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Book Review

Miller, Robert and Graham Day. 2012. *The Evolution of European Identities. Biographical Approaches*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan

The European Union integration process is receiving increasing scholarly attention, particularly in light of the latest three enlargement rounds, which nearly doubled the number of member states and brought in an enormous diversity of historical backgrounds. While the majority of political science studies has been driven by the “top-down,” elite-center perspectives on Europeanization, a collective volume edited by Robert Miller and Graham Day proposes an explicitly subject- and agency-oriented approach to examine the “bottom-up” evolution of European identities. In fifteen chapters of the book, the leading biographical scholars present the results of the

EU Seventh Framework Program project “EURO-IDENTITIES. The Evolution of European Identity: Using biographical methods to study the development of European identity.”

Contrary to much of a scholarly work on the European identity today, the Authors of the volume do not look at explicit identifications with Europe or “grand history” of European integration. Instead, they take on a micro-perspective to examine “the different types of phenomena that could be related in a person’s life story that could have a biographical impact that might affect their sense of self-identification as a European or the relation between themselves and Europe” (p. 7). In this way, the book contributes to the existing body of biographical research on European integration, for instance, the SOSTRIS project (Social Strategies in Risk Society) (Chamberlayne, Rustin, and Wengraf 2002) or the ENRI-EAST project on the interplay of European, national, and regional identities along the new eastern borders of the European Union (see: www.enri-east.net). However, the book goes beyond the substantive area of European integration by engaging in the core methodological problems connected with doing large-scale biographi-

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cal research on various dimensions of European identities.

The structure of the book reflects an overall composition of “sensitizing groups” in the “EUROIDENTITIES” project; the “sensitizing groups” being the “aggregates of persons whose life experiences could be anticipated to have caused them to reflect upon their situation of living within the continent of Europe and perhaps to be challenged or changed by these experiences” (p. 3-4). Thus, the reader learns about the European experiences of the educationally mobile, transnational workers, farmers, cultural contacts and civil society organization activists, as well as those “external to Europe” and engaged in intimate cross-border primary relationships. The book includes theoretical chapters offering an empirically grounded account of the phenomena of shaping European identities, the chapters based on the comparative analysis of data coming from sensitizing groups and the chapters presenting the selected biographical case studies. By the means of multiple techniques of qualitative data presentation, the reader can actually observe the emergence of major categories which the Authors employ to understand the interpretive practices under scrutiny.

In the introductory chapter, Robert Miller, Markieta Domecka, Dirk Schubotz, and Maruška Svašek present the eight distinct dimensions for the expression of European identity which were empirically grounded in the “EUROIDENTITIES” research: multiple social identities and biographical identity, transnational intimate relationships, collective action, cultural production and intercultural translation, inclusion/exclusion, standardization and regulation, structural conditions and

opportunity structures, and the public sphere and state regulated institutions. In the second chapter, “Method in practice,” the group of Euroidentities research assistants (Markieta Domecka, Marta Eichsteller, Slavka Karakusheva, Pasqualle Mussella, Liis Ojamäe, Elisabetta Perone, Dona Pickard, Anja Schröder-Wildhagen, Kristel Sillak, and Katarzyna Waniek) get the reader acquainted with the “EUROIDENTITIES” methodological background. It is worth emphasising that this chapter will be especially valuable for all those who want to learn the tricks of the trade accompanying the various approaches to biographical data analysis. As such, it can easily serve as a core reading for social sciences research methodology classes for graduate students.

The next twelve chapters bring a detailed analysis of the processes and practices of European identity formation, taking into account the life stories of the members of all seven sensitizing groups. The third chapter (by Howard David, Graham Day, Sally Baker, and Marta Eichsteller) and the fourth chapter (by Marta Eichsteller) present the analysis of the educationally mobile group who shared the significant experience of studying abroad. While the conclusion of comparative analysis presented in chapter three is that “much of the time, the category of ‘Europe’ appears dormant” (p. 60), in the life stories of the studied group, the in-depth study of Majka (in Eichsteller’s chapter) suggests a much more active reference to Europe, at least in some cases of transnational educational mobility. The latter conclusion is confirmed in chapter eight on the biographies of former foreign exchange students (by Lena Inowlocki and Gerhard Riemann). Inowlocki and Riemann argue that “there is no automatic relationship between

‘time abroad’ and ‘transformative experience’” (p. 148) as it requires additional conditions to be fulfilled so that subjects continue to build on their experiences abroad.

In a similar vein, Kaja Kaźmierska, Andrzej Piotrowski, and Katarzyna Waniek take a look at two cases of transnational workers in chapter four. They explain why corporate workers tend to take rather passive orientation to cultural others in Europe as compared to traditional professionals. This is followed by two chapters on farmers written by Mariana Draganova, Rumiana Jeleva, Dona Pickard, and Slavka Karakusheva. Their analysis demonstrates the ambivalent perceptions of Europe by European farmers who tend to see it, on the one hand, in terms of hope for equalized standards, and as “an administrative entity organizing top-down processes, without a human face, and lacking understanding of the specificity of farming” (p. 114), on the other.

