What were the French telling us by voting down the 'EU constitution'?

A case for interpretive research on referendum debates

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Abstract How to make sense of a popular vote is a question raised once again by the prospect of a Brexit referendum. To date the French rejection of the European Union constitutional treaty's ratification has been one of the most consequential electoral statements in the history of European integration. Still, what its actual message was con- tinues to puzzle analysts. What were the French telling us? The article approaches this question of from the angle of the discursive processes of meaning making in the public sphere, through arguments, narratives and images. Complementing available explanatory accounts based on survey date or quantitative textual analysis, it presents a non-quantitative interpretive discourse analysis of political ideas providing structures of meaning in the debate around the treaty, as it was reflected in the press. The focus is on discursive and narrative techniques of meaning making and knowledge production. These are situated against embedding webs of beliefs, languages, and traditions. The reading offered pre- sents the debate as structured (i) by the motif of an open-ended search for a better Europe, rather than an outright rejection of the integration project (ii) by a deep opposition between 'social Europe' and a world where political agency over market forces is lost, and (iii) by an overarching discourse about reclaiming this agency, popular sovereignty, and asserting the will to influence Europe's political future.

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Introduction

On 29 May 2005, the French electorate rejected the ratification of the EU constitutional treaty (TCE) by 55 per cent (turnout 69 per cent). Three days later the Dutch followed suit. And for the first time in the history of European integration popular verdicts in referendums brought a treaty to the fall. 'The tragedy', philo- sopher Tully (2007) noted about the EU-constitution referendums, 'is that we do not even know why peoples voted "no"' (p. 77). If referendums, and elections more broadly, can carry dramatic messages, it is difficult to read these messages. As for voting behaviour more broadly, there is a certain mystery over what a particular vote choice means to its author, what they intend to express by it. Proponents of the notion of an electoral mandate are all too familiar with the problem of discovering the meaning of a vote, or 'what voters wishes are' (Kelley, 1983, p. 134, see Dahl, 1990, pp. 362–366; for a study of how the news media helped construct election mandates in six Canadian elections, see Mendelsohn, 1998).

This article revisits the 2005 French referendum, more particularly, the wider public debate surrounding it and the campaign as reflected in the (print) media. It presents a case for, and an example of, a qualitative interpretive reading of processes of collective meaning making and knowledge production at play in referendum debates. Whereas much progress has been made in refining causal explanations of the referendum result we know much less about what the French may have meant to say with their votes. Of course, as Berezin (2009) puts it, the 'French "non" meant "no" to the draft treaty but it also had multiple other meanings' (p. 193). In order to reveal these manifold and complex other meanings, this article proposes a perspective complemen- tary to existing explanatory accounts. It suggests thinking of popular votes in referendums as performative acts that produce, carry, and convey certain implicit and explicit meanings. Votes thus understood as performances are approached as some- thing to be *interpreted* rather than outcomes to be *explained* in a counterfactual (see Berezin, 2012, p. 616). The article's specific focus is on the 'stage' of the ideas and understandings shaping, and shaped by, the French referendum debate as it was reflected in the quality press.

The article is divided into two main parts. The first section explains the adopted research design and underlying methodological choices, and situates the article's reading in the context of existing explanations of the French vote. The subsequent presentation of the case material in the Section 'Interpreting meaning-making in dialogue with existing why-explanations' opens with a number of observations on general discursive patterns that characterised the French debate. This is followed by a discussion of the central discursive opposition running through the debate, between a 'social Europe', associated with all kinds of respective ideals of a better world, and a 'liberal Europe', feared and antagonised by both camps. A final subsection addresses

the role played in the debate by the issue of 'democracy' as well as, through this lens, Eastern enlargement and Turkish accession. The Conclusion relates the article's interpretive explorations of meaning making to existing accounts of voting behaviour and political attitudes in the EU.

Interpreting Meaning-Making in Dialogue with Existing Why-Explanations

A substantial literature investigates why the French voted the way they did, and what motivates voting behaviour in referendums more broadly. Despite all disagreements, a common narrative emerges from this literature, which is distilled below. In direct dialogue with it, this section raises a number of questions that arise from it, and explains how the article's interpretive qualitative perspective and research design might shed light on them. These questions provide a loose structure for the subsequent presentation of the case material.

The referendum debate and dramatis personae

Four levels of independent variables in particular tend to be considered by the literature explaining the referendum outcome: domestic politics, and especially party politics or government-opposition dynamics (for example, Crum, 2007); the referendum campaign (Atikcan, forthcoming; Hobolt, 2009); the media coverage of the campaign and the constitutional treaty itself (Maatsch, 2007; see Statham and Trenz, 2012); and, finally, the level of the voters, including their socio-economic and geographic backgrounds, political attitudes and issue positions, or information levels (Bailey, 2008; Glencross and Trechsel, 2011). Most accounts analyse a combination of these levels, and how they interacted (in addition to the above, see for example, Hainsworth, 2006; Ivaldi, 2006; Crespy, 2008; Hobolt and Brouard, 2011). Many lay special emphasis on cue-taking effects (of voters following 'cues' from political parties, individual politicians, other campaign actors, the media and so on), priming effects (of actors 'priming' issues, or making them seem relevant to the vote choice), and framing effects (of their 'framing' the question at stake in certain ways, defining what in this case the constitutional treaty was about, how it should be understood, and what should be done about it; see Hobolt, 2009; Hobolt and Brouard, 2011; Statham and Trenz, 2012, p. 142; Atikcan, forthcoming). All of these effects worked crucially through the campaign and the debate around the referendum.

The present article shares, with much of this work, the understanding that contributors to the debate (including parties, individual politicians, civil society organisations or activists, journalists or other commentators and individual citizens) engaged in 'discursive entrepreneurship' (see Fligstein, 2001). Promoting certain issues or frames over others, opponents of ratification in particular used the ratification controversy strategically to gain 'credibility and momentum from the referendum' (Marthaler, 2005, p. 236). Laurent Fabius, for example, reneged his Parti Socialiste's (PS) pro-ratification stance, agreed by internal referendum in December 2004. He did so in the context of a leadership contest within the socialist party, and not least with a view

to who would be the left's main candidate for the 2007 presidential election (see Hainsworth, 2006, p. 101; Crespy, 2008; Grossmann and Woll, 2011). As Fabius, contributors to the debate sought to empower or (re-) constitute themselves as legitimate actors through their speech acts (Seidendorf, 2010), and/or tried to anchor certain issues or discourses more firmly in the discursive and political landscape. Especially the anti-globalisation group ATTAC, founded in 1998, had a golden moment in the limelight as a key contributor to the No campaign, relating the constitution to anti-globalisation sentiments and discourses, now catapulted to the very forefront of national debate.

Key protagonists in the spectacle of the campaign thus included, on the side of the No, renegade factions of the officially pro-ratification PS and Greens, as well as the parties to the left of the PS, and civil society organisations such ATTAC, the Fondation Copernic, or trade unions.1 Prominent treaty opponents on the right, in turn, comprised notably Nicolas Dupont-Aignan (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire, UMP), the traditionalist Eurosceptic Philippe de Villiers (Mouvement pour la France, MPF), as well as, on the extreme right, Jean-Marie Le Pen (Front National, FN) – who, however, stayed relatively quiet throughout the debate, presumably so as not to discredit the No vote (Ivaldi, 2006, pp. 55–56; Berezin, 2009; Atikcan forthcoming, pp. 94–95; see for example, Libération 23 March 2005). The chorus of the Yes campaign, in turn, comprised the governing centre-right UMP and its Giscardist junior party Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF, led by François Bayrou), in addition to the PS and Green majorities.

