

## Review

Claudia Wiesner, *Demokratisierung der EU durch nationale Europadiskurse? Strukturen und Prozesse europäischer Identitätsbildung im deutsch-französischen Vergleich*. Baden-Baden: Nomos. 2014. 496 pages. ISBN 9783848705368.

**Anja Thomas**, Sciences Po Paris

In times of growing success of new extreme left- and rightwing Euroskeptical parties and movements in the member countries of the European Union, Claudia Wiesner's book contributes to understanding the potentials and limits of the democratisation of the European Union.

The author analyses the role of national discourses on "Europe" for the democratisation of the European Union and the emergence of a European identity. The book's basic assumption is that national discourses on the EU play a fundamental role for the development of a European identity – and in turn for a fully developed European democracy.

The book undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the debates on the failed Constitutional treaty in France and Germany to investigate into the issue. The central question of the study is: How far are national discourses on "Europe" and the "EU" a means for the emergence of a European identity and the democratisation of the EU? This question is answered through the investigation into two sub-questions: The first is about how national political, academic and economic elites construct the EU in national media discourses in the quality press. The second asks about the specific national context which defines the discourses.

Wiesner starts with a discussion of the role of a form of democratic identity for the democratisation of the EU. She then discusses her methodological approach. In a third step she presents first the institutional and cultural context in each country and the analysis of the discourses in France and Germany. She then compares the results and develops hypotheses for further research.

The second chapter lays the theoretical foundations of the approach and presents one of the core contributions of the book. In contrast to most research on identity and democratisation in the European Union the author uses a counterfactual heuristical method instead of an empirical-analytical one. Drawing on democratic theory she develops a model of European democracy serving as a 'counterfactual norm' (p. 43) for the analysis. Drawing on the literature on democratic theory, identity and nation-building, she defines an ideal model of European democratic identity based on twelve fundamental theoretical assumptions. The latter serve as a normative scheme for comparison for the real-world processes analysed in the study. Crucial for the final interpretation

of the results are the tensions, contradictions and conflicts which they provoke in light of the ideal model.

The main assumption of her model is that a complete European democracy is not possible without a fully developed European identity. The latter is thus the central focus of her theoretical considerations on the democratisation of the European Union. Democratic institutions and processes in the EU must be supported by a democratic subject, i.e. a European demos. This latter – claims the author – can only exist if European citizens define themselves to a certain minimum extent as member of this European demos. This European identity is not only the premise for the stability of the EU as political system, but a necessary precondition for the emergence of substantial democratic practice in the EU.

Building on Habermas' concept of 'constitutional patriotism' for Wiesner European identity must be based primarily on political and democratic core values. But she doubts that such an exclusively civil identification is possible, more cultural or even emotional foci for identification might be necessary. She also argues that the acceptance of differences must be part of European identity itself – given the ethnic, religious and cultural or other differences between different groups of Europeans. For the author European identity is necessarily a system of multi-level identities of which national identities are one element.

In the following she presents a new method for the empirical analysis of elite discourses integrating two opposite approaches to identity: those which study identity and its formation on the micro-level of the individual in the tradition of Easton's concept of diffuse support for the political system (Easton, 1953) and those who study European identity on the macro-level searching for meaning structures and frames of interpretation.

A central assumption of Wiesner's model is that national and EU elites play a central role for the construction of ideas about the identification with Europe and the European Union. To be fruitful for the democratic legitimation of the EU, the ideas present in the elite discourse must be compatible with codes present in the different European societies and not contrary to individual attitudes.

The author assumes that processes of construction of a European 'multi-level identity' (p. 67) take essentially place in national discourses on the EU (because a European public space is at its best be in the state of emergence). The national discourses on Europe are themselves coined by national context factors (the political system, the effects of Europeanisation, domestic models of European identity, prior discourses on European integration (p.74)...).

In the third chapter the author presents her methodological apparatus to understand how far these context factors influence the national discourses on Europe in the debates on the failed Constitutional treaty in France and Germany. Epistemologically, she subscribes to critical discourse analysis and argues

that discourses are never independent and autonomous meaning structures, but that they are not only open to influences of other discourses, but also defined through power structures, interests and socio-economic constellations (p. 93).

In difference to critical discourse analysis though, she follows Foucault's concept of discourses. Discourses not only serve top down domination, but have the potential to change power structures in society (p. 103). For Wiesner discourses are consequently the means of intermediation between the micro and the macro level.

In contrast to discourse-analytical studies which are interested in the content dimension of discourses, the author in the following develops an ambitious analytical framework which not only allows to illustrate what is conveyed in the discourses, but also *how, why* and *by whom* meanings are constructed in the discourse. The framework allows mapping the progress of the discourse, its rules, the references used, the topics addressed, the motives conveyed, the central arguments and finally, the relationship between these elements.

The four empirical chapters of the book then undertake an impressively detailed empirical analysis of the context factors and the discourses on the failed constitutional treaty in France and Germany.

