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*Constructing political Europe “in practice”:  
The French referendum campaign*

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## Introduction

On 29<sup>th</sup> May 2005, the French citizens, by voting “non”, decided the rejection of the proposed Constitutional Treaty (CT) of the European Union. While this result, together with the negative vote in the Netherlands a few days later (1<sup>st</sup> June), put a (preliminary?) end to the European constitutional project, it can also be analysed from a second perspective: the referendum was the occasion for a hitherto nearly unknown and for most observers surprising public political debate about Europe, the sense of Europe and its political form and content<sup>1</sup>.

Not only received every French voter a copy of the CT, but this seemingly useless and boring “waste of money” gave way to a high mobilization of the French political forces and engendered an at times heated political debate. While mixing up French domestic politics, European politics in general with its consequences for France (the Polish plumber) and the referendum’s subject (the CT), it also was in a broader sense the occasion for a political definition of the European Union. This definition was of course a French definition (only few foreign contributions were “heard” in the debate), and within the French discourse, there were conflicting and mutually exclusive visions of the EU. Still, it was a political debate with the construction of a political understanding and vision of the EU.

The question this paper raises is twofold. First, I would like to ask if a closer look on the referendum campaign can explain the referendum outcome. In this perspective, a first part (1) gives some statistical information that seems to underline the importance of the political aspect in the voters’ decision. Second, I ask how an analysis of the referendum campaign can help to understand the outcome. In this second part (2), I approach my subject via a content-analysis of the referendum campaign. While this second part seems to confirm the importance of the political aspect in debating the CT, it is still difficult to understand how the “non”-campaign, supported in a first time by mainly extremist political forces, could gain its vigour and finally win a majority of the voters. That’s why a third part (3) tries to understand the discourse of the referendum campaign as “social practice” and asks what factors made the force of “le non”. Finally, I am interested in assessing the value added by this approach to classical discourse analysis.

## Explaining and understanding the referendum-outcome

In these first two parts, I am interested in the reasons that made voters vote “non”. Was it the decline of president Chirac’s popularity, a general refusal to follow the

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<sup>1</sup> The early debates of the fifties show an astonishing degree of politicization, see for example the debate on the European Defence Community in 1952 in Seidendorf (forthcoming).

government's choice? Was it a political decision that lies in domestic French politics? Or finally, was it the definition of a political understanding of Europe and the rejection of this Europe? Arguably, all of these components were playing a role in the multi-faceted campaign, but can we find one component more important than the others, or can we define a specific combination of components that explains the result?

In a first section, I use statistical results of opinion polls to find out about the main reasons that made French voters vote no. In a second section, I take a closer look on the discursive evolution of the campaign by using the results of a content-analysis of some central French media.

### 1. Some statistics

By now, several excellent publications presenting all aspects of the voters' opinion, their preferences for the "yes" and "no"-camp and the reasons for this, are available. In this paper, I rely on Laurent / Sauger (2005, in the following: LS 2005 and page), a compendium that contains information on most aspects dealt with here. The first finding that is interesting for this paper is the mobilisation of voters. 69,73% of the registered voters participated, a little less than in the Maastricht-Referendum (1992: 69,70%) but slightly more than in the regional elections 2004 (62,12%) (LS 2005:3). Abstention reaches the same level as the "yes"-vote (30,64% of all registered), the "no"-vote comes with 36,97%, equivalent to 54,7% of the expressed votes.

Without entering into details, this shows a quite substantial mobilisation of the French electorate, especially if one considers that beforehand, most observers took "Europe" as a topic with hardly the potential to mobilise political passion. The question is, how this mobilisation was organised, or more specifically: in what terms took the debate place, what subjects were discussed, how was the referendum framed to reach this high mobilisation?

As mentioned, several ideas come to mind: next to the (im-)popularity of the French political personnel (president Chirac and his prime minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin were beating all records of unpopularity in the weeks before the vote, see Piar / Gerstlé 2005: 42-43), one could imagine a decision taking into account French domestic politics or a decision on "Europe". The results of the opinion polls in LS 2005 allow for a differentiated analysis:

The factor that makes up for most of the decisions was "Europe" – but not "Europe" in an a-political, general sense: it was the esteemed consequences of the CT for France *and* for the European construction that voters analysed. In this combination of factors, we can also

integrate the (un-)popularity of the president / government: they were closely identified with the “liberal” (in the French understanding) European construction and politics.