Chapters nine and ten (written by Fritz Schütze, Anja Schröder-Wildhagen, Ulrike Nagel, and Bärbel Treichel) are devoted to the exploration of the biographical experiences of participants in European civil society organizations (CSOs), including those doing reconciliation work, trans-border work, intercultural education work, as well as environmental work. Both chapters are among the best examples of analytical work in the book going beyond descriptive analysis of narratives towards solid grounded theory of biographical practices. The CSOs activists are considered by the Authors “educational protagonist of Europe,” guided by a “typical down-to-earth orientation” (p. 167). It involves special sensitivity regarding cultural otherness which is rooted in their biographical experi-

ences. The outcome of their grassroots activities is enacting, shaping, activating, and deepening the European mental space; a process which can be labeled the bottom-up European integration.

In chapters eleven (by Dirk Schubotz, Maruška Svašek, Robert Miller, and Markieta Domecka) and twelve (by Markieta Domecka), the ways of reflecting upon the transcontinental experiences of two categories of informants are discussed. First, this is the category of those residing in Europe but born outside the continent. Second, these are informants who were born in Europe but had resided a significant proportion of their lives in other continents. The Authors explore how the confrontation with “non-European” life worlds had given narrators an outside perspective of themselves as “Europeans,” involving new understandings of internal differences within Europe (p. 198-199). They also discuss various barriers and opportunities of mobility to Europe and out of Europe related to the EU and non-EU citizenship, language, and ethnicity.

In the final two substantive chapters, the experiences of cross-cultural intimate relationships are explored. The latter are considered to be an important contribution to the construction process of Europe “from below” (p. 252). Exploring two biographical stories, of a Swiss man moving to Estonia and an Estonian woman moving to Germany, Katrin Paadam, Liis Ojamäe, and Kristel Sillak (chapter thirteen) demonstrate how the social dispositions and the biographical paths of informants have led them to engage in cross-cultural intimate relationships utilizing the emergent opportunity structure in Europe. In chapter fourteen, Antonella Spanò, Pasquale Musella, and Elisabetta Perone

investigate the changing meaning of intercultural intimate relationships. Their analysis demonstrates important cross-generational differences among the various generations of informants: “if for the generation socialized to ‘old Europe,’ the need to preserve their original sense of belonging does not go further than affirming a difficulty to reconcile bi-localism...for younger members it becomes possible to build identification driven by *both-and* principle... [as they] locate themselves in an imaginary space much wider than what they have actually experienced in life” (p. 253).

The concluding chapter by Fritz Schütze and Anja Schröder-Wildhagen offers a summary of the main theoretical contribution of the book. Opposing the reduction of European identities to nation-types of collective identifications, the Authors coin the notion of European mental space. Referring to Alfred Schütz’s concept of “frames of reference,” they understand it as “standpoints and perspectives of comparison, criteria of critique, assessment measures, and other types of mental-operational roles and procedures for drawing connection between phenomenal elements of a supranational world” (p. 257). This phenomenological concept helps them to conceptualize the bottom-up process of European integration residing in creating a potential for understanding between the different national cultures in Europe and taming “the dangerous abstracting potential for the absolutistic mono-perspectival thinking of the ‘we’-category of the nation” (p. 276). Despite their overall promising view on the European integration, the Authors warn about the potential of social exclusion in the situation of the (economic) crisis which could reinvigorate exclusivist national identities and negative cross-national comparisons in Europe.

As the collection of articles written by the best scholars in the field of biographical methods today, the book will certainly become the core reading for all those interested in biographical methods in general and policy-oriented biographical research in Europe in particular. Thanks to the richness of the methodological discussion in the book and illustrative examples of biographical analysis, it can be recommended for all those interested in the biographical research practice regardless of their interest in the analysis of European identities. Simultaneously, however, the book represents a vital contribution to the field of European studies. It provides a solid piece of empirical work on largely neglected dimensions of European integration connected with neither heroic nor elitist attempts of ordinary European citizens to make their way through the European social spaces. I would expect that the notion of European mental space will become one of the core concepts used in the interpretive research on the European Union developments in the future.

Although my overall assessment of the book is very positive, I have one critical remark concerning the theoretical and methodological coherence of the volume. Given the variety of academic and national backgrounds of Authors, it is unsurprising that the reader is confronted with diverse theoretical backgrounds and the ways of applying biographical methods. Nevertheless, it would strengthen the theoretical contribution of the book if the Authors had more systematically referred to the core, empirically grounded concepts of the whole project, such as, for instance, the European mental space. I have also noted significant differences in the ways of analyzing biographical data, which include both rather descriptive accounts

and solid pieces of substantive theories based on the principles of the grounded theory methodology. Nevertheless, as I have already mentioned, this can also be read as an added value of the book since it also demonstrates the difficulties of doing

large-scale qualitative research within the international context. I believe that the “EUROIDENTITIES” project team was able to successfully meet this challenge, but the final assessment is obviously up to the readers of this exciting book.

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