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Constructing EU-Criticism in Dominant Newspapers

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In my doctoral dissertation I will seek to clarify the concept of “EU-criticism”. I will not offer any normative definition myself, nor will I argue that one of the various terms used for the phenomenon is more appropriate than the others. Instead, I will discuss how the entire phenomenon is discursively constructed in dominant newspapers¹ and juxtapose those representations to EU-critics’ own representations of themselves.² My assumption here is that “dominant newspapers” are something largely external to EU-criticism. In other words, nationwide newspapers are not the primary channel of expressing critical ideas regarding the EU. I will examine the “inside” perspective by analyzing texts recommended by key EU-critical actors. That is, I will ask them what texts I should read in juxtaposition to dominant newspapers, in order to get a more balanced picture of what EU-criticism is about. I do not suggest that either of the two representations—that of dominant newspapers or self-representations—is more “true” than the other. In other words, I do not propose that EU-critics understand themselves better than do the dominant newspapers, nor do I believe that the latter as an outsider can be more “objective”.

I am conducting case studies of EU-criticism in three countries: Finland, Sweden, and Estonia. The first criterion for choosing the case studies was the principle that EU-criticism should be studied in countries where it is claimed to exist, as opposed to countries where it is not. That is to say, all three countries display a high degree of public

¹ I use the expression “dominant newspapers” to refer to newspapers with the broadest circulation in a given country.

² Of course, there are other actors who participate in the discursive construction process, but I have chosen these two because the dominant newspapers are the most visible, whereas the EU-critics themselves largely constitute the phenomenon and therefore have a firsthand experience of it.

EU-criticism. Also, Sweden, Finland and Estonia constitute a kind of a “Nordic scale”³ of EU member states. Adding Denmark would have gone a step further on the EU-critical scale. Indeed, adding Norway to the study would have broadened the scale as an example of a country that has not even joined the EU.

In each country, I analyze the representations of EU-criticism/EU-critics in the largest daily newspaper: *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Postimees*, respectively. The timeframe for my study is from the year 2000 to 2006. It is common to choose a time period according to some historical events. However, it is difficult to determine an event in the development of EU-criticism that would be relevant in all three countries. Choosing an event from the history of the European Union would not be relevant either, as these affect EU-critical activity and thinking differently in different countries. The study becomes technically more manageable by choosing a relatively recent time period because more of the material can be found in an electronic format, thus reducing the labor intensity of the project undertaken and making it more manageable for a single researcher.

The sample of articles for this study was chosen by searching the *HS* electronic archive for keywords, such as EU-critical, Euroskepticism, EU-pessimist, EU-opponent etc. This method easily leaves out writings by EU-critics themselves, since they are unlikely to use any of my search words in their texts. However, since I also ask EU-critics to provide me with their own texts, this shortcoming will be compensated for.

As scholars of social movements have pointed out, the movements themselves rarely if ever are powerful enough social players to produce their own representations of themselves through the channel of mainstream media. Their writings are mainly published in regional newspapers and on the Internet. My second set of data, i.e. writings

³ While Scandinavian countries have traditionally been considered “Nordic”, Finland was constructed as “Nordic” only after WW II and Estonia began the construction of its “Nordic identity” only after re-independence in 1991. In fact, today it is mainly the Estonians themselves who propound the image of Estonia as a Nordic country (see also Lagerspetz 2003).

produced by EU-critics themselves were gathered by asking those movement activists I knew from my previous research activities to send me up to five of their most significant writings from 2000-2006 and to recommend other writers on this topic, whom I should contact. I originally got acquainted with the "EU-critical field" in Estonia in 2003, when I was writing my master's thesis on the Estonian campaign against joining the European Union. I participated in events organized by EU-critics, was included on an "Independence" mailing list and interviewed the leaders of EU-critical organizations. When I started my PhD research, I first contacted those Finnish EU-critics, who were recommended by their Estonian colleagues and proceeded by broadening the network. Then I repeated a similar process in Sweden.