The referendum campaign and its media coverage are established independent variables in research explaining the voting outcome. They played an important role, more specifically, in priming certain existing attitudes as relevant to the referendum choice, and in framing the constitution as pertinent to specific issue attitudes, according to research focusing on their influence on public opinion (Hobolt, 2009; Hobolt and Brouard, 2011, respectively). It was notably the No camp that had the upper hand in defining the terms and grounds of the debate (for example, Marthaler, 2005; Mergier, 2005, p. 22). Ratification opponents 'were more successful in initiating public debate and in defining the meaning' of the constitutional treaty than its proponents, a quantitative discourse analysis of the campaign's newspaper coverage has found (Maatsch, 2007, p. 261). A seminal comparison of all four 2005 TCE referendum campaigns, moreover, which brings together in-depth interviews with campaigners, media content analyses, and public opinion data, makes a direct causal connection between the No campaigners effective framing of the constitution and the dramatic fall of the initially favourable public opinion on it (Atikcan, forthcoming, p. 6).

The debate and its reflection in the press as a stage for meaning-making

If the debate and campaign did influence voting behaviour and public opinion, this paper is an experiment in how interpretive analysis can help to break up the black box and knowledge production in the debate. These processes shaped, and reflected, how people made sense of the constitution, making certain understandings become more plausible than others (see also Seidendorf, 2010; Sternberg, 2013). More particularly, the article looks at discourses (ways of representing the world through words) used by the two camps. These discourses are understood to be expressive as well as constitutive of collective meanings. The article unpacks such 'meanings as beliefs' (Bevir, 2006, p. 281, 83), and the narratives, imageries, and discursive techniques

employed by the two camps, situating them in the wider webs of embedding meanings, languages, and discursive traditions. In a nutshell, it provides an analysis of contemporary French political ideas.

The underlying thus approach differs essentially from 'critical discourse analysis'. This is because discourses are approached not as independent variables that explain political outcomes (see Hay, 2004; Bailey, 2008, p. 35), but rather in their own right, as dialectically related to the 'meanings, belief systems and preferences' that underlie people's actions (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, p. 1). The article's source work is 'interpretive' in the sense of being 'concerned, empirically, with meaning' (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. xii). 'Humans making meaning out of the meaning- making of other humans' is the activity at the heart of the interpretive approach. This makes it inescapably subjective, as well as non-positivist (Pachirat, 2006, p. 374).

The referendum debate and campaign are conceptualised here as a stage for the production and contestation of meaning. Of course, individual meanings attributed to these performances varied greatly. Still, they were structured and enabled, by their context. Shared, inter-subjective meanings – and the campaign messages that would be received given these shared meanings – were produced, contested, adapted and revealed in the debates surrounding the referendum and constitution. These debates shaped and reflected the (ever changing) available common language; the vocabu- lary, semantics, and imagery that made meaningful communication possible. Discursive actors were both constrained by this structure, and agents over it (Wendt, 1987, see Seidendorf, 2010, p. 426). Hence, the discourses discussed below represented, in part, novel discursive shifts, but were also vehicles of already ongoing discursive developments and deeply grounded in longstanding discursive and French political traditions (see for example, Hazareesingh, 1994; Sternberg, 2013).

Relevant meaning making and knowledge-producing processes took place across the private and public spheres. This included, but was not limited to, the media. Still, the textual corpus analysed for this article was selected from the national quality press, and more particularly Le Monde, Le Figaro, and Libération. This is because the media overall, and these dailies in particular, are assumed to have been central mediators between 'private public' debate and the organised campaign, making their respective arguments and understandings, and feedbacks between them, visible to each other. Contributions to the campaign and to public debate became relevant not least by their resonance in them (see similarly Statham and Trenz, 2012, p. 174, 184). Gamson (1992), furthermore, has helpfully compared media discourses with 'maps' that guide ordinary citizens through the 'forest' of an issue in public affairs, where people may choose to stick to the pathways provided or wander off on their own account (p. 117).2 To stay in Gamson's image, the article explores the discursive repertoire of arguments, ideas, narratives – the maps – available to help the French find their way through the wood of the EU constitution, as well as the surrounding topographies of languages, imageries, and broader discursive contexts or cognitive conditions.

The article's limitation to the press, and specifically the quality press, is admittedly problematic. Notable omissions include the newly emerging free commuter dailies Metro and 20 min. The latter was in the process of a spectacular rise to being the second most-read paper after Le Monde (Le Nouvel Observateur 9 June 2005). Moreover, new online media are, and were, 'commonly accepted' to be playing an

important role in this particular debate (see Marthaler, 2005, p. 233; Fouetillou, 2006; Seidendorf, 2010, p. 428). For this very reason, however, the traditional print media devoted exceptional attention to the arguments advanced in the papers distributed free of charge, as well as in Internet chats, forums, and blogs, in addition to the broadcast media. The referendum debate was an exceptional moment where previously more marginal discourses challenged and established themselves firmly in the discursive mainstream, not least in the selected dailies (see Fouetillou, 2006; Seidendorf, 2010, p. 428). The quality press covered this development in a reflexive way. In addition, their coverage was 'used in deciding what stories should be covered by television news', and probably the new free and online media as well (Picard, 2015, p. 15, on the campaign's TV coverage generally, see Gerstlé, 2006). On these grounds, the selected corpus does arguably give a reasonably good picture of the discursive landscape of the wider public debate at large.

The corpus analysed covers the 3 months leading up to the referendum on 29 May 2005. In this period public opinion shifted from 60 per cent in favour to 54 per cent against (Ipsos, 2005). A total of 897 articles were reviewed: 306 for the centre-left Le Monde (M), 456 for the centre-right Le Figaro (F, both retrieved on LexisNexis, keywords 'constitution européenne' AND 'référendum'), and 135 opinion pieces for the left-of-centre Libération (L, retrieved from liberation fr, same keywords for the debate rubric 'rebonds'). Key discursive positions and techniques were identified by reading and re-reading this comprehensive sample. This iterative 'hermeneutic circle', moreover, extensively drew further on fieldwork conducted by the author in Paris from September 2004 to June 2005. This involved regularly reviewing 20 min, online sources (selected by the snowball principle), the many books on the constitution displayed in bookshops, as well as campaign posters and pamphlets distributed at metro stops and markets, in addition to reading a mixture of daily and weekly papers, watching television, attending talks by a number of key campaign players at Sciences Po, and having conversations on the constitution on a daily basis (according to a widely reported IFOP poll, the referendum featured in 83 per cent 'of conversations' in May; cited in Ricard-Nihoul, 2005, p. 3). On a second level, particular texts and passages exemplary of the thus extracted key discursive moves were subjected to close readings, much like a scholar of literature would approach a set of poems or short stories. How, and on what grounds, do they create and contest meaning? The analytical focus lay on recurrent or especially effective story lines, arguments, imageries, and rhetorical techniques. These were contextualised, further, in the embedding webs of understandings, meanings, and beliefs. Particular emphasis is placed on the use of binary oppositions, as discussed below.

