

Book Review

Myra Marx Ferree, William Anthony Gamson, Jürgen Gerhards, and Dieter Rucht: *Shaping Abortion Discourse: Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany and the United States*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
350 pp.

The ultimate purpose of this intriguing book is to use media abortion discourse in Germany and the United States to illuminate issues about cultural change, democracy, and the public sphere. More specifically the questions focus on the processes by which newspaper practices, social actors, and institutions interact to provide public discourse about policy issues. The quality of that discourse is evaluated by criteria emerging from competing democratic theories. The book provides a compelling empirical argument that counters the sweeping claims of some globalization theorists who suggest that the national state is no longer the appropriate unit of analysis for social processes that are transnationalized. Abortion discourse would seem to be a prime candidate for an issue on which a global discourse exists, given a transnational pro-life lobby and women's movement. Yet this careful and wide sweeping analysis of the abortion contest shows how the specific history, institutions, and culture of each country lead to representations of the abortion issue that are quite different in the two nations.

The book is organized around two interweaving stories that present the analysis and interpretation of the vast comparative data-set on which this study is based. The first is about the cultural context in which abortion discourse is shaped. Key questions include: who are the major players? What voice do they have in the media? How does the way they frame the issue interact with the specific sets of opportunities and constraints that help create these two contrasting national discourses? It is abortion talk, not abortion policy, that is the specific focus. The second strand is about the quality of abortion talk. Drawing on four main democratic theories about the nature of the

public sphere (Representative Liberal, Participatory Liberal, Discursive, and Constructionist/Feminist) the book examines, in relative terms, how well the German and United States media discourse performs. The evaluative criteria include civility and inclusiveness, closure and consensus. Germany does relatively better than the US on closure; whereas the US does better than Germany on the greater inclusion of social movements and other voices from the periphery. Does it matter? It does if we share the authors belief that in a democracy, it is important to know how the media, as a public arena, provides an opportunity for ordinary people to participate as citizens in shaping public discourse about matters that concern them.

There are four sections to the book; the introduction provides the historical context needed for understanding the contemporary debate on abortion in each country. There is also a detailed introduction to the quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches that are used to make sense of their newspaper analysis, organizational survey, and interviews with key actors. Further methodological details are also available on the Web. This level of detail makes the book extremely useful as a methodological exemplar for those concerned with research training. The second part of the book provides a comparative overview about the contest for ways the abortion issue is framed. Building on Goffman's seminal study of frame analysis and Gamson's earlier work on the framing of political discourse, this book demonstrates that frames can be usefully applied even with large-scale complex data. The idea of 'discursive opportunity structure' also proves a very useful one for drawing out the different political and cultural contexts in which policy issues in the two countries are debated. The major outcomes of the analysis are discussed in terms of propositions about differences in actors and framing contests in the two countries. The third section provides more comparative findings concerning the representation of the discursive interests of women, religion and the political parties of the 'left' that champion 'the disadvantaged'. The final section, the most far-reaching section of the book,

examines the relative quality of abortion discourse as a litmus test for the well-being of democratic process.

Understanding the complexities of discourse about abortion policy in Germany and the United States is a challenge. How successful is this endeavour? How do the arguments and the interpretations that are made in this book stand up to close evaluation? I certainly have some quibbles. For example, the authors argue that abortion discourse in Germany, with its historical position that regarded abortion as a felony, provided the discursive opportunity for feminists to mobilize around abortion as an issue. In contrast, abortion was argued in more medical terms in the United States and reproductive rights were granted to a non-gender specific individual, the 'pregnant person' in the words of the Supreme Court (p. 291). To me, it seems to be straining the evidence to cite the 1976 *Gilbert vs. General Electric* rather than 1973 *Roe vs. Wade*, which states that the right to privacy is broad enough 'to encompass a woman's decision whether or not to terminate her pregnancy'. Could it not be that in the USA the woman's rights argument is so salient that it is often implicit rather than explicit in discourse?

I also find the argument about why the United States fares less well than Germany in reaching abortion consensus, somewhat overly-elaborate. It is an interesting question why abortion remains so much more controversial in America than in Germany, or indeed in the majority of European countries where abortion has been legalized. Part of the answer, as

the authors acknowledge, lies in the different legal/judicial processes. In the United States the Supreme Court decision relies on the precarious balance of power on the supreme court; whereas, by contrast, the German Court decisions appear as *ex catbedra*, the judgement of the legislative institution. Does the elaborate analysis of media discourse add anything to this basic difference? The authors suggest it does and that the 'elite-dominated' model of media coverage in Germany allows journalists to withdraw from the issue once it has been made law, leaving questions of implementation and impact on individuals out of the picture. That may be correct. However, it is also possible that the United States, by declaring abortion a constitutional right, followed a route almost designed to cause ongoing controversy, regardless of the media's role.

One does not need to agree with all the arguments and interpretations of the authors to find this book immensely instructive and enjoyable to read. It is an exemplary piece of comparative research. The theoretical questions are important and the empirical analysis is performed with a rigour and breadth that is rarely matched. I recommend the book strongly to those interested in gender, social policy, contested values, democratic process, and the media. The book also provides a fascinating case-study for judging ideals of democratic debate in practice, a subject that takes us far beyond the abortion issue.

Jacqueline Scott
University of Cambridge