These two sets of data—articles in dominant newspapers and writings by EU-critics—provide ample textual material to analyze the social construction of the phenomenon “EU-criticism”, yet pose the methodological problem of how to compare them. I have chosen to overcome this challenge by using frame analysis.

I proceed by giving an overview of what is understood by the concept of *framing* in social science, how framing has been used in research to date. Thus, I begin by defining what I mean by “frame” and I will distinguish the term “frame” from other related terms, such as “discourse” and “ideology”. Then, I will discuss the general theoretical implications of the perspective of frame analysis on doing research.

Frame analysis has mainly been used in the area of social psychology. The concept was introduced by Erving Goffman in 1972. David A. Snow, Robert D. Benford, Pamela E. Oliver and Hank Johnston have introduced the theoretical basis, as well as the subsequent methodological guidelines for research in the study of social movements. Frame analysis has also been widely used in media studies. The theory and methods of frame analysis have been developed in these and other interrelated areas, thus the general theoretical framework has been advanced through interdisciplinary synergy.

Frames consist of a variety of elements that are seen as forming a consistent whole and stored in memory. These elements are accessed to make sense of particular events. Snow and colleagues defined frames as interpretative schemata “that enable participants to locate, perceive, and label occurrences” (1986: 464), “selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environment” (Snow & Benford 1992: 137). Hank Johnston’s definition is somewhat shorter, yet maintaining the same principal idea. According to him, frames are “problem solving schemata, stored in memory, for the interpretive task of making sense of present situations” (Johnston 1995: 217). I see Charlotte Ryan as offering the aptest and clearest definition. She sees frames as “thought organizers” (Ryan & Alexander 2006: 567). To quote her full definition, “Framing is the process of mapping one’s social reality, whereas a frame is the product of that mapping—the underlying thought organizer through which we relate events and stories” (ibid.).

Framing, thus, refers to the reproduction of meaning. Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993: 118) have defined frames as the main ideas that indicate “what is at issue.” In a similar vein, I like to conceptualize framing as the process of answering the question “What is this a case of?” Framing emphasizes how people conceptualize joys or sorrows, rather than the joys and sorrows themselves. In different contexts, the same objective phenomenon may be perceived differently.

An important aspect of frames, which was already discussed by Goffman in his seminal work *Frame Analysis* (1972), is that individuals are “likely to be unaware of such organized features as the framework has and unable to describe the framework with any completeness if asked” (Goffman 1972: 21). Hank Johnston has referred to this by saying that framing takes place inside of the “black box” of the mind and there are countless factors that may influence this process (Johnston 1995: 218-9). Therefore, caution should be exercised in not jumping to the conclusion that the frame sponsors, i.e. those who subscribe to a particular frame, are explicitly aware of the structure of their frames, at least not in its full detail. Rather, this is a tool for researchers to make the frame easier to understand for outsiders who may or may not be of academic background.

Frames are sometimes confused with ideologies.⁴ This confusion has been well cleared up by Pamela E. Oliver and Hank Johnston in their article *What A Good Idea!* (Oliver & Johnston 2000). According to them, frames are informed by an underlying ideology, which has more staying power than the frame (Oliver & Johnston 2000). This means that the same frame may be utilized by actors who hold very different ideologies. Oliver and Johnston have suggested that “an ideology links a theory about society with a cluster of values about what is right and wrong as well as norms about what to do” (Oliver & Johnston 2000:44). Thus, frames are informed by an ideology, but different frames may be based on the same ideology. Similarly, different ideologies may inform a single frame.

Another confusion is that between frame and discourse analysis. Here no clear answer has been provided in the literature that has come to my attention. Hank Johnston has attempted to distinguish between the two concepts, yet acknowledging that there is still some overlap in them (Johnston 2002: 63). He identified two main differences between discourse and frame analyses. However, I argue that both of these distinctions are artificial and not very helpful in actual empirical work.

The first difference, according to Johnston, has to do with research questions. He suggests that while framing studies mainly “describe collective action frames and their role in movement development [...], discourse studies treat cultural processes and their effect on what gets talked about” (ibid. 72). I do not see framing studies as a method to be necessarily limited to social movement research or that frames as being limited to collective action frames. Also, framing processes do not happen in some “culturally autonomous zone”, where the process is not influenced by cultural processes and the culturally determined choice of “what gets talked about”.

