

L'EUROPE DES EUROPÉENS, Enquête comparative sur les perceptions de l'Europe edited by Daniel Gaxie, Nicolas Hubé, Marine de Lassalle and Jay Rowell reports the results of the Concorde research project whose purpose was to “understand and explain the attitudes of various categories of citizens to Europe” by means of qualitative methods. The project was initially focused on France and Germany, where respectively 332 and 132 interviews were conducted, and was extended by conducting interviews in Poland (n=100), Italy (n=60) and the Czech Republic (n=44). The investigation of the differences between these countries is however limited; the main objective of the authors is rather to reveal general relations between attitudes and positions in the social space. The book contains numerous contributions, mainly co-signed, by 15 authors. The first part of the book is dedicated to methodological issues, the second describes attitudes towards Europe, and the third deals with “resources” and “instruments” (categories, knowledge, and reasoning) used by interviewees when they make an assessment or express an opinion about Europe. Finally, the last part shows how Europe is conceived of by specific groups such as farmers or lower classes.

The authors claim to be swimming against the tide by using qualitative methods instead of quantitative ones. This may explain why they are so prone to open fire on quantitative opinion studies throughout the entire book. Thus, almost all the chapters provide a criticism of Eurobarometer (EB), a (mainly) quantitative programme in opinion research sponsored by the European Commission. In the first part, called “Methods”, the first two chapters (out of three) are respectively dedicated to criticism of quantitative European Studies and of the EB. The third one itself, though conceived of as a presentation of qualitative methods, emphasizes the limitations of quantitative

* About Daniel GAXIE, Nicolas HUBÉ, Marine de LASSALLE, Jay ROWELL (dir.), *L'Europe des Européens. Enquête comparative sur les perceptions de l'Europe* (Paris, Economica, 2011., English edition, *Perceptions of Europe. A Comparative Sociology of European Attitudes*, Essex, ECPR Press, 2011).

methods, as if the former could only be justified by the flaws of the latter. As we shall see, the arguments the authors raise are based upon some important epistemological confusion. I will therefore set out a very critical review of these arguments in order to explain to what extent public opinion data are not essentially different from many others in social sciences and can rightfully take part in scientific research. I will also make the claim that many flaws in this book are due to the fact that the authors undertook a type of research which, typically, would have required these data.

One of the most typical examples of the wrong path taken by the authors may be found in the chapter by Philippe Aldrin about how the EB is biased and how it is used to “naturalize” the idea of a European public opinion. I will not address the validity of this thesis, but I admit I find it surprising to read an article devoted to the criticism of a particular quantitative survey and of its political use in a book whose endeavour is to present the results of qualitative interviews. How politicians manipulate polls as a way of supporting their decisions is definitely a problem; however it can hardly serve to legitimize the use of qualitative methods in the social sciences.

The many other criticisms against opinion studies are hardly more convincing. In the first chapter, Daniel Gaxie presents a volley of criticisms stemming from many different perspectives (epistemology, methodology, sociology or politics). However, these criticisms do not really correspond to his objective of presenting the blind spots of quantitative methods. Those should be specific failures of these methods and not a general criticism that could be directed at any method. Daniel Gaxie argues, for example, that correlation cannot reveal causality. This argument is repeated over and over, from one chapter to another. However, it is hard to determine why such an argument could stand in favour of qualitative methods. The author argues that revealing the reasons given by an interviewee for his or her attitudes makes it possible to provide some kind of causal explanation. Finding out how someone accounts for his or her own behaviour can certainly be useful in investigating causal connexions; it is however not a proof of causality, no more than correlation is¹. Causality cannot be observed and always remains an assumption. For this purpose, there is no reason why qualitative data should enjoy some kind of supremacy over quantitative

¹ This would at least require defending the philosophical position that giving the agent's reasons for doing what he did can account for a species of causal explanation (for an example of such a philosophy, see, for example, Davidson's classic paper (1963)). That philosophy is not presented or discussed in the text.

data. Most criticisms expressed in this book reveal some kind of misinterpretation. Among many, I can mention the assertion that quantitative methods focus only on the most probable cases. It should be obvious that choosing to handle a probable or an improbable case depends on the preferences of the researcher, not on methodological grounds. The author goes from one critic to another without any detailed investigation that could bring evidence of some supremacy of qualitative methods.

