

## **Book Review**

## Liana Giorgi, Ingmar von Homeyer & Wayne Parsons (eds) Democracy in the European Union: Towards the Emergence of a Public Sphere

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There is little doubt that national referenda on European Union (EU) treaties have had a decisive impact not only on the process of European integration, but on the development of EU studies as well. The outcome of the Maastricht treaty referenda in France and Denmark in 1992 brought the question of EU legitimacy and democracy at the forefront of scholarly attention. Thirteen years later the stumbling of the European constitutional treaty on the French and Dutch referenda ensured that debates on the democratic credentials of the EU remain as important and as relevant as ever.

In this light, the publication of the collective work of Liana Giorgi and her colleagues is an important and welcomed contribution. This edited volume is the outcome of a three-year EU-funded research project abundant in empirical work. The book's actual scope is both broader and narrower than what its title suggests. On the one hand, it examines democracy from a multi-level perspective and makes sure it does not equate Europe with the EU. On the other hand, it approaches the concept of democracy from the perspective of an emerging public sphere. While this offers the reader new insights on the actual and potential links between democracy and the EU, it underplays more traditional themes such as the role of collective identities, the need for accountability, transparency and representation.

The introductory chapter sets the theoretical background of the research project, but the arguments are not always straightforward. Crowley and Giorgi define a public sphere as "a place in which citizens come together to discuss and debate issues of common or public concern" (p.5). Furthermore, they argue that the European public sphere's existence is a matter of degree, and it is measured in terms of the EU institutional opportunities for public participation and of "forces and actors that are shaping mobilization...at the European level" (pp.18-9).

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on democratic audit. In particular, Giorgi argues that key conditions for democratisation are the operation of subsidiarity and the reduction of socio-economic inequalities. Unsurprisingly, none of these conditions are met at the European level. The chapter concludes with the challenges involved when monitoring democracy at the EU level, and with a limited presentation of the importance of a European identity in a democratic EU.

Ingmar von Homeyer (chapter 3) analyses three case studies (the Directive on the Deliberate Release of Genetically Modified Organisms; the 1999 sanctions against the Austrian government; the European Employment Strategy) to examine under what conditions Europeanisation of public debate is more likely to take place. He finds that "common affectedness" and non-state actors' "embededdedness" at the national or European level are



particularly important. On the contrary, formal competences or the decision-making rules on a policy area are much weaker predictors.

Chapter 4 reports the results of a survey on the existence of a European political class. Feron et al. deployed a web-based questionnaire and personal interviews to determine if officials working at the EU level share enough common characteristics and attitudes to qualify as a European political class supportive of European integration. Amongst the rich and diverse array of findings I note here the authors' claim that the European Parliament is not a second class professional choice for most MEPs. In addition, the data does not suggest the existence of a homogeneous European political class. Nevertheless, Feron et al. prefer to close the chapter in a more optimistic note arguing such a class could emerge in the future.

In chapter 5 Elise Feron examines the emergence of a European public sphere from below. In particular, she studies the role of the anti-globalisation movement in relation to mobilisation at a trans-national level. As she explains the anti-globalisation movement is neither exclusively European nor coherent and homogeneous. Nevertheless, the anti-globalisation movement managed to attract media attention on trans-national and European issues and helped to "reassemble the fragmented image of the European political space" (p.128).

Unfortunately, chapter 6 appears to suffer from the lack of a clear research purpose and context. Giorgi *et al.* argue that there are three distinct narratives regarding the EU as a community of values. The first one links European values to democratic principles and human rights, the second one refers to a 'social' Europe and the third one to Europe as a cultural community. However, a systematic examination of the different narratives about the EU as a community of values would have required the analysis of a greater number of documents covering a longer time-span and more policy areas. This is not the case here where the selection of cases is both limited and largely drawn from the past two decades.

Chapter 7 is dedicated to the national public sphere rather than the European one. Using the Czech Republic as a case study Illner *et al.* illuminate the ambivalent relationship between the new EU member states and the EU. The authors argue that the need to integrate the Czech Republic back into Europe led the Czech people to vote in favour of the accession. A large abstention rate, though, implied that a considerable segment of voters were rather sceptical towards the EU – a finding confirmed by opinion polls and the national election results.

It is regrettable that the first extensive references to Habermas' views on the European public sphere come late in the book in the concluding chapter. Similarly, the impact of the European constitution ratification process on the European public sphere ought to have been examined much earlier. Nevertheless, Parsons' critical arguments are a valuable addition and highlight the need to understand the EU within the context of multi-level governance.

Overall, this book is particularly useful for its rich and innovative empirical work, but unfortunately less so for its theoretical clarity on the notion of a European public sphere. Consequently, it is more suitable for postgraduate students and scholars who would like to draw from the empirical findings on the existence of a European political class, on participatory governance and on euroscepticism in Eastern Europe.

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