⁴ Fairclough defines ‘ideology’ as follows: “Ideologies are representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation (Fairclough 2003: 9).

According to Johnston, the second difference between frame and discourse analysis is that “framing studies offer less reference to the actual texts on which the frames are based, while discourse studies tend to analyze texts more closely” (ibid.). Again, while this may be true of the research that Johnston is familiar with, such practice does not stem from any inherent difference between the two approaches. It is advisable for frame analysts to stay close to texts in their analysis as well, not attempting to “read their minds”. Indeed, in an earlier text (Johnston 1995), he also called on researchers to stay close to the data in their analysis (Johnston 1995: 241). He suggested that the number of texts analyzed be kept small and the criterion for selection should be that they are from “critical junctures” in the life of the social movement that is being analyzed (ibid. 229). My method of snowball sampling texts from key EU-critics in the three countries seeks to accomplish precisely this.

My study does not focus on the framing contest⁵ between EU-critics and EU-proponents, seeking ideological hegemony in framing the European Union. Rather, I am looking at the framing contest that takes place in constructing EU-criticism as a social phenomenon. My primary concern is not with the *outcome* of this framing contest, but rather with the process. Of course, identifying the elements of the process also sheds light on how a particular outcome is achieved. However, I do not conduct a causal analysis, as the causal relationships can only be speculated about, but they cannot be known with any notable degree of certainty.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001) have spoken of ‘floating signifiers’, for the definitional hegemony of which different groups compete. In my study, this floating signifier is “EU-criticism”. The concept of ‘floating signifiers’ is related to that of framing contests, which refer to “struggles to decide whose accounts will matter” (Ryan & Alexander 2006: 568). I assume neither of these two sets of data to offer “neutral” representations of the phenomenon. Rather, I share Moscovici’s view that “representations are prescriptive,

⁵ The term was introduced by Ryan 1991, more recently Ryan has also used it in her study on the Massachusetts welfare framing battle (Ryan 2006)

that is they impose themselves upon us with an irresistible force” (1984: 9). However, neither of the two (groups of) agents, dominant newspapers or EU-critics, has the monopoly on “constructing reality”. The question, thus, is: What is EU-criticism a case of? Both sets of data make it possible to identify the diagnostic (what is the situation?), prognostic (what is the desired future state of affairs?) and motivational (what should be done?) frames⁶ (Snow & Benford 1988: 199-202) regarding EU-criticism.

In what follows, I will offer some preliminary analysis of a subset of my data from dominant newspapers. The frequency of articles mentioning EU-criticism in *Helsingin Sanomat* was the highest in *June* 2004 because that was when the European Parliament elections took place. I have chosen the articles from this period as a small case study. Thus, I seek to answer the question: “How are EU-critics framed in *Helsingin Sanomat* in the context of European Parliament elections 2004?” When articles are cited, the number in the parentheses after the quotation indicates the number of that article in my register (and will be cited with dates in the final text).

In the sample analyzed, there was no systematic use of terms related to the phenomenon. Indeed, frequently the different terms were used as synonyms and in no instance did the author attempt to define the term he/she was using. The various synonyms of EU-criticism were used virtually interchangeably and no clear pattern could be observed. It thus seems that the dominant newspapers actually contribute to the widespread confusion surrounding the concept of EU-criticism.

With few exceptions, the usual structure of the articles reserves the “last word” to EU-proponents. In other words, after the EU-critics’ position(s) are presented, they are countered with a statement from someone from the yes-side, usually a government or

⁶ These could also be determined by various other methods, such as interviews, analysis of visual materials etc., all of which address “texts” of some sort (see e.g. Fairclough 2003 for a broad definition of “text”). As the scope of this project does not allow for the inclusion of a wider variety of material, I have limited the empirical material to two kinds of texts, which create two radically different and mutually competing definitions of reality.