A more specific argument presented by the authors against public opinion data has its origin in Pierre Bourdieu's seminal text, "Public opinion does not exist". It emphasizes the specificity of data about opinion and presents a strong and virulent criticism of such data. It gave birth in France to many critical analyses of polls like the one by Patrick Champagne arguing that polls construct public opinion (1990). Daniel Gaxie follows the same path, arguing that surveys produce artefacts by aggregating answers that are formally the same (ticking the same box) but that involve different degrees of belief and information. It is central in the chapter by Philippe Aldrin, arguing that polls naturalize European public opinion. These criticisms result, however, from a confusion between the data and their interpretation. There is indeed no measure of opinion; the behaviour which is measured is the answer to a question in a situation created by the pollster. The data are thus more similar to experimental data than to observational data. How we are to interpret the answer and the validity of aggregating equivalent answers in order to depict a "public opinion" are therefore open questions whose responses do not have to be anticipated by the survey or by whoever uses the data. On the contrary, it is certainly interesting not to take these assumptions for granted and to find a way (using other questions) to understand how different persons give different meaning to the question or the answer they provide. When someone answers that he/she is in favour of the European Union or that he/she thinks of himself/herself as a European, these answers can have a variety of meanings that the investigator is supposed to explore. Asserting, as the authors do, that researchers always assume that two identical answers necessarily refer to the same meaning or that the respondent has the same meaning as the investigator who created the survey is a complete misunderstanding. Such criticisms may be correctly directed to the blind use of data by certain politicians, journalists or even some academic scholars but cannot count as a general criticism of the use of questions about opinion.

Considering that studying voting or any type of behaviour is more "objective" is quite superficial. Unless one maintains a very behaviourist conception, different meanings are attached to similar behaviours and

it cannot be assumed that two persons physically doing the same thing are actually doing the same thing with the same intention. Two citizens voting for the same candidate may account for their vote in a different manner and it will be necessary to explore interpretations of these actions, as is the case for polling data. No doubt there is a difference in degree between an election's outcome and a poll: a vote may be viewed as a result of a mature reflexion and is more likely to reflect deeply embedded beliefs than polling material obtained by phone in the evening from someone casually talking while cooking dinner. It cannot be taken for granted however that this is always and necessarily the case, since some people may not care much about casting their votes while others may be very happy to have an opportunity to provide their opinion by answering a poll. In any case, these are behaviours which have to be interpreted, and on which it is possible to base hypotheses; none of them are more "real" or artefactual than others. In fact, some quite casual answers may be of great interest. They can reveal prejudices, things taken into account or the first things that come to mind. The relative advantage of having such answers compared to very thoughtful and honest ones depends on the subject of research and cannot be stated a priori.

Moreover, arguing that it is scientifically impossible to aggregate answers because of their different meanings could be applied to any type of statistics on behaviour. Such a position would even lead to the discarding of more apparently "objective" data, such as those concerning unemployment. Being unemployed can correspond to many different situations according to your skills, your financial situation, the labour market, your confidence in finding a new job, your will or your need to find one. Following Gaxie's criticism, it would be as impossible to aggregate all the unemployed in order to define the unemployment rate, as it would be to aggregate votes.

The results presented in this book are mainly typologies defining different ways of conceiving of Europe in different social categories. Most of these typologies outline differences in the ability to convey structured discourses about Europe. For example, the second part of the book distinguishes four different attitudes. The "synoptic involvement" of individuals belonging to "upper regions of social space" is characterized by the ability to express a general perspective and to provide an opinion about ongoing political debates concerning the European Union. This is opposed to a "distant evaluation" in "lower regions", describing the attitudes of those who do not think they are really concerned and therefore do not have a well-considered opinion. A mid-range perspective can be found in "intermediate regions". A

“limited involvement” characterizes individuals who immediately identify Europe with some direct intervention by the European Union in everyday life, such as farmers or restaurant owners. All these attitudes may be positive or negative, depending on the degree of satisfaction of the interviewee in his or her job or to what extent he or she benefits from the EU. The author argues that this typology, based on interviews conducted in France, is also suitable for describing the differences in attitudes in other countries. They nonetheless identify several national specificities in three short subchapters devoted to Germany, Italy and Poland.