The method applied, thus, is essentially qualitative. This choice sets this article apart from most of the existing literature on the French vote, campaign, and debate – which draws overwhelmingly on large-n survey data and/or quantitative frame or discourse analyses (see notably Seidendorf, 2010 for an exception). Most accounts that consider ideas, discourses, or frames basically measure or compare which actors used which frames how often (for example, Lord, 2008), and to what effects on public opinion and voting behaviour (for example, Maatsch, 2007; Hobolt, 2009). Atikcan's analysis stands out in that her main explanatory factor for the shift in public opinion is the 'relative strength' of the No campaign's framing. Strong arguments for the No, she suggests, were those that 'built a connection between existing contentious issues' and

the referendum proposal (12–13), and did so in a timely manner, before the Yes campaign got into gear. Drawing on pertinent political- framing literatures, Atikcan (forthcoming) identifies strong frames as those related to beliefs stored in people's memory, as vivid, concrete, image provoking and emotionally compelling, and as resting on 'negative easy versus positive hard arguments' (pp. 19–28; see also Hobolt, 2009, p. 20, 110–133; see below). She, too, uses quantitative media content analysis in order to 'observe the extent to which the campaign messages were picked up by the news media', and to quantify their impact (forthcoming, p. 29) – and to work back from their thus identified strength to a theory explaining it.

There is an inevitable trade-off between translating textual data into numerical, measurable and comparable indices on the one hand and, on the other, capturing deeper argumentative and narrative dynamics of discursive construction, or implicit and context-dependent meanings that would slip through the net of indicator-based research (see Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. xii). This article's methodology and research design prioritise the second option. This means that it does not undertake to, and cannot, make claims about the relative frequency or dominance of the discourses and discursive techniques it discusses. Rather, it starts from a number of themes identified as central by others, to then zoom in on the underlying narrative and argumentative workings and the embedding discursive context in the next few sections. In the picture portrayed by the available quantitative work, the main fault lines of the debate and vote ran as follows.

The mainstream narrative and its loose ends

A prominent explanation of the French vote is that it was at least in part a 'sanction vote' against President Jacques Chirac and the centre-right government (Dehousse, 2006, pp. 152–153, see Hainsworth, 2006, Ivaldi, 2006). Broken up by political affiliation, however, opposition to Chirac was important in explaining the No vote among his opponents, and more specifically among right-wing and neither- left-nor-right factions, but not among the leftist voters (Brouard and Tiberj, 2006, p. 266) – where the No vote was much stronger than on the right (Marthaler, 2005; Atikcan, forthcoming, pp. 123–124). Many commentators located the 'chief cause' of the French No vote, on this basis, in the division of the PS (Crum, 2007, pp. 76–77).

Against such explanations centred on domestic politics – and mirroring the debate on whether or not EU votes are really 'second-order national elections' (see Crum, 2007, pp. 63–64 for an overview) – a number of survey-based studies have concluded that the vote was indeed 'about Europe', or EU-related issues. Some see a general 'rejection of the European project' at play (Brouard and Sauger, 2005, p. 140), or how 'voters understood the EU polity, in particular whether membership is beneficial to one's own country' (Glencross and Trechsel, 2011). Others provide evidence that vote choices were 'driven by specific issue concerns rather than general dissatisfaction with the European Union or national governments' (see Hobolt, 2009, pp. 226–227; Hobolt and Brouard, 2011, p. 309). From this vantage point, the No vote was not a vote against Europe as such. One of the questions addressed in this article is in what the French debate actually turned on a rejection of the EU as a whole, or of integration as such.

What virtually all accounts do agree on, moreover, is the crucial importance of the economic and social situation in France, and the constitution's implications for it.

TCE opponents on the left feared the 'neo-liberalisation' of the EU's and France's economic and social model, and those on the right, the social and economic consequences of open borders and free-trade liberalism (Ivaldi, 2006, p. 61). Economic and social issues were central as a frame in the campaign (Atikcan, forthcoming), as well as in the media coverage (Maatsch, 2007; Hobolt, 2009, pp. 209–210, 226; on the TV coverage, see Gerstlé, 2006 or Piar and Gerstlé, 2005). In addition, they were the single most central consideration in people's vote choices (see Brouard and Sauger, 2005; Ivaldi, 2006; Hobolt, 2009, p. 224, 215; Atikcan, forthcoming, pp. 120–122), even if they played a much more 'marginal' role among voters on the right (Brouard and Tiberj, 2006, pp. 266–267). This article explores, on this basis, discursive meaning-making dynamics by which the constitution could so plausibly be framed as a matter of social and economic questions.

The other most controversial issue in the print media (Maatsch, 2007, but Hobolt, 2009, pp. 209–210) and campaign (see Atikcan, forthcoming, p. 102, 4), as well as the most decisive issue at least for UMP and FN supporters who voted No, was the issue of Turkish accession (see Brouard and Sauger, 2005, pp. 132–134, Atikcan, forthcoming, pp. 122–123). Notwithstanding, overall the question of Turkish membership (9 per cent) was given much less frequently as a reason for voting No than negative consequences for France's social model (57 per cent), too liberal/not social enough (37 per cent), opposition to government (18 per cent), according to Flash Eurobarometer (Nrs 171 and 172, 2005; see Hobolt, 2009, p. 215).

Finally, there is striking disagreement in the literature on the salience of 'democracy' as an issue of debate. Hobolt (2009, p. 210) does not list democracy as one of the main issues of debate, whereas Maatsch does have it as a prominent justification given for discursive actors' positions on the constitution (2007, pp. 272–273). It seems comparably uncontroversial, however, that 'democracy', or a lack thereof, was not an important voting motivation. Only 3 per cent of Flash Eurobarometer respondents spontaneously mentioned a lack of democracy as a reason for their having voted No (Nr 171, 2005, p. 17). Was democracy really so absent from the debate, or did it make an entry in disguise? What follows takes up all these questions.

The Plot as Seen from the Interpretivist Seats

A key to understanding the debate as a whole was the following pattern. Advocates of ratification, at least initially, focused on making a case for how the constitution would improve the *status quo.* The EU, and France, they repeated, would be better off if the constitution were ratified (for example, F 10/05). They showcased the treaty's institutional improvements (including revised decision-making procedures, which would not only allow the enlarged 25-member EU to function better, but also increase France's voting weight), its advances towards democracy and transparency, or the fundamental rights charter (see also Atikcan, forthcoming, p. 108). The 'advocates of the No' by contrast pilloried the gap between the Europe of the constitution and their ideal of a better Europe. Effectively they redefined the question at stake. The official referendum question read 'Do you approve the bill authorising the ratification of the treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe?' The

constitu- tion's opponents, however, forcefully asserted that the 'real question' being asked of the French was 'Which Europe do we want?' (for example, F 07/03/ 2005, 07/04/2005; M 14/05/2005; L *2*6 May 2005, 17 March 2005; see the title of *Le Figaro*'*s* opinion-piece series on the constitutional treaty of that name, and Milner, 2006, p. 257 on the Communist referendum manifesto). This discursive move was so successful that ratification advocates, too, had no choice but to turn their attention to the 'real' question, thus unwillingly fuelling a dynamic that ultimately worked against the constitution.

Which Europe do we want? Or: What are we actually talking about?