EU-official, who either indicates the critics' idea as false or unreasonable. This creates the impression that the first "wrong" argument is corrected by the subsequent "right" argument and that the "leaders" are a more trustworthy source. Frequently, the EU-critics' position is not presented at all and the topic is entirely controlled by EU-proponents.

An article cites Tony Blair: "This will be an interesting political contest because it is a contest between the truth and myths" (19). Since there is no counterargument to balance this claim, the reader is left with the impression that EU-critics are lying. If balance were sought, this claim could have been superseded by a quote from an EU-critic, indicating some myth propounded by EU-proponents. Also, Tony Blair is cited as having "condemned the idea of Britain leaving [the EU] as particularly stupid" (19), but there is no information after that to balance this one-sided opinion.

Another article also claims that EU-criticism is fueled by "wrong information and prejudices" (260). The article suggests that "in the minds of countless Finns, the EU is a threatening devil-like image". (260):

"In particular the discussion of basic security and welfare before the elections is a good example of creating negative false notions. [...] A couple EU-opponents and politicians looking for cheap slogans have read the clauses and proposed directives of the future Constitutional Treaty in a way that would make devil reading his Bible green with envy. Suddenly the Finnish electoral discussion is governed by the fear that bad EU comes and eats our basic security. There is no substance in these ideas. [...] In a free country, EU-opponents certainly have the right to present whatever interpretations" (260).

EU-critics are said to be "afraid" of various things, however, their fears are made to appear irrational. For example, "In Britain [...] the Constitution [for Europe] is feared to narrow Britain's sovereignty" (29). To say that the Constitution is "feared" to limit Britain's sovereignty sounds as though there were no reasonable ground to expect this to happen. It would give a very different impression if the word "thought" or "expected" were used instead.

On the other hand, EU-critics are also presented as *arousing* fear in competing parties. Sometimes, though, the articles leave it unclear, *who* is afraid of the EU-critics:

“Serious fear has arisen that the tiny Independence Party will eat the vote harvest of the Conservatives. The leader of the Conservatives, Michael Howard, has warned the British not to waste their votes on Independence Party members” (61).

One gets the impression that something terrible will happen (“warned”) if one votes for *UKIP*, but also that it is pointless for some reason (“waste”) to vote for *UKIP*.

In *HS*, the *United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)* and the Swedish *Junilistan (June List)* serve as the prime examples of EU-critical parties throughout 2000-2006 in *Helsingin Sanomat*, but they are particularly often mentioned in the articles of June 2004, when both got roughly the same proportion of national votes. In fact, in June 2004, the topic of EU-criticism primarily arose in the context of *UKIP*'s and *Junilistan*'s electoral results (Poland's EU-critical parties were also mentioned a few times). EU-criticism, thus, appeared in these articles as a foreign phenomenon, not something that would exist in Finland.

UKIP and *Junilistan* are clearly different parties, the first demanding Britain's withdrawal from the EU and the second seeking to prevent the transfer of more power from Swedish decision makers to Brussels. The treatment of the two parties in *Helsingin Sanomat*, however, is very similar. They are represented as small strange groupings that, as an unpleasant surprise, had unexpected success in European Parliament elections.

When EU-critical parties get any places at all in the European Parliament, the media terms it as “success” (129, 411, 127) and a “victory” (127, 72). Compared to the big parties they were of course unsuccessful, getting less than 20% of the votes. The assumption behind it is that “normally” EU-critical parties should not be elected to the European Parliament at all. This image is further supported by the claims that EU-critical

parties were “eating the votes” of the big parties. It appears as though they took something that was not rightfully theirs.

The success of EU-critical parties is presented as surprising and unexpected (72, 62, 129, 411), even for the parties themselves (74) Why would it be unexpected for an EU-critical party to succeed in Euroskeptical Britain? One could speculate that EU-critical voters in fact had no other option but to vote for *UKIP* because this was the only realistic EU-critical alternative available. *UKIP*'s voters might not necessarily agree with all political views the party has, but they support its main message, which is that Britain should withdraw from the EU. The impression that the surprise of the EU-critical parties' success was unpleasant is augmented by some articles, which use the word “shocked” instead of “surprised” (74, 299).

