Thesis evaluation Irina Percemli

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Programme details

Programme: European Politics and Society

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Thesis details:

Title: Understanding and Framing of Democratic Decline in the EU-funded Research Projects

Is the thesis in your assessment free of plagiarism?

Yes to my knowledge the thesis is free of plagiarism

no plagiarism

Can the thesis be made publicly available in the Leiden University Repository?

by A. Escribà-Folch: it can be made public throught the repository.

Summary assessment/comments

The thesis has many strong points, including its originality and methodological and conceptual rigor.

Some of the weakness concern the discussion of democratic decline and the connection with current lietarture. Also, the limitations in offering a more comprehensive framework for understanding academia and fundings institutions relationships and mutual influence.

Criteria

Knowledge and insight

This is a truly original and interesting thesis that examines how democratic decline is conceptualized and studied in the European Union funded research. It also studies the alignment between EU policy priorities and academic production in this line of research.

As said, the research question is original as it looks at the links between research and policy objectives and concepts from funding institutions, which is something to which academics rarely pay attention to. The question is correctly framed and justified.

The literature review focuses first on the concepts of neoliberalism and democracy. In there the author should be more careful in the separation of concepts used by the EU and the academic debates. The author argues that the concern is the latter, but focuses on the latter and makes some assumptions on the links between democray and neoliberalism. I'm unsure if that discussion belongs there, or it should be massively streamlined to highlight the potnetial concepts to be found in the data.

Then the discussion centers around the context of democracy decline in the EU. In there I'd recommend a broader scope and a more specific discussion of the concept of democratic decline or backsliding. In fact, it is somewhat woryying that so much importance is place don the concept of deocracy, but not on the one of decline, backsliding, erosion, etc. that so much attention has received in recent scholarly work. Further, the connection with neoliberalism of the whole process is a bit blurred and a bit forced too. The connections between democracy and market economies precede the emergence of neoliberalism. And one might even wonder about the usefulness of such a concept and the applicability after more than 40 years since its practical inception. The assumption then is made by the author about the particular stand adopted by the EU beforehand. I do not disagree with the approach, I jus think the author should be more careful in the framing of the conceptual discussion.

Section 2.4 is very interesting and seems very central to the research question. SO instead of the lengthy discussion of concepts at the beginning, the author should have spend more space to this particular discussion of connections between academia and funding institutions. And not only focus on the EU but also other relevant contexts where research on this has been conducted, such as the US. This would have allowed to develop a more general framework of the ways both can influence each other and the mechanisms of that potential influence and connections.

Assessment: very good   **Weighing:** n/a

Application of knowledge and insight

The thesis starts with an interesting claim, namely, that "EU's understanding and promotion of democracy are not neutral or universal. Rather, they reflect particular ideological assumptions rooted in liberal conceptions of democracy and neoliberal economic orthodoxy."

The author then argues that research on democracy erosion aligns with a EU vision of democracy rooted in neoliberalism and a liberal notion

of democracy, and that it overlooks structural and economic factors undermining democratic processes as it focuses on populism and citizen engagement.

To test the claims, the author uses a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis.

Concerning research projects, the author focuses on those funded under the Horizon 2020 'Societal Challenges' pillar. I wonder is that limits a bit the number of projects that author could have paid attention too. The discussion on why ERC projects and other programmes are not considered is not enough to convince the reader, in my opinion. Yet, the overall justification of data selection is rigorous and thorough, so I commend the authir for the transarency and carefulness in detailing the data collection and analysis.

My main concern is the lack of theoretical discussion on the ways the alignment or non-aligment might happen. That is, the thesis moves quickly from the literature review to the design and methodology. There is no discussion of the ways in which both EU and research can influence each other that can lead the author to some expectation on the direction of the influence and the possibility of alignment, and how. Furthermore, there is an issue of reversed causality, concerning the origins of the ideas and concepts of democracy, etc. that the EU might seem to hold. The observed alignment might be the result of several distinct process not necessarily having to do with an influence of the EU on the framing and outcomes of the research projects.

Assessment: good   **Weighing:** n/a

Reaching conclusions

The conclusions are nicely written, including, most importantly, the many policy implications that are derived from the findings.
I think they could be more ambitious.

Assessment: good   **Weighing:** n/a

Communication

Everything is ok, overall. Although the thesis contains some grammetical errors.
All other formal compenents are correct and according to academic standards.
Overall, the thesis is very nicely written

Assessment: very good   **Weighing:** n/a

Formal requirements

All ok

Final assessment

This thesis is graded with a 8.7

Signatures

A. Escribà-Folch