To begin with, the redefinition of the question under discussion effectively moved the measuring stick for assessing the constitution away from the status quo with all its shortcomings, and shifted it to an ill-defined ideal open to manifold interpretations. This had the advantage of taking all those on board who generally approved of European integration. According to Eurobarometer, 88 per cent considered France's membership 'a good thing' immediately after the referendum (Flash 171, June 2005:23). Some public opinion scholars, however, have presented more sceptical views and statistics (for example, Ivaldi, 2006, p. 59, or Dehousse, 2006, p. 154; Sauger et al, 2007, pp. 16–23). At the discursive level, to be sure, one journalist commented, everybody 'vied with each other in their faith in Europe', even among the critics of the constitution, (L 24 May 2005a, see also Maatsch, 2007, p. 271). Framing the debate in terms of a quest for a better world, permitted regarding obstructing the constitution's ratification as a positive act of 'hope' (for example, cultural critic Slavoj Žižek in M 26 May 2005b or the Communist pamphlet 'Le NON: un vote d'espoir').

Voting No became a statement not a statement against Europe, but in favour of a different, a better Europe. According to a common metaphor, a French No would entail a 'salutary crisis' (for example, M 24 May 2005b, L 23 March 2005a, 16 September 2004; see contra, M 31 March 2005, 14 April 2005). What this crisis would entail, ranged from a 'more leftist' treaty extracted by the 'vast European movement arising from a French No' (Duhamel, 2005, p. 14, L 23 March 2005a) to a 'Europe founded on sovereignty and the free cooperation of states' (F 25 March 2005).

Such constructive readings of a no vote were favoured by the general confusion about whether or not the constitution would be renegotiated if rejected. This bewilderment found an emblem in the soon infamous 'plan B', over the existence of which there was much disagreement and speculation. Proponents of the No, and most prominently Fabius (for example, M 7 May 2005), successfully kindled the hope of crafting a better Europe, and France, by detailing demands regarding what France's positions should be. Against such utopias made tangible by projection, ratification proponents were reduced to repeating, on a daily basis, that there would be no opportunity to renegotiate, there was 'no such thing as a plan B'.

The redefinition of the question opened up discursive space for a critical engagement with what was perceived to be wrong, not only with the proposed treaty, but also with the EU. As anything was conceivable at this moment of public imagination of ideal alternatives, there was a lot to take fault with. 'Each of us has a reason to say no' as de Villiers canvassed (M 24 May 2005a). The constitution's opponents partly objected to specific treaty provisions, giving some rather twisted

interpretations. Communist party leader Marie-George Buffet for instance intimated that the treaty would abolish the rights to abortion and divorce (M 20 April 2005b). Others claimed it would re-establish the death penalty, undermine the secular

principle of 'laïcité' (and hence the very nature of the French republic), or lead to the dismantling of French public utilities ('services publics'; for example, M 15 June 2005, 8 March 2005, 20 March 2004, L 17 March 2005a). These allegations allowed the No camp to fashion themselves as the defenders of constitutive French political traditions such as the enlightenment tradition, universalism, and étatism (see Hazareesingh, 1994, pp. 151–178; Maatsch, 2007, p. 276; Seidendorf, 2010). Moreover, they could also be read as examples of a deliberate 'bullshit strategy' (see Frankfurt, 2005; Fossum and Trenz, 2006, p. 16), or of actors strategically presenting a particular interpretation of the issue instead of 'providing voters with facts' (Atikcan, forthcoming, p. 11).

Ratification advocates unsurprisingly accused opponents of lying and wilfully stoking confusion (see for example, L 17 March 2005a, M 27 April 2005, F 10 May 2005). They threw themselves into the 'educational challenge' of illuminating what the provisions really would entail (for example, M 2 March 2005b, 6 March 2005, 7 April 2005), and engaged with the prominent concerns one by one: the 'freedom of thought, conscience, and religion', they explained, did not entail an attack on French secularism; the 'right to life' was not an abortion ban; and 'services publics' were referred to as 'services of general economic interest' and actually protected for the first time (M 28 May 2005, see also 8 March 2005, 20 March 2004, 29 May 2005). The Yes camp effectively found themselves coerced thus to counter the No-side's individual allegations. This attested to the success of the No camp's framing, a pattern confirmed by campaigners on both sides ex post facto (Atikcan, forthcoming,

p. 101). The No camp retorted, moreover, by denouncing in turn the Yes campaign's 'policy of lies', and their 'educational' approach as patronising (for example, M 5 May 2005, 26 May 2005c, or Le Pen in F 11 May 2005).

In this standoff of mutual accusations and contradictions as to what the text entailed, one person's word stood against another's. Everyone on the electoral register had been mailed a copy of the constitutional text and many had a go at it. Most citizens were at a loss as to what it really would imply. The debate turned into a paradigm example of how context becomes more important than legal text when this legal test is read by non-experts, and even more so in a debate as highly mediatised as this one (see Fossum and Trenz, 2006, p. 12). Beyond the actual, confusing text of the treaty, the balance was tilted by what people associated with it. Taking advantage of this, the No campaign focused the debate not on a pragmatic analysis of the actual changes foreseen, but on what the constitution, and the EU generally, stood for. This forced the Yes camp onto the defensive. Often they could do nothing but protest against the discursive linkages, images, and storylines advanced by the No-side, arguing that this or that had 'nothing to do' with the constitution (for example, F 15 April 2005).

Associations with the EU or the EU constitution were widely structured around a number of fundamental discursive oppositions. This applied to the discourses of both the No and the Yes camps. The analyses that follow focus on two such clusters of oppositions. The first, between a 'liberal Europe' and a 'social Europe', was the most important. It rested on a number of related discursive patterns regarding to the

relationship between impersonal market forces, globalisation, and European supra-nationalism, on one side, and human political agency or viable social policies, on the other. The second cluster of structuring binaries to be discussed subsequently contrasted a democratic Europe to a Europe where decisions are taken beyond the reach and control of the people. All these oppositions would align with the respec- tive positive ideals of the Europe supported versus negative counterimages of the Europe rejected. In the case of the No campaign, the rejected type often coincided with the EU either as it had developed historically or as the constitution would institute it. In the case of the Yes, the argument was that the constitution would help to bring the EU closer to the desired ideal and cut back on the undesirable aspects, or else that it had nothing to do with the respective bugbear.

The social-liberal divide

The emblem of 'social Europe' pervaded pro- and anti-constitution discourses alike. Constitution opponents on both the left and the right presented the treaty and the EU in its current form as threatening the social and economic situation in France and Europe, whereas a strong No-vote would make a more 'social' France as well as Europe possible (for example, L 23 March 2005a, see Duhamel, 2005, p. 14). The Socialist Yes-campaign canvassed that 'the Yes' was 'the way to social Europe' (Duhamel, 2005, p. 32, Atikcan, forthcoming, p. 102). Even President Chirac, who at first primarily used the foundational legitimating argument that the EU/constitution stood for peace in Europe (see Sternberg, 2013; Atikcan, forthcoming, p. 102), eventually chose to justify the treaty in terms of social policy: that it was 'a decisive step towards a more social situation', and would allow 'safeguarding the European social model' (M 7 April 2005, 28 May 2005).