The articles make it seem as though the EU-critical parties appeared out of nowhere and so did their supporters. One article is particularly eloquent: “But suddenly, as though through a magic trick, everybody started talking about the Independence Party” (61). It would have created a very different impression to say, for example, that “EU-critical voters finally found candidates who represented their views.” A neutral statement, indicating subjects of the actions, would have sounded something like this: “The political elites were used to a situation where EU-critical parties only existed in the margins. They were unpleasantly surprised when EU-critical parties gained strength and the voters were able to express their EU-criticism in their voting.”

The votes gathered by *UKIP* and *Junilistan* were either directly or indirectly presented as being “away from” the big parties (61, 299, 84). *UKIP* is said to have “stolen the show” (64) in the European Parliament elections. This creates the impression that the elections were not perceived as *UKIP*'s show at all and it stole the show from the two major parties, the Conservatives and the Labourists. Particularly if we consider that *UKIP* got roughly 1/5 of the votes, it is evident that its results did not surpass those of the two major parties. But EU-critical parties were not only said to be “stealing” votes from “their rightful owners”. A subheading declared: “The Independence Party snatched the

Conservatives' message – and maybe the Euro-election [i.e. European Parliament election] voters as well.” (61). The EU-critical *UKIP* is thus portrayed as having taken something that was not rightfully theirs. It would have been a very different message to say: “EU-critical voters preferred *UKIP* over the Conservative Party.” Also, strictly speaking, a message is not something that can be “snatched”, as the “original owner”, i.e. the Conservative Party should still have it left.

EU-criticism is presented as a problem to be solved. The metaphorical comparison in the following quotation (“win”) is either with a battle or a sports game. It is not quite clear, *who* is meant to fight against “Euroskeptic opinion”, but it is clear that widespread EU-criticism is considered as an unfavorable condition.

“Europe has to fulfill its promise of development toward increased welfare and greater security. Only then is it possible to successfully win against the Euroskeptic opinion, which so many voters expressed in many member states” (122).

The choice of words sometimes makes EU-critics appear as dangerous and aggressive. For example, “The leader of [*UKIP*] Nigel Farage threatened on Monday to make *UKIP* into a mass movement” (127). The same information could also be presented more neutrally, saying for example “According to Nigel Farage, *UKIP* is planning to develop into a mass movement.” Similarly, the same article speaks of *UKIP* as “extremely EU-oppositional”. What does “extremely oppositional” mean? The word “extremely” is unnecessary in terms of the informational content of the sentence, but it is value-laden, making *UKIP* sound aggressive.

While the articles frequently use biased language when talking about EU-criticism, there are also exceptions. In some instances, the articles state the goals or activities of EU-critics in straightforward language.

“EU-critics have brought up the problems of democracy of the [European] Union in Britain, Sweden and Denmark” (121).

“The EU-critical list [*Junilistan*] wants to transfer power from Brussels to member states and organize a referendum in Sweden regarding the new EU constitution. The members of *Junilistan* have their background in different parties” (73).

UKIP is presented as a marginal (62) single-issue party (26), a joke (61), ravaged by internal conflict (61), free-riding on the popularity of its “front man” Robert Kilroy-Silk, a former TV-star, and Joan Collins, an actress, who never bothered to vote in British elections (61). It is portrayed as a “troublemaker”, who causes trouble for the main opposition party (Conservatives), as well as for the government. It appears that the opposition does not like the newcomer because it takes away the established party’s votes, and the ruling party dislikes it because of its oppositional politics.

UKIP and *Junilistan* are constructed as scapegoats. It appears as though their success is what indicates the high level of EU-criticism in the UK and Sweden, although both got less than 20% of the votes. An article (129) suggests that *UKIP*’s success threatens the ratification of the EU Constitution at the referendum. Another article says, “If Independence Party stirs up EU-opposition among the British, this means difficult times for Blair” (61) It is, however, clear, that it takes more than *UKIP*’s supporters to get a negative referendum result.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) have spoken of the simultaneous operation of a ‘logic of difference’ and a ‘logic of equivalence’.⁷

“These are respectively tendencies towards creating and proliferating differences between objects, entities, groups of people, etc. and collapsing or ‘subverting’ differences by representing objects, entities, groups of people, etc. as equivalent to each other (Fairclough 2003: 88).