The third part of the book is dedicated to the “resources” and “instruments” used by people to express an opinion about Europe. Philippe Aldrin and Marine de Lassalle identify, for example, different styles of “language” (*parole*). They make a distinction between “de-focussed language” addressing mainly general and socio-political issues, “socio-focussed language” based on personal experience and related to a collective trend, and “out of focus language” characterizing those who think of themselves as not involved in European issues. No systematic relations are suggested between these different “language styles” and the kind of attitudes previously depicted, although they are based on the same qualitative data: recorded interviews. To what extent is it possible in an interview to distinguish between what is supposed to account for “resources”, “instruments” or “language” and what is supposed to account for “attitude”? A coherent empirical and theoretical perspective would have required a precise explanation on that matter.

The following chapters examine the skills required to produce an opinion about Europe. Patrick Lehingue’s chapter thus deals with the relations between cognitive skills and what he calls “statutory skills”, the skills which allow or “force” someone to express an opinion. Giuliano Bobba *et al* focus on the way citizens gather information about Europe and how they react to this information. They emphasize that for all educational levels and social positions, information about European institutions is scarce and incomplete. Respondents primarily use categories of everyday life to make their judgments, thus mobilizing “bits of information”, their personal experience and common sense or popular wisdom. Finally the fourth part is an attempt to show the plurality of conceptions of Europe in different social groups: political activists with high educational endowment, farmers, business people, lower classes, etc.

These contributions tend to confirm the existing literature. Opinion concerning Europe can be more or less structured while knowledge

about European institutions is very poor; all this hardly represents an innovation. These facts are however sometime neglected in the interpretation of some of the EB's outcomes; it is therefore not without value to point them out.

Showing that there are different ways of conceiving of Europe is often presented here as something new though it has been previously demonstrated in a much more impressive and original manner by Juan Diez Medrano. Whereas he was able to show sharply contrasting national perceptions concerning the European Union in Germany, the United Kingdom and Spain, the authors of this study confined themselves to very general considerations on the different conceptions of Europe: some respondents may emphasize the importance of peace, others of economics, others of the euro, or culture, etc. This is so basic that almost all Eurobarometers include questions about these different representations. Arguing against Medrano that national culture cannot account for all differences is quite easy. It would be strange to consider that all Spanish without exception think exactly according to the framework he has revealed. Moreover, this is a criticism of a quantitative nature that the authors do not really have the means to test.

Although the authors present their results as revealing the potential benefits of qualitative methods, this approach could be qualified as "quantitative results without numbers". The authors content themselves with very general correlations between conceptions of Europe, cultural capital and position in the social space. The qualitative appears here simply as resulting from a lack of systematisation and precision. Leaving aside technical questions concerning the correlations which are presented, we do not know how the social space is conceived of, what its "upper region" (*region supérieure*) is, or what enables the international comparison of different social structures. The authors do not use any classifications, which gives the impression that they simply rely on tacit common knowledge about social structure. In a striking example, the authors explain that the lack of knowledge about Europe concerns all "social and occupational categories" (*catégories socioprofessionnelles*). They thus use a specific term from the French nomenclature of social positions in order to provide a general result about Europe, revealing a complete lack of reflexivity about the use of this classification or of knowledge on the ongoing debate about the different ways in which to classify social position in Europe. The same criticism concerning cultural or educational capital can be addressed. The main problem is perhaps that here the angle is mainly quantitative rather than qualitative. The authors repeatedly

criticize Juan Diez Medrano's work. However, using qualitative methods, he has been able to reveal different national representations of Europe and their origins in national histories. He has thus provided a very powerful contribution to European studies. Here, the authors try to demonstrate that the attitude depends on the social position of the individual, a rather quantitative question that requires other tools, at least a classification of the social space suitable for every country.

The authors' approach is merely descriptive, resting upon a simplistic positivist view of science: finding out the "true" attitudes of citizens as opposed to those "produced" by the EB. It is clear that a wealth of academic debates about European Union are either disregarded or ignored. The authors take into account and criticize a very limited part of the literature strangely accounting for the essential of the European studies: research on the factors of European support or of the opposition between pro- and anti-European attitudes. Junior scholars in European studies be well advised to start with another book to avoid such as distorted view of the field.

C Y R I L J A Y E T