What exactly constituted social Europe remained hazy. Depending on political orientations and personal concerns, it often took shape ex negativo in terms of what the constitution supposedly threatened. Thus it could evoke the French 'social acquis', social protection, reduced unemployment, higher spending in public education, secure pensions, affordable sick insurance, efficient public utilities and so on (see for example, M 24 May 2005b). A German journalist commented that the phrase mostly mirrored the respective speaker's ideal of an ideal-world French welfare state as it had not been working for decades (Die Zeit 9 June 2005c). Longstanding vociferous resistance to threats, or changes, to the French social and economic model, had prepared the immediate availability and strong emotional appeal of references to 'social Europe'. This conflict had culminated in a series of public sector strikes and street demonstrations against cuts to social spending and pensions, privatisation, and social security reforms from 1995 onwards (see Smith, 2004, p. viii, 2; see Atikcan, forthcoming, p. 94).

Most decisively, social Europe was defined against 'liberalism' (neo-liberalism, ultraliberalism). Liberalism, in turn, would be associated with the 'Anglo-Saxon' economic and social models, with unemployment, and the unchecked reign of market rationales and the forces of globalisation. Anti-liberal and anti-globalisation discourses had likewise been gaining ground since the mid-1990s (see Hay and Rosamond, 2002; Schmidt, 2002, 2007; Crespy, 2010). In the long run-up to the 2002 presidential election, both President Chirac and cohabitation Prime Minister Lionel Jospin had wooed the emerging anti-globalisation movement, responding to supposedly 'clear

popular resonance' of 'anti-American, anti-imperialist' and anti- liberal sentiments (Hay and Rosamond, 2002, p. 153). Regarding the question of how this connected to European integration, successive governments justified the cut- backs of the 1990s as necessary to help France meet the convergence criteria for monetary union. European economic integration, in turn, had been framed as protecting France against globalisation, in official discourse under Mitterrand as well as Chirac. In this discourse, Europe was France's 'shield' against globalisation and its neo-liberal imperatives, as well as a means of rescuing the French welfare state. This narrative (Schmidt, 2002, p. 187; 2007) had already suffered with the economic crisis of the 1990s (Sternberg, 2013, pp. 106–113), and did so even more now. It is noteworthy that in the 'strikes against globalization' of 1995, wider public discourse, unlike the government, did not generally blame France's economic problems on the EU, but rather on globalisation (Hay and Rosamond, 2002, p. 154). This changed now.

The 2005 referendum debate marked the 'coming of age' (Crespy, 2008) of anti-globalisation discourses, and of the 'idea that Europeanization and globalization were iterations of the same economic processes' (Berezin, 2009, p. 207). Now Europe was firmly articulated with globalisation, and the 'liberalism' associated with it. European integration now seemed to generate, rather than help to solve, economic problems. In this transformed discursive landscape, Chirac's defending the constitution as the way to 'social Europe' proved 'ultimately unconvincing', for by now 'voters believed [that this narrative] was contradicted by current EU policy priorities' (Glencross, 2009).

Again, it is striking that both opponents and proponents of the treaty used the social-Europe-versus-liberalism antithesis. Opponents linked the constitution to the bugbear of liberalism with all its associations: 'There is no leftist Yes, and no Gaullist Yes. All there is is a liberal Yes. Full stop' (Jean-Pierre Chevènement, nationalist-republican, former Socialist, M 7 April 2005). A common metaphor for the constitution was that of a 'liberal corset' or 'liberal straitjacket' (for example, M 20 April 2005a, 28 May 2005, see 20 April 2005b). The pro-constitution side, on the other hand, called the constitution a 'bulwark against ultraliberalism' (for example, Socialist Jack Lang, M 28 May 2005), echoing the 'Mitterrandist' discourse of Europe as a shield against globalisation (Schmidt, 2007). Chirac, again, followed the wider public debate's, and ultimately the No camp's, lead in joining the anti-liberal rhetoric: 'Liberalism will end in disaster just like Communism' (FAZ 28 May 2005a; see M 28 May 2005, L 24 May 2005a) – to then brandish the treaty as Europe's weapon for resisting 'the globalisation carried by an ultraliberal current' (in a televised discussion, M 16 April 2005). Thus accredited the spectre of a 'liberal Europe' that 'attacked French social advantages', some commentators observed, only 'played into the hands of the partisans of the No' (M 24 May 2005a). The discursive situation turned into such deadlock that 'any mention of the word liberalism' triggered off a 'reaction against the constitution' (Duhamel, 2005).

Underpinning the equation of Europe/the constitution with 'liberalism' was their concurrent association with unemployment – another issue of immediate emotional appeal. The relocation of French jobs abroad (délocalisations) was an overpowering topic in the audiovisual media. In March in particular, 'no day' passed 'without a relocation announcement' (Cambadélis, 2005, p. 33; see Le Gall, 2005, p. 106). The issue's extraordinary centrality during the referendum campaign has been compared with that of 'insecurity' in the 2002 presidential elections (for example, M 26 May

2005a; Cambadélis, 2005, p. 33). Campaigners for the No actively linked the constitution and délocalisations. Fabius for example had made his short-lived initial support of the treaty (withdrawn after only 3 days, when he came out as the leader of the Socialist No in September 2014) conditional upon the stipulation 'everything for employment and against industrial relocation' (M 29 May 2005). Henri Emmanueli, in his role as another central proponent of the Socialist No, undertook a 'tour de France of the dislocated' to 25 companies (M 26 May 2005a). Jacques Nikonoff, president of ATTAC France, warned: 'if the yes wins on 29 May […] délocalisations will be accelerated' (M 24 May 2005b).

Fears of unemployment helped ratification opponents to mobilise against the constitution an entrenched climate of insecurity, pessimism, smouldering frustration, which had forcefully manifested itself, and been stirred up, on the occasion of the 2002 presidential election (see also Atikcan, forthcoming, p. 108).3 It centred on perceived threats to social welfare, employment, social protection, or retirement standards, or even the health system (see L 06/04, Le Gall, 2005, p. 106; Dehousse, 2006, p. 154; Ivaldi, 2006; Berezin, 2009, pp. 126–166). This climate now found another focal point in the European services directive (see Crespy, 2010; Grossman and Woll, 2011). Referred to as the 'Bolkestein directive', it provided a powerful means of linking both EU and constitution not just with the outflow of jobs abroad, but also with the influx of cheap labour from the new Eastern member-states (for example, L 21 May 2005). In vain did treaty supporters repeat that the directive had 'nothing to do with the constitution' (L 16 March 2005).

De Villiers popularised not only the orthographic mutilation 'Bolkenstein' (quipping 'Bolkestein, Frankenstein, another million unemployed', M 17 March 2005), but also the infamous symbol of the 'Polish plumber'. The services directive, de Villiers alleged, entitled the skilled Pole to 'offer his services in France, at the salary and with the rules of social protections of his country of origin. Out of the 11 million persons working in the services sector, one million jobs are threatened by this directive' (F 15 March 2005; for an earlier appearance of the Polish plumber, see Charlie Hebdo 12/2004). De Villiers established the plumber as shorthand for the 'dismantlement of our economic and social model', for the destruction of French jobs as well as salary and protection standards. These associations created a discursive atmosphere where pro- and anti-campaigners alike competed over 'who was the most hostile to the Bolkestein directive' (L 24 May 2005a; see for example, Fabius in F 7 March 2005). Even the Chirac government distanced itself from the directive, which it had negotiated itself (see for example, M 29 May 2005).

