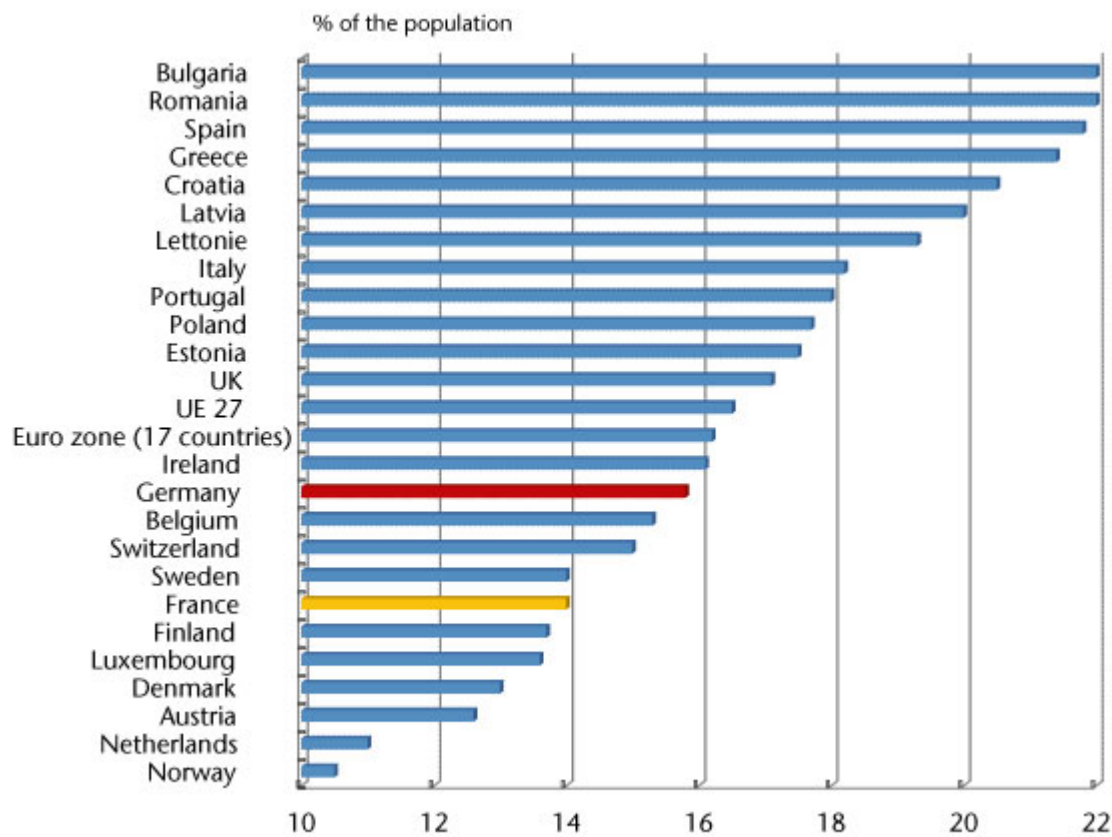


Source : ILO.

The purpose of this note is not to revisit the reasons for this difference, which have already been the subject of posts on this blog (see in particular the impact of demography, by [G. Cornilleau](#), of the reduction in working hours, by [E. Heyer and M. Plane](#), and of the rise in male-female inequalities, by [H. Périvier](#)). The point rather is simply to note that the reduction of unemployment in Germany has been accompanied by a steep rise in poverty.

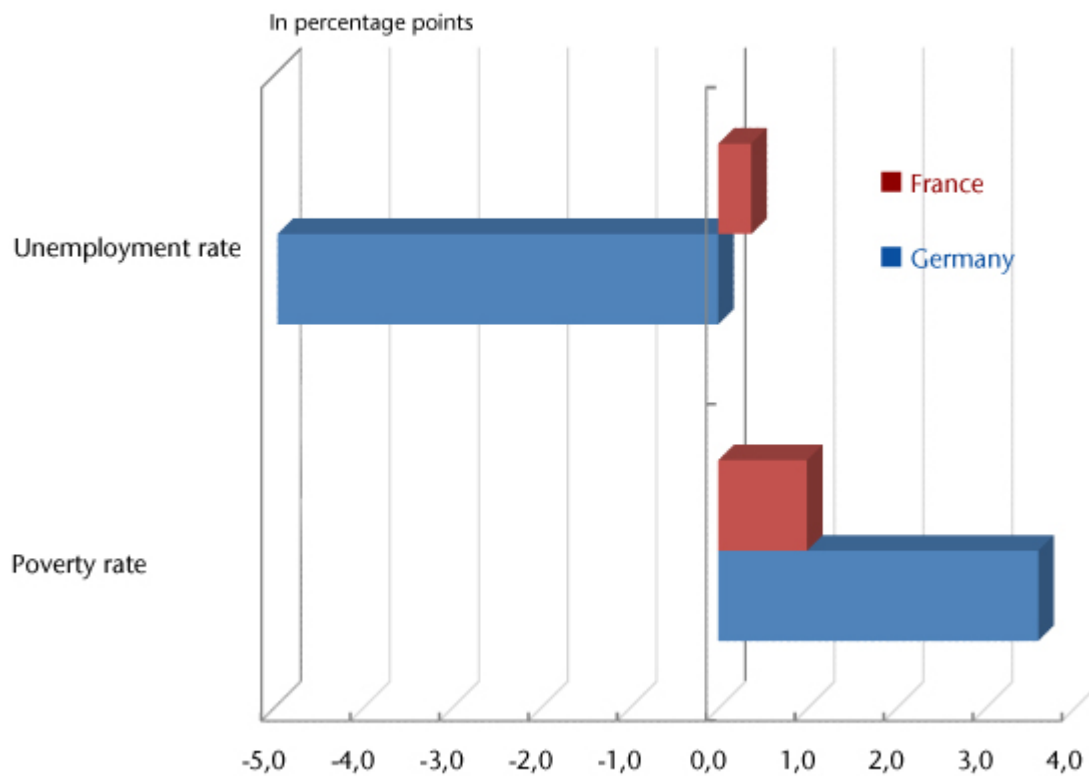
According to Eurostat, over the past six years the poverty rate (measured at the threshold of 60% of median income) has risen by 3.6 percentage points in Germany, four times more than the rise observed in France (0.9 point). In 2011, despite the sharp drop in unemployment and the large differential with France, the poverty rate in Germany was 1.8 points higher than the level observed in France, *i.e.* a difference of over 11% (Figures 2 & 3).

Graphique 2 : Poverty rate (60 % of median income) in 2011



Source : Eurostat.

Figure 3 : Changes in the unemployment rate and poverty rate (60 % of median income) in France and in Germany (2005-2011)



Source : Eurostat.

There is, therefore, a hidden side to the reforms implemented in Germany over the past ten years, which have led to lower unemployment but greater poverty.