Cultural Diversity, European Identity and the Legitimacy of the EU

Fuchs, Dieter and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (eds.); Studies in EU Reform and Enlargement; Cheltenham; Edward Elgar; 2011; 269 pages; £69.95, Hardback; ISBN 978-1-84844-629-8.

The issue of democratic legitimacy has been at the forefront of the development of the European project in the last 20 years. Traditionally it was framed as the detachment of citizens from EU politics and studied through rigid research frameworks which looked only descriptively at public opinion polls and constitutional law. In their volume, Dieter Fuchs and Hans-Dieter Klingemann focus on the interplay between cultural diversity and a common European identity in endowing the European Union with legitimacy. The contributions to the book (from Arnold, Bornschier, De Clerck-Saschee, de Vries, Fuchs, Guinaudeau, Klingermann, Ruchet, Schlenker-Fischer and Schneider) skilfully highlight the fact that such an overarching European identity based on a common European culture is paramount not only for the legitimacy of the Union but also for its further widening and deepening through the process of European integration. The book is the result of a 4 year research project co-funded by the European Commission, EU-Consent ‘Wider Europe, Deeper Integration? Networks of Excellence’, comprising of contributions from a variety of scholarly fields: ranging from political science and political philosophy to media studies and sociology. The first part (chapters 1-2) of the volume presents an extensive overview of the academic debate around European identity and legitimacy in the EU, followed by a detailed description of the theoretical framework proposed by the editors. The role of national and European identities in aggregating support for the European Union is explored in the second part (chapters 3-5). The last part (chapters 6-10) tries to explain the influence of identity, culture and legitimacy on patterns of public support towards the EU. By systematically enquiring into the links between European culture or identity and the democratic legitimacy they ascribe to the European Union, the volume represents a much needed intellectual endeavour in locating the role of such processes and concepts into the logic of European integration. This makes the book a worthwhile read for anyone interested in the social make-up of the European project, but also more broadly to scholars of political science, international relations or sociology.

In their introductory chapters Ruchet (chapter 1) and Fuchs (chapter 2) present the theoretical framework and locate it into the literature on identity and legitimacy in the European Union. They express four important ideas and themes which are found throughout the volume and differentiate it from mainstream debates. Firstly, drawing on insights from social psychology collective, group identities are conceptualized as the result of the overlapping between multiple identities. Schlenker-Fischer (p. 87) argues that although EU citizens have multiple identities, there are significant differences between the various levels of compatibility between national identity and European identity. These are partly influenced by the cultural and social construction of the ‘others’ at national level, pointing to the idea that European identity is always expressed in relation to alterity.

Secondly, the source of the lack of legitimacy within the EU is found in the fact that the transfer of sovereignty that gave birth to the Union was not accompanied by an increase in transparency and accountability. As Fuchs and Schneider (chapter 3) insightfully underscore in their descriptive analysis of popular attitudes towards the EU, the crisis of legitimacy framed in such a way is not matched by empirical findings. Thus, citizen’s support for ‘more Europe’ has increased or at least remained constant during the last 15 years in relation to most policy areas. Nonetheless, such findings should be carefully considered as the authors base their analysis on a number of Eurobaromètre surveys which are commonly taught to paint only a static and narrow picture of public opinion towards the EU. In her analysis of French support...
for the EU, Guinaudeau (p. 139) favours the view that drawing positive or negative inferences solely from opinion polls eschews the ways in which important national political figures might have an influence on public support that is not fully captured by the Eurobaromètre.

Thirdly, a differentiation is made between subjective legitimacy which stems from citizen’s ontological support and objective legitimacy, influenced by European policy outputs. Subjective legitimacy is based upon citizen’s beliefs which they normatively construct and use to evaluate a certain political regime, while the notion of objective legitimacy refers to the institutionalization of widespread political rights and competitive and periodical elections. De Vries and Arnold (p. 202) rightly argue that both types of legitimacy are often invoked without any empirical quantification. Their comparative analysis of public and elite support for EU policies shows that citizens seem to have an impact on the amount of legislation produced at EU level. Nevertheless, such an influence has practical policy consequences only in areas where elites want to expand EU integration and favour a functionalist logic only where it brings practical benefits: foreign policy, common currency, international development or environment policy.

Finally, the existence of a common European identity might be a prerequisite (if not the most important one) for the legitimacy of the whole EU project. However, most contributions paint a pessimistic picture regarding the level of collective identification with the European Union. For example, Bornschier (p. 195) concludes that due to various overriding and mixed economic interests the European Union is bound to be perceived through different lenses in various national contexts. However, the European public sphere might be the site where such a common European identity could be forged. According to Julia De Clerck-Sachsse (chapter 6), the public sphere has a central role in creating the coherence of political and decision making processes. She goes on to posit that civil society is the most important actor within the public sphere which contributes to the creation of a coherent political identity. Equating civil society with the public sphere overlooks the role of other important actors which have been commonly presented in literature: the media or epistemic communities.

The obvious strength of the volume lies in the thought provoking way in which the contributions link the development of European identity and cultural diversity with the advancement of European integration through popular legitimacy. The highly sophisticated empirical analyses underpinned by the theoretical framework clearly set out in the introduction contribute to the coherence of the volume. Consequently, the book is an important resource for scholars and practitioners alike interested in issues of European democracy, culture or identity.