Another foundation stone of the social-Europe-versus-crude-liberalism opposition's was the antagonism of 'the market' and 'the social', which characterised discourses not only of the left. Unlike New Labour or the German tradition of the 'social market economy', sociologist Alain Touraine noted, the French left had long since tended to present market and welfare state as two antipodal, rather than potentially mutually reinforcing, forces. The call for the state to regulate and intervene in the market in order to guarantee social security and secure jobs had traditionally been louder in France than elsewhere in Europe (Süddeutsche Zeitung [SZ] 19 May 2005; see Hay and Rosamond, 2002; Dehousse, 2006, p. 155). Early pro-integration discourses had sought to have this active function of the state partly transferred, in people's minds, to the European Communities in their foundational decades (Sternberg, 2013, pp. 44–

54). In 2005, however, both France (among other member-states) and the EU had had difficulties in delivering these functions for many years.

A frame had become rooted in the French public imaginary that blamed the EU for forcing France into a world where 'the economy' prevailed over the interest for 'the common good'. 'The market' prevailed over 'the social', and the two were mutually exclusive. Some leftist as well as sovereignist opponents to the constitution nurtured hopes that France or the member-states could master the liberal market forces, if only the EU did not interfere (Touraine, Süddeutsche Zeitung 19 May 2005). They blamed the treaty for shifting the EU's system towards 'the market' at the expense of the French and European social systems. This criticism bundled against the provision that competition in the internal market was 'free and unobstructed' (Article I:3–2). Although the principle had been fixed in the Treaty of Rome since 1957 (Article 3), the far left and altermondialistes saw in this article a further step in the 'organised submission' to the 'forces of the market' (M 24 May 2005, see Heine, 2009). Across the political spectrum, many criticised that this 'economic principle' was being 'erected as a constitutional principle for the organisation of society' (L 23 March 2005a). Pro-constitutionalists objected that according to another article (I-3) competition was not an 'objective in itself' but only a means to the objectives of full employment and social progress (for example, L 25 March 2005; Sarkozy in F 14 April 2005). But anti-constitutionalists made a meal of the treaty's 'restrictive third part' defining 'an economic and social policy and II (Buffet in M 20 April 2005b). Even some supporters of the 'Oui' criticised the treaty for leaving social policy to the member-states, not enabling the EU to interfere enough (for example, M 24 May 2005a): 'competitiveness' continued to take precedent over 'solidarity', and 'social and fiscal dumping' remained possible (M 26 May 2005d). The association of the EU with liberalism rested further also on the understanding that convergence criteria and the European Central Bank 'prevent[ed] fighting unemployment with contra-cyclical strategies' (for example, M 26 May 2005d). Together with the principle of 'unobstructed competition', this made 'Euro-Keynesianism' impossible (M 28 May 2005).

Nicolas Sarkozy, at the time minister of the interior, set out to undermine the market-social antagonism (although, he also reproduced it in statements like 'the new Europe will be no longer at the service of the market'). In his discourse, which anticipated his presidential campaign, globalised market forces were essential to making social policies possible, namely by forcing France to be competitive. He ridiculed the eagerness of many constitutional sceptics to preserve the French social model, when this model was failing. 'The best social model is that which gives everyone a job. Hence, it is not ours' (M 14 May 2005a).

In the liberal-versus-social frame, the 'impersonal forces of the market' and globalisation were up against a more 'human' world (see for example, Nikonoff in M 24 May 2005b). Once again, globalisation was a lynchpin in how the EU was represented in the French constitutional debate. And once again many opponents depicted EU as an agent, a precursor, or amplifier of the 'inhuman' forces of globalisation. The utopia of 'social Europe' by contrast stood for the 'mastery' of these forces, continuing on old official discourse. Presidential widow Danielle Mitterrand praised the No as a 'forceful demonstration of our humanism' (Spiegel 23 May 2005b). Counter to this, Yes-advocates framed the EU and the constitution pragmatically as

means of mastering globalisation and ‘putting the market at the service of the human being’ (Sarkozy, F 15 April 2005). They renewed the old but now increasingly endangered discourse of the EU as a guard or ‘bulwark’ against globalisation (for example, L 24 May 2005b). In any case, they pointed out, a rejection of the constitution would not stop globalisation. Quite the reverse, it would unleash its forces, giving away indispensable means of regulating them (F 14 April 2005, L 9 March 2005).

The long-standing image of European integration as a resource for mastering globalisation was again used flexibly for competing political orientations. In the language of the orthodox left, the constitution would provide ‘some useful means’ to check ‘neoliberalism’; for instance the fundamental rights charter offered European employees an ‘effective tool for toning down [salary] inequalities’ (L 25 May 2005). On the centre- right, and in Sarkozy’s language, the constitution featured as a ‘reform accelerator’ for the French system, which was in dire need of increasing its global competitiveness (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 25 May 2005, see F 14 April 2005). (Of course, many on the left would call precisely the reforms Sarkozy had in mind ‘neoliberal’.)

The discourse of the EU as a reform enabler went against the grain of another entrenched assumption in French Euro-sceptic discourses, which opposed ‘l’Europe’ to political voluntarism. This had already been a pillar of French EU-critical discourses at the time of the debate over the Maastricht treaty in the early 1990s (Sternberg, 2013, pp. 143–148). At the time, opponents had set up the EU as the ‘reign of economic rationales and technocracy as opposed to “the political”, as in the effective ability to change things in accordance with political will’ (Sternberg, 2013,

p. 121). Taking up this tradition, political agency, or ‘the political’, was now frequently opposed to constraints of the market or globalisation. This pattern pervaded leftist and rightist, anti- and pro-constitution discourses. The difference was that ratification supporters understood that the constitution, and European integration generally, could help the member-states to recover lost capacity of action (for example, L 26 May 2005). The opponents on the contrary understood that they would exacerbate the lack-of-leeway-for-political-agency problem. Leftist discourses defined ‘liberal Europe’ as the antithesis to ‘the political’ and ‘political responsi- bility’ (Nikonoff, L 23 March 2005a). Rejecting a world in which the market ruled gave No-supporters the ‘feeling that they were the agents of their own fate’. To many, it meant that ‘France, the political country par excellence’, refused the ‘primacy of economics’ over politics (Cambadélis, 2005, p. 35, 28). The droite sociale [social right] of Philippe Seguin agreed that ‘social Europe’ would mean recouping political agency and the ability to shape the world according to one’s will, and that the constitution obstructed this.

Brief, the discourse that political voluntarism and political agency were at odds with European integration had become a force to be reckoned with. No-discourses on the right in particular reserved this capacity of wilful action on the world for the nation-state. To de Villiers, Le Pen, or Dupont-Aignan, a No-vote meant refusing the primacy of European supranationalism over politics. In contrast, many opponents on the left did not frame political voluntarism as inherently antagonistic to a supranational political framework, or to Europe. Some saw, as already quoted, the constitution’s principal shortcoming in that it did not go far enough in creating supranational frameworks for

political voluntarism. In this voluntarism-through-supranationalism sub-discourse, rejecting the constitution was still an act of reclaiming political agency over economics, but precisely by demanding a more rather than less supranationalist arrangement. Of course, concurrent reflexes against supranationalism, at least by implication, were notable among many constitutional opponents of the left.

Democracy?