⁷ In a way, my use of language also makes some very different phenomena appear as equivalent. For example, I am looking at three country cases, three newspapers. I will have a list of contributors of EU-critical texts, in which European Parliament members will be next to small scale activists. My choice of three newspapers also seems to carry the assumption that they are comparable and enjoy a similar role in their respective countries.

One example of using the logic of equivalence is creating lists. For example, two articles talk about Finnish European Parliament candidates and mention Paavo Väyrynen next to Esko Seppänen (126, 343). Neither of the two articles claims that Väyrynen is EU-critical, but mentioning him next to Seppänen gives the impression that he is.

The following are good examples of “list-making”, which creates a sense of equivalence between the different phenomena. In the first quote, EU-critics are equated with the Greens, extremists and single-issue parties, and in the second EU-critics may be inferred to “desire to object” and to be similar to nationalist parties:

”It is embarrassing for the political elite that all parties and particularly Greens succeed particularly well in European Parliament elections. This is also true of groups representing the extremes, as well as EU-critical and other single-issue or single-person ”lists” (131).

”The fresh opinion survey, ordered by the European Parliament, [...] speaks of the citizens’ desired to object. According to the survey, Euroskeptics and nationalist parties advance in many EU countries (130).

The logic of equivalence is evident in an article that talks about the two unpleasant surprises of the elections: low level of electoral participation and high level of EU-criticism in the member states. EU-criticism appears as a problem, although it is not directly stated as such, because it is presented together with the “established problem” of low electoral participation (150, 171, 279, 241, 411).

”The most regrettable surprise was that citizens did not seem to be interested in the EU. The percent of electoral participation was worse than ever at 45.3. [...] The second surprise of the elections was the number of member states in which Euroskeptical parties won great favor” (171).

Sickness and health metaphors are pervasive in talking about social problems. The social problem is seen as a disease that is taxing on the whole society (organism) and it should be cured. EU-criticism is also referred to as a societal sickness in *Helsingin Sanomat*

articles. In one article, it is presented as a progressive disease that should be stopped before it gets really bad:

”The citizens’ clear dissatisfaction regarding the EU in many member states could develop into an inflammation if something is not done about it” (171)

Another article presents EU-criticism as an unfavorable condition that one would expect to pass: “The critical attitude of Swedish citizens toward EU membership [...] is not easing off” (84).

One article directly equates non-participation in elections and opposition to the EU:

“While some people consider voting self-evident, others have made just as convinced a decision to leave the opportunity unused because they oppose the EU altogether” (406)

The same article, which is a description of a Finnish European Parliament candidate’s campaign, also displays the logic of equivalence at work. In the first sentence of the following quote, EU-critics are mentioned. The second sentence speaks of aggressive and rude citizens, whom the European Parliament candidate meets during his campaign, but there is no indication that the two sentences speak of different individuals. While those “waving their fists and spitting on [you]” are not directly equated with EU-critics, the latter appear as such due to the way the sentences are placed one after another.

”Buttler has also met such people perceived the EU as a curse to get rid of. One even comes across people who will wave their fists and spit on [you], but Buttler does not complain” (406)

It may be concluded that the coverage of EU-criticism in June 2004 in *Helsingin Sanomat* concentrates on foreign, particularly Swedish and British EU-critical parties. Also, EU-criticism is presented as a matter of public opinion. Reasons for EU-criticism are either not discussed or they are dismissed as irrational fears. EU-critics are presented as marginal, aggressive and seeking a position on the political scene that is not rightfully

theirs. The electoral results in Britain and Sweden are presented as surprising and shocking. The phenomenon of EU-criticism itself is shown as a disease-like condition. Occasionally, but rarely, the language of the articles is neutral when describing the ideas or activities of EU-critics.

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