In Germany issues concerning the Constitutional treaty were dealt with as if they were "European domestic policy". Discourses were open to other European discourses. In France identification was mostly constructed against the European Union. The discourse was focused on domestic issues and did not take into account the European debate. However, while in France there was a lot of access for citizens, activists and other civil society actors to the discourses, in Germany the discourses were dominated by political and social functional elites.

An active construction of a European identity in the discourse – a necessary precondition in the author's counterfactual model – was missing in both cases: in Germany because attributes for the EU were mostly missing (positive identification seemed to be "taken for granted"), and in France because negative attributes and the construction of the EU as "other" were dominating.

Drawing on the literature on nation-building, the author is able to show that the discourses on the Constitutional treaty did not lead to a significant construction of a collective European identity. Positive attributions of meaning to the EU were rare in the functional elites' discourses. There were only few attempts of linking the EU as a geographical territory to the idea of a common destiny. When the EU was explicitly defined, it was presented as the "other" by parts of the French elite and civil society. Only few EU symbols were introduced into the debates.

Wiesner shows furthermore that there is only a weak relationship between the identity construction in the discourses and diffuse support for the EU on

micro-level in both countries. The elite support for European integration in the discourses was disconnected from the attitudes of the population. Elite identification was in both countries more positive towards EU integration than the attitudes of the population (p. 405). The author finds that the political elites in both countries only marginally adjust their discourses on the EU to the attitudes of the population, even in cases in which critical citizens and activist are provided with voice in the elite discourses.

Longer and medium term narrations on the European Union are far more important factors for the explanation of the evolution of the discourses. The author finds that EU criticism has most chances to succeed in the discourses the more conflicts there are between specific context factors (political system, party system,...) and EU induced evolutions. This is all the more true the more the motives uttered resonate with specific issues frightening the citizens. Successful negative discourses use points of the national identity narration which are conflicting with European integration. They are put forward if there is the chance for political actors that they pay off politically in elections.

Interpreting the results of her analysis in the view of her counterfactual ideal model of European democracy, Wiesner identifies only few active processes of identity building in the discourses. There were no active attempts to define the European Union as a territory or political entity of common European destiny. What is more, the discourses in Germany were dominated by members of the functional elite of the state and there was only a very low participation of members of the civil society.

Wiesner's book is an important contribution to the question of how discourses can be successful. It is thus close to debates within the school of discursive institutionalism (see e.g. Schmidt, 2008). A dialogue with this literature would certainly be very interesting for further research.

In terms of methodology, the work's strength is its interpretative character and the thick holistic analysis of the two cases. The aim of the author is to understand the French and German discourses to develop inductively new discourse-analytical methods and explanatory models from the empirical material.

Wiesner's counterfactual comparison is interesting and inspiring. There are some points which could be discussed though with reference to the model of democracy for the EU she developed. First, the model she draws up is very demanding. In the author's view complete democracy is only possible when there is a minimum level of collective identification with the European level and some substantial active citizen participation. The latter condition might not even be fulfilled on the domestic level. Even if direct democratic forms of participation are currently in vogue, they do not compensate for the decline of traditional forms of democratic participation such as membership of political parties or trade unions. A liberal pluralistic idea of democracy based on the

guarantee of fundamental rights, transparent decision-making processes and free and fair elections may be a more adequate vision for democracy in the EU today.

Secondly, investigating into the democratic quality of the European Union poses always the question of the “nature of the beast”. Despite some precautions Wiesner’s vision of an ideal democracy on European level seems to be implicitly based on the idea of a European Union which *is* or *will be* a homogenous state-like political entity in the future. The recent evolution of the European Union does not point into this direction. Differentiated integration has been on the academic agenda for several years now. The historic objective of an ‘ever closer union’ is put into question by the current British government. A federal European Union seems to be farer away from political reality than ever. Given its hybrid character, the European Union must therefore probably rather be based on different parallel and potentially mutually reinforcing ‘vectors’ (Lord and Magnette, 2004) of (democratic) legitimation.

Finally, there is another more normative problem with a state-like vision of the European Union and a European identity. For a lot of political actors the EU was created to overcome the traditional nation-state and to put an end to nationalism. Trying to recreate an analogous form of ideology on European level seems to be a logical paradox.

Wiesner’s book provides an excellent food for thought to analyse the European Union of today. The gap between elite discourses and citizen attitudes she detected in 2005 have been filled in many member states by political parties and movements. This provided a new political offer for Euroskeptical voters, not the least in Germany triggered by the Eurozone debt crisis. The call for a renationalisation of EU policy instruments, for example the border control in the Schengen area, show that there is indeed still no form of collective European identity which is sufficiently resilient to support fully collective European decision-making processes and institutions.

## References

- EASTON, D. 1953. *The Political System: An Inquiry Into the State of Political Science*. New York: Knopf.
- LORD, C. and P. MAGNETTE 2004. E Pluribus Unum? Creative Disagreement about Legitimacy in the EU. *JCMS J. Common Mark. Stud.* 42, 183–202. doi:10.1111/j.0021-9886.2004.00482.x
- SCHMIDT, V.A. 2008. Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse. *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, 303–26. doi:10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060606.135342.