During the campaign, as it turned out that a victory of the “no-camp” was in reach, but only under the condition that a strange alliance between extreme left, extreme right and the French particularity of sovereignists could be formed, the “left” part of this coalition had to justify its participation in this coalition. It did so by claiming its own “Europeaness”, but insisting on the slogan: *une autre Europe est possible* (“another Europe is possible”). This shows again the strange melange of national and European arguments: it was neither a pure national rejection of Europe, nor an enthusiastic embracing of Europe. It was the claim to define Europe politically in one’s own favourite terms – of course these terms were first of all French terms, before being left or right terms<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, a multivariate regression combining political, demographic and social factors shows the following (Perrineau 2005:5). Neither age, nor sex or level of education significantly account for voters’ decisions. The best results in predicting “yes” or “no-votes” are made up of two political variables directly linked to the European factor. First, the esteemed economic and social consequences of the CT (for France) combines European *and* national concerns, but shows also the individual appreciation of the risks and chances of the new political construction. Second, it is the voter’s attachment to the European institutions that decides on the rejection or acceptance of the CT (Perrineau 2005:5).

Together, those two variables account for the majority of votes in the French case and they clearly stand for the politicisation of the European project. Nevertheless, this politicisation occurs not only along one (classical left-right) cleavage-line, but along two: Next to the political cleavage (left / right, social fears against the liberal project) we find the – seemingly territorial, in reality political – cleavage of nation / Europe: is the political nation, at the centre of the French political project, still confined in its national terms, adequate to solve the problems? Or does it need to be enlarged, to integrate (at least partly) other actors in decisions that directly concern the French citizens?

Under this perspective, a seemingly rational decision is taken by the voters: They make up their mind about the possibilities and risks to continue the “French way” within the European constitution. This account of course cannot be “won” by the European side – the project being by its very nature a compromise of 25 national opinions.

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<sup>2</sup> Take only the specific French meaning of “liberal” European politics – being in the French campaign nearly a f...-word, it has a completely different sense within the German or the British debate.

In the next section, the framing and functioning of this claim (Europe in French colours) are to be understood. For this, a content-analysis of the referendum-campaign seems adequate.

## 2. Content-analysis and framing of the debate

After having “explained” the two major variables that seem to account for the voters’ decision, I would like to “understand” why the voters realised the proposed question in the specific way they did, meaning in terms of “social fears” and “European construction”. This is the result of a collective construction that was realised throughout the referendum campaign. Taking part in it were the political forces (government, parties...), the social forces (trade unions, employers representation, churches...), intellectuals and journalists (in France traditionally strong), and of course every citizen debating the question.

Whereas an approach via the aggregation of individual actions can figure out the (individual) reasons that made the voters vote the way they did, it cannot explain why the referendum question was discussed and framed in the way it was. This “structural” side of the story can be approached via a content-analysis of the media and a discourse analysis of its content. By this, the content is not only recorded (content-analysis) but also integrated into the specific French set of references and meaning.

Again, the excellent work compiled and edited by Laurent and Sauger allows an easy approach. Their compendium contains an article by Piar / Gerstlé that analyses the daily 20h news broadcasts of TF1 and France 2, the two main French TV-chains. They investigated the TV-chains’ handling of the referendum subject between 29<sup>th</sup> November 2004 (internal referendum of the PS) and 29<sup>th</sup> May 2005 (day of the referendum). The authors can show two things very clearly: the “quantitative discrimination” of the no-camp (of course primarily criticized by the no-partisans) seems obvious. TF1 (private) and France 2 (public) were framing the referendum within their main news broadcasts in the following way: positively (in favour of the “yes-camp”) in 796 min 55, negatively (supporting the “no-camp”) for 141 min 56 (Piar / Gerstlé 2005:64). This seems at first a paradoxical finding: If the referendum’s question was so largely framed in terms supporting a “yes-vote”, why is it then that the no-vote prevailed?

Another factor that should have played in favour of the yes-campaign is the repartition of yes- and no-supporters within the political forces: The yes-side was of course represented by the political authorities – president, prime minister, government – and by the political

forces supporting them (UMP, the president's party, was entirely supporting the yes), including the presidents of the two chambers of parliament (*Assemblée Nationale* and *Sénat*). This constellation should favour something like Foucault's "hegemonic discourse", especially as the main opposition party – the socialist PS – was also supporting the yes-side. The internal referendum of this party (29<sup>th</sup> November) gave a majority in favour of the yes, and it was afterwards that it became clear that one third to 45% of the party did not respect the internal referendum, thus bringing the party to the point of splitting up. Still the established forces of the PS, including chairman François Hollande and former prime minister Lionel Jospin, were central figures of the yes-campaign.