In addition to being shorthand for political voluntarism and agency on the world, 'the political' was increasingly also used in the sense of political contestation. It was becoming a counter-ideal to de-politicised (for example, technocratic, bureaucratic, constitutionalist) modes of governance, political will-formation, and 'integration from above' (see also Glencross, 2009). References to 'the political' in this sense conjured up a picture of politics, at the heart of which lay conflict. In this picture conflict was not something to be avoided or else resolved as quickly as possible, but something appreciated. It framed politics as the very processes of negotiating clashing interests, worldviews, values and so on. In the anti-constitu- tionalist line of argument, the ' "constitutionalisation" of economic policy' was a problem in that it moved essentially political questions out of the realm of public contestation (for example, Nikonoff in L 23 March 2005a). Pro-constitutionalists replied that the constitution, by making EU decision making more transparent, would, quite the contrary, precisely move it to the realm of public scrutiny, opinion- formation, and contestation (for example, L 26 May 2005). Both arguments effectively rooted the idea that political contestation is a condition of democratic legitimacy in the public repertoire of discourses on what makes a state or a post- national unit composed of states legitimate.

This emphasis on contestation as part of democratic life was only one aspect of an emerging discourse on democracy in the EU and its deficiencies, which took a firm hold of the public imaginary during the French debate on the EU constitution. To be sure, part of the debate was directed (in line with traditional understandings of democracy) at the treaty's institutional or constitutional reforms and the extent to which they would make EU decision making more democratic. The pro-constitutionalist mantra was that they did (for example, L 22 November 2004, F 18 May 2005, 5 May 2005, 11 March 2005, 25 March 2005; Maatsch, 2007, p. 276; see Atikcan, forthcoming, pp. 101–105). The opposing side admonished that these advances did not go far enough: the European Parliament still had no legislative initiative; the citizen's initiative was useless because not binding upon the Commis- sion; the Commission would still be neither sufficiently accountable nor authorised (M 28 May 2005, 21 April 2005, 23 March 2005a, 12 October 2004, F 12 April 2005). Another common criticism brandished the treaty's revision procedure as 'clearly obstructive' (L 12 October 2004, see M 28 May 2005). This was encapsulated in the pervasive image of the constitution – and its political and economic biases – being 'set in stone' (see 23 March 2005a). Some critics furthermore fell back on the longstanding critiques of the EU as non-transparent, elitist, and undemocratic in this (M 28 May 2005) but this discourse was had less clout than in the debate around the 1992 Maastricht referendum still.

The real battle over the EU's 'democratic deficit' in the French debate on the EU constitution, however, was not fought in these skirmishes about the treaty's (supposed) democracy-enhancing provisions. It was not fought over the EU's institutional setup

and day-to-day decision-making procedures or practices. The phrase ‘democratic deficit’, if employed at all, tended to be used in more inclusive, interpretable senses. Some used it directly to denote the perceived lack of political agency discussed above (for example, L 12 October 2004). Some used it as a signifier for the EU’s weak performance of whatever would have been ‘good for the people’ from the respective standpoint (for example, F 2 March 2005). Furthermore, the term was employed for the indifference of many citizens to EU politics, expressed in low participation in EP elections (for example, L 23 March 2005a).

The most powerful critique, however, of EU democracy aimed at the disenfranch- isement of the European citizens in the construction of ‘l’Europe’ over the past five decades, and the ‘democratic deficit’ became an emblem of it. ‘For the partisans of the No,’ Le Monde summarised, ‘Europe has been constructed outside of all rules of democracy, and the project of the constitution is a new piece of evidence for this. With the exception of the referendum on the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, the French, they say, have been kept well away from the European debate, to which only some initiated circles have access’ (M 28 May 2005, see also L 23 March 2005a). The Bolkestein directive, but also the 2004 enlargement and now the negotiations over Turkey joining the EU became embodiments of this disenfranchisement – of how decisions that would ‘deeply disrupt the life of the French’ and constitute a threat to French welfare, jobs, and salaries, would be ‘taken over their heads’. The services directive, many claimed (debatably, if the French government is constituted of elected representatives), had been passed ‘without their elected representatives being able to have their say’. An omnipresent reproach was that the French were ‘never consulted’ about Eastern enlargement (all M 30 March 2005). Against this backdrop, a No-vote emerged as a unique opportunity for people to throw a spanner into the works of a process that had been unrolling over their heads.

Chirac had tried to disengage the question of Turkish accession from the constitution by promising a separate referendum on it (M 29 May 2005). This attempt failed. Le Pen’s call to vote No was framed as a call to say ‘No to Turkey’s entry to the Union’ (M 2 March 2005a). He thus appealed to xenophobic sentiments without even having to pronounce them explicitly on all occasions (Berezin, 2009). Dupont-Aignan canvassed for a rejection of the referendum on the grounds that ‘the treaty opens Europe’s door to Turkey’ (M 28 May 2005, see F 7 April 2005). De Villiers, too, declared refusal of Turkish accession ‘one of the principal motivations’ of the no’. The ‘obvious’ link he asserted between Turkey and the Constitution was an indirect one: ‘If the yes wins, the process [of accession] will be irreversible whereas if the no wins negotiations will immediately be suspended’ (F 14 March 2005). Anti-constitutionalists reasoned that rejecting the constitution was a ‘means of preventing Turkey’s accession’, of defying the ‘trap’ of commenced negotiations leading ‘ineluctably’ to Turkey’s admission (M 5 March 2005). In vain did the partisans of the Yes insist that the constitution provided means of stopping Turkish accession – thus only accepting the rhetoric that Turkish membership was something to be prevented. On the whole, ant-constitutionalists, especially but not exclusively the ‘non de droite’, imposed an essentialist discourse on the debate as a whole, includ- ing many constitutionalists (if they did not already have it), along the lines of Turkish traditions being ‘incompatible with Europe’s values’ (Chirac, M16 April 2005). No-campaigners could draw on xenophobic feelings as well as fears of ‘social dumping’ and ‘stolen jobs’ (see for

example, L 23 March 2005b, François Hollande/ PS in 12 April 2005, M 5 March 2005, M 24 May 2005b, L 23 March 2005b; Le Gall, 2005, p. 106; see for example, Dehousse, 2006, p. 154).

Many compared Turkish accession with the 2004 enlargement. Like the latter, enlargement towards Turkey would be a precipitous 'fuite en avant', a defiance of political, cultural, and economic facts, some anti-constitutionalists of both left and right argued (Dupont-Aignan in F 7 April 2005; see equally Fabius in F 7 March 2005). The Eastern enlargement in particular still incited similar fears and reactions to the Turkish question. The No to the constitution (and opposition to Turkey's entry into the EU) emerged as an ex-post protest to Eastern enlargement. The referendum became the people's fervently longed-for opportunity to express their objection (M 5 March 2005) – not only to enlargement, Turkish accession, or the social and economic model associated with the EU, but also, more broadly, to not having more of a say in the political will-formation and decision making in the EU.

This symbolic act of obstruction could effectively force Europe's political leaders to act in consideration of their peoples' misgivings. In this sense, much of the discourses around enlargement, Bolkestein, and Turkey in effect contributed to spinning a potent narrative of the referendum (vote and debate) as a violent assertion by the people of their sovereignty: their right, and will, to influence decisions about the future political, social, and economic makeup of Europe, and France. Moreover, by virtue of all these emblems' discursive association with unemployment, unchecked market forces, and threats to the French social model, the discourse of the assertion of popular sovereignty linked up with the above discourse of the No as a way of re-claiming political agency in a globalising world.

Conclusions

This article has presented an interpretive-explorative, non-quantitative reading of the French debate about the EU constitution as reflected in the press. It has focused on two clusters of discourses: (i) the structuring antagonism of 'social Europe' and 'liberal Europe' and its discursive underpinnings, as well as (ii) a new discourse on what democracy or the lack thereof meant in the context of the EU, centred on reclaiming political agency as well as popular sovereignty in influencing the future of Europe. Although, this desire was expressed in a French, national referendum and debate, a noteworthy shift was that this outcry for agency and popular sovereignty seemed no longer principally limited to the confines of the nation. In principle at least it could extend to the EU as a whole. Moreover, both the binary structure of the first cluster and the shift in how democracy was understood pervaded both pro- and anti-constitutional discourses, the difference being how they related the constitution and its ratification to them. Another feature that united both pro- and anti-ratification discourses was that they did not usually reject European integration as such, but claimed to be searching for a 'better Europe'. This corresponds to findings in behaviouralist accounts

that the French ‘no votes were a signal of voters wanting not less Europe but rather a different Europe’ (Hobolt and Brouard, 2011, p. 309).

How does this reading of the French debate fit in with existing accounts of the French debate on the EU constitution? Its interpretation of the social-versus-liberal antagonism and its discursive foundations was an attempt to fill in a lacuna innate to most accounts that identify social and economic issues as a ‘key factor’ shaping both the debate and voting decisions. The article has sought to contribute an exploration of what the discourses behind, and embedding, these codes or survey items may have meant to people, and how such meanings were made and how they related to underlying webs of meanings, beliefs, and traditions.

For example, the article’s analysis of the new dominant discourse on what was at fault with democracy in the EU illustrates that even statements that might be registered (at least on one level) as statements about enlargement, a specific directive, or Turkish accession in effect carried a rich narrative about democracy and a reclaiming of political agency and popular sovereignty. In addition, the article has revisited the common analysis that overall the No camp had the upper hand in defining the terms and grounds of debate, and effectively forced ratification advocates into the defensive. One way to substantiate this hypothesis is through the high salience of issues that ‘shed a bad light on the constitution’ (Maatsch, 2007, p. 276). This article has added perspective to this picture by analysing some specific structural patterns and dynamics that anti-constitu- tionalists managed to impose on the debate: how they redefined the question at stake, how they worked with general associations with the EU and the treaty, how they tied the constitution to the liberal-social divide and poled entrenched anti-liberal sentiments as working against the constitution and so on.

At the level of methodological questions and their implications, interpretive explorations into discursive meaning-making of the kind offered in this article may be informative with a view to selecting textual codes in content analysis, identifying factors to be weighed in explanatory factor analysis, or designing surveys or experiments. Two examples illustrate this point, while also referring back to the remaining questions set out above.

First, the numerical evidence from content analyses of the French debate’s media coverage is contradictory regarding the saliency of the issue of ‘democracy’. The difference seems to be because of choices of code selection and definition, in particular whether ‘democracy’ is included at all as a category, and how inclusively or narrowly it, and rival compared categories, are defined. Qualitative work can, and does, inform such choices. In addressing the question whether democracy really was absent from the debate or whether it rather entered it in disguise, this article has argued that there is a democracy-related story, and a central one, to be told about this referendum debate.

Second, the identified discourse defining a No-vote as a constructive act of hope and building a better Europe points to ways of building on the experiment setup by issue depend on how it is portrayed’). Her independent variable is whether the negative consequences of ratification versus non-ratification were highlighted to respondents (2009, p. 20, 110–133). This takes up the broader understanding in the political-framing literature mentioned above, whereby ‘frames that contain negative information are more successful in affecting individuals’ opinions’ than more positive ones (Atikcan, forthcoming, p. 5, see her discussion and literature review on 12–13). The

debate as it was presented in this paper, however, was very much about positive ideals and utopias, about people wanting to make their voices and wills carry in deciding about the future of the country and of Europe. Framing the No-vote as a positive act of hope may well have been the most decisive framing move of the No campaign. But then, of course, hopes may be considered the flipside of fears, and testing their respective effects in an experiment situation might shed some interesting light on this underlying philosophical question.

With a view to a couple of additional, larger questions occupying EU studies, to conclude, the article's interpretations support, from a different angle, the finding in research on public attitudes and the structure of political contestation that the classic line of supranationalism-versus-national-sovereignty ('more' versus 'less Europe') has gradually been replaced or complemented by a new dividing line that articulated conflict over Europe more closely with the classic left-right axis of contestation over policy issues, including social and economic issues (see Hooghe et al, 2002; Ivaldi, 2006, p. 66, Hobolt, 2009, p. 277).

Moreover, the described assertion of the will to take agency over political, social, and economic decisions shores up calls for more politicisation and institutionalised political contestation, including about substantial policy choices in European politics (see for example, Føllesdal and Hix, 2006; White, 2010; de Wilde, 2011). It supports it not in terms of greater normative legitimacy, but in terms of what public discourses demanded on the occasion of one of the most intense, polarised, and inclusive debates on the European integration ever. Once again, there may of course be a gap between what media discourses demanded and actual citizen attitudes. Indeed, three recent qualitative (or mixed method) studies, which draw centrally on focus group discussions (Duchesne et al, 2013; Van Ingelgom, 2014) or on a comparative qualitative survey built around a range of open-ended questions (Gaxie et al, 2011), have described the attitudes of 'ordinary citizens' towards Europe as marked not only by ambuiguity, but importantly also by indifference. People, these studies suggest, do not care about the EU. But they do care about issues such as globalisation, economic flows, and their consequences for democracy and the welfare state.

This reading of the French debate on the constitutional treaty presented in this paper suggests not only that contestation over Europe did happen on this occasion. It also offers an interpretation of how it happened where it did; namely through contestation over these very issues, including France's and Europe's social and econonic future makeup, and popular sovereignty. This debate transformed the landscape of what it makes sense to say about Europe. Glossing over those points of controversy is very definitely no longer a plaubible discursive option – if it ever was even before the deabate (see Sternberg, 2013, pp. 2010–2022 on longer-term and broader discursive shifts to this effect). In conjunction with the referendum result, the French debate shows: politicisation on the ground is happening, with or without encouragement. And with the ongoing public debates across Europe on the Eurozone crisis, much more of it was yet to come. Today the discursive link between the EU or the Euro and social and economic issues is stronger than ever, and the idea that whoever cares about them should care about the EU is gaining ground.

About the Author

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Notes

1 The left-wing No campaign was 'highly united' and organised, with the 'No committee' assembling approximately local 900–1000 committees all over France and achieving 'astonishing local implantation'. The Yes camp, by contrast, was much less coordinated and less implanted (Atikcan, forthcoming, pp. 99–100, 103, 115).

2 Indeed, Gamson offers empirical evidence for a gap between these guiding media frames and how participants in focus groups discuss political issues. On how people 'use information available from media and societal discourse selectively and creatively for their own purposes', see Baden/de Vreese, 2008, p. 118. For two studies of popular media reception specifically in the French context, which likewise idenyify a gap between media discourses and citizen beliefs and opinions, see Goulet, 2010 and Le Grignou, 2003.

3 Atikcan (forthcoming) quotes an UMP communications official as reflecting on the referendum campaign with hindsight, that the Yes campaign's mistake had been to misjudge the 'national political spirit' at the time, which was fundamentally 'pessimistic', whereas the No campaign found better ways to talk to people, appealing to their profound fears (p. 108).

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