

Another Grand Book on European Integration?

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A Certain Idea of Europe. By Craig Parsons. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003. 256 pp., \$39.95 (ISBN: 0-8014-4086-6).

The time has long gone since authors studying European integration would start their books by arguing that the integration process should be seen as following either a neofunctionalist or an intergovernmentalist logic. It is no longer fashionable to make that distinction. These days, if a dichotomy of theories is identified, different labels are used: constructivist versus rationalist (Pollack 2001), governance versus international relations approach (Jachtenfuchs 2001), institutionalist versus structuralist, and so on. More often still, authors shy away from grand theorizing and move instead to examine the usefulness of a selected theoretical approach for explaining a particular dimension of European integration. The last important contribution to the original grand debate was Andrew Moravcsik's (1998) *The Choice for Europe*, which received praise and criticism and provoked heated discussions about the value of its insights (Diez 1999). *The Choice for Europe* was seen as a major contribution to the debate because it provided a clear statement of its theoretical assumptions and hypotheses; it also included five major empirical studies to back up its theoretical claims. It was written as if it would be the ultimate contribution to the literature on European integration theory.

Craig Parsons's *A Certain Idea of Europe* can be seen as the ultimate attempt to fight Moravcsik on his own terms. It is a theoretically and empirically rich study of European integration covering five decades. In comparison with Moravcsik, it is equally bold in its theoretical claims, obsessed by the importance of France and its leaders, and reflective of good scholarship within the tradition of US international political economy (IPE). With respect to the grand debate on European integration, the book presents a case against both structuralists (realists and liberal intergovernmentalists) and institutionalists (path dependence theorists and supranationalists). Instead, Parsons argues, one should look at the importance of ideas. In fact, the book starts off by giving the impression that it is a major contribution to the literature on ideas, but unfortunately this dimension is not its strongest point. Parsons reflects those parts of the literature on ideas with which we are well familiar (that is, Sikkink 1991; Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Berman 1998; McNamara 1998; Risse 2000; and so on), but the book is primarily aimed at using an ideational or constructivist approach, in which national leaders play an important role, to dethrone Moravcsik. By staying close to Moravcsik's legacy, however, the book departs considerably from a pure ideational or constructivist account.

A Certain Idea of Europe is very well structured and nicely written. In many ways it represents the epitome of a good IPE study. (It is very appropriate that the book was published as part of Peter Katzenstein's excellent IPE series.) It is exciting to read, and it challenges the reader's vested knowledge about how the European Union was created. It will no doubt make a very important contribution to the literature on European integration.

In terms of his theoretical perspective, Parsons sets out to challenge both the structuralist and institutionalist understandings of European integration, arguing

that neither of them can explain satisfactorily the outcome of the European integration process. In his view, structuralists overemphasize the role of objective economic interests, and institutionalists overemphasize the degree to which institutions constrain the behaviors of actors. In a sense, the former account contains too much politics, whereas the latter contains too little. A third approach, the ideational approach, stresses the limitations of the first two and adds that “[t]he cognitive lenses through which actors interpret their surroundings shape how they respond to structural or institutional pressures” (p. 5). The bottom line of the approach put forward by Parsons is “not only that ideas cause actors to make certain choices, but that the institutionalization of certain ideas gradually re-constructs the interests of powerful actors” (p. 6).

Empirically, *A Certain Idea of Europe* examines “French government interests in European integration from 1947 to 1997 and the European consequences of French strategies” (p. 23). The five empirical cases studied are the 1952 European Community for Coal and Steel (ECSC), the 1957 European Economic Community (EEC), the 1979 European Monetary System (EMS), the 1986 Single European Act, and the 1991 Maastricht Treaty (in particular the Economic and Monetary Union). The empirical studies are carefully done and backed up with many references (mostly secondary sources) and numerous background interviews with key informants. Overall, the historical cases are well studied, although Parsons’s findings appear aimed at being provocative. On the whole, the message is that national political leaders took on a visionary stance toward Europe, and it was their ability to push through their vision that made European integration work.

The case studies are extremely interesting. Rereading the same history for the n^{th} time is not normally a thrilling experience, but Parsons account makes one want to read on. Nonetheless, the story does not always add up to an ideational account of European integration. More often than not the study seems to send the message that leadership matters and that, in particular, strong statesmen make all the difference. The accounts of Mitterrand’s change in policy in 1983 and his commitment to EMU in the late 1980s, and even Chirac’s conversion to EMU, are told as stories of how great statesmen managed to get their way. It is not clear how the idea they held had any power, other than that it was the idea that these statesmen held. As Parsons tells it, even if these statesmen had held completely different and utterly silly ideas, they would still have been able to force through their policies. In other words, it remains unclear exactly how ideas matter. Are there characteristics that make one idea more persuasive than another when held by a strong statesperson? What difference does it make to call the policy of Mitterrand and Chirac “an idea”? Why not merely call it an “interest”? Could one not have said that they decided that it was in their interest to appear to have taken France to Europe, and that as such it was in their own interest to aim at becoming legendary? What about the role of structural factors? On many occasions the study shows the disciplining effect of financial markets. Parsons does not really address that effect. Of course, one can make the case (tell the story) in different ways. But why this otherwise extremely interesting and thought provoking account of the impact of French politics on European integration is portrayed as an ideational approach will be confusing for some, especially for those sympathetic to an ideational approach (see, for example, Verdun 1999). Particularly because this study will be widely read, Parsons might want to spell out in future writings what the role of ideas actually is.

A Certain Idea of Europe is a most interesting, thoughtful, ambitious, and daring book. Anyone with an interest in European integration theory should read it. Its accessible style and structure will even make it a good book for advanced graduate courses. It will be intriguing to see how this book influences the debates in the months and years to come.

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