We are thus confronted with (a) a largely biased media account of the referendum question (in favour of "yes") and (b) a quasi-homogeneity of the most important political forces, including the "authorities", in favour of the CT. How, under these conditions, was it possible that a negative framing (the no-campaign) not only took place, but gained in importance and was to become more dynamic than its counterpart, up to the point to reunite a majority of French citizens? At first sight, this seems to contradict the expectations of media- and discourse-theoretical approaches.

To better understand this phenomenon, I want to link the content and form of the campaign to the framing and dynamics of the debate. While the "quantitative approach" seems unambiguous concerning the biased media-campaign in favour of the yes-vote, this "process"-approach may allow a better understanding of the complex mechanisms underlying a process of persuasion. In the words of Piar / Gerstlé (2005:72):

“C’est moins en privilégiant directement une position au détriment d’une autre qu’en focalisant l’attention d’une partie critique du public sur une situation nationale (et européenne) où les problèmes sociaux étaient omniprésents, venant ainsi valider le discours des partisans du «Non», que l’actualité a joué contre la ratification du Traité constitutionnel européen.”<sup>3</sup>

For the first of the identified variables (social fear), this is what comes out from a more detailed content-analysis of the main news-broadcasts (Piar / Gerstlé 2005:71): The authors established the global visibility of European themes in the news and the part that social themes were playing within them at different moments (Maastricht referendum 1992, European elections 1994, 1999 and 2004, referendum 29<sup>th</sup> may 2005). The global visibility of the European Union 2005 is comparable to 1992. It is much weaker in 1994 and 1999. More

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<sup>3</sup> My translation: “The actuality has played against the ratification of the European constitutional treaty less by directly privileging one position over another, then by focalising the attention of a critical mass of the public on a national (and European) situation where social problems were omnipresent, what came as a validation of the discourse of the “no”-partisans”.

revealing, the evolution of the “social question” that concerned 4,5% of the total amount of reporting about Europe in 1992 and 24% in 2005 (ibid., 72). This is the way that the “European question” to be answered in the referendum was framed as a “social question”.

The same can be shown for the second explanation, Europe as a “national question” or better: the framing of the proposed subject in “national” rather than “European” terms. Again relying on the content-analysis of the two news-broadcasts, Piar and Gerstlé show the very large majority of the “national frame”. If mutually exclusive, the “European” and “national” frame account for 214 vs. 900 minutes of the campaign. Within the 26 weeks of analysis, the European frame dominates only during two weeks (Piar / Gerstlé 2005: 59).

Thus, the content analysis gives a first indication how we have to understand the dynamics and effects of the campaign that led to the specific framing of the CT. It seems difficult to integrate these findings methodologically into a statistical analysis on the level of individuals (aggregation): the frames that could be proposed in an opinion poll have to be established in a first time. While this is most certainly a collective process, it is not a mere aggregation. The discursive approach seems more promising, as it allows to integrate the structural factors of the political and national discursive environment that framed the campaign. Yet, some fundamental arguments of the discursive approach (hegemonic discourse, biased media content) are not working as expected. That is why a third part will ask if an understanding of the referendum campaign as “social practice” can more adequately account for the events that led to the negative vote of the French citizens.

### 3. An alternative try: Discourse as “social practice”?

An important strand of discourse analysis understands discourse as “social practice”. That’s why a first sub-section presents some clarifications about my understanding of “social practice”. A second sub-section tries to assess the utility of this approach for the present case, the French referendum.

#### a. Conceptual clarifications

The two approaches presented so far are, in theoretical terms, either grounded on individual actions (opinion polls, personal appreciation of costs / advantages) or structural explanations (structure of media content that gives meaning / creates the context). Both approaches seem to account for parts of the story, but neither seems really convincing for the entire *problématique*: how was the dynamics and finally success of the no-campaign possible? How was it possible that arguments that seemed “rational” in most parts of Europe did not

work in France? And how was it possible that in the inner-French discourse within which the campaign took place, an at the beginning largely marginalized frame won at the end a majority of votes?

To bring together the structural and the level of action, an idea could be to understand concrete settings in terms of time, space and content with the aim to understand how certain outcomes are possible. These “practices” do not only depend on the action of people, but also “on the significance of those actions and the surroundings in which they occur” (Stern forthcoming: 2) Amongst other practices, we then should understand “discourse” as “social practice” (Reckwitz 2002:54). Furthermore, the specific subject, a political campaign within which different political forces struggle to justify their arguments, gives another hint why an approach of the referendum-campaign as “social practice” could be of interest (Boltanski, Thévenot 1999; Wagner 1999).

What specific structures of meaning have to exist and what rhetorical action is necessary in order to justify certain arguments of the campaign that seem rather unfounded in the other 24 member states? If we understand language as including background practices, then only by using a shared language, can we decide upon the justness, true or falseness of a claim (Stern forthcoming: 5).

Yet the web of meaning created by discourse is not an eternal, unchangeable structure. It can be changed, but only slowly and not by a single act. As a “social structure” giving meaning to action and speech, discourses are sticky. But as they are consisting of language, they contain more than one meaning, there is always room for a different interpretation. In a process of communicative exchange (or “social practice”), the appreciation of a situation can be transformed. As the actor (speaker) always refers to existing (linguistic, discursive) structures and continues to develop them, his own speech-act becomes part of the structure that generates meaning. This is also the reason why it is so difficult to “enter” a discourse as a foreigner – you first have to understand at least partly the meaning of a concrete rhetoric act within the web of meaning that is common to other members of the discursive environment (Larsen 1997:19, for an alternative understanding of discourses as more fragile and permanently contested, see Laclau / Mouffe 1985).

This understanding of discourse is also shared by “critical discourse analysis” (itself made up of different strands)<sup>4</sup>. The relationship between specific discursive actions and their

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<sup>4</sup> Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, Liebhart, Hofstätter, Kargl 1998: 42, FN 37 for a detailed account.

context (situation, institutions, social structures framing the discourse) is understood as “dialectic”<sup>5</sup>, as mutually constituent.

How can this understanding be operationalised for the case at hand? The two main explaining variables can hint at the situation(s) that should be analysed: (a) a national situation, meaning the national specificities that create a national discourse. (b) The social situation that gives meaning and resonance to the understanding of the CT as social danger. In terms of time, several layers can be distinguished.

Concerning the *national* situation, the understanding of the EU as menacing French “sovereignty” was always present (mainly amongst French Gaullists and communists), it can be found for the first time in the coalition that refused to vote the European Defence Community (EDC 1954, Gaullists and Communists). In its contemporary form, it was concretised in the campaign for the Maastricht referendum, where both Gaullists and Socialists had to cope with intra-party dissidence, leading to several new parties<sup>6</sup>. These new parties had in common their understanding of the one and indivisible popular and national sovereignty of France. Since then, this reading has sharpened its argument and created a particular genealogy of meaning. In 2005, it was understood as a “just”, “true” and “legitimate” position in the debate. The historical antecedents can be drawn back up to the struggles between Jacobin and Girondin revolutionaries, in the first French revolutionary assembly of 1789.

Concerning the *social problem*, we can find a similar, but more recent development. The anti-globalisation movement that has broad support in France (“attac” was born in France) has established the notion of *altermondialists* (not refusing globalisation, but longing for another [alter] globalisation) in the broad mainstream discourse. The slogan of the no-camp in the referendum campaign, *une autre Europe est possible*, followed the same lines and was supported through a coalition in many aspects comparable with the globalisation critics. Yet as for the “national” genealogy, the “social” genealogy goes back much further.

For both situations, the question is if specific discursive practices can be established that try a justification of the argument (why – or why not – one should vote in favour of the

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<sup>5</sup>“Einerseits formt und prägt der situationale, institutionelle und soziale Kontext den Diskurs, andererseits wirkt der Diskurs auf die soziale und gesellschaftliche Wirklichkeit formend zurück. Anders gesagt: Der Diskurs ist sowohl sozial konstitutiv, als auch sozial bestimmt”, Wodak e.a. 1998: 42. My translation: “On the one side, the situational, institutional and social context forms and influences the discourse, on the other side the discourse reacts in a forming way on the social reality. Put another way: the discourse is as well socially constitutive as socially constituted”. This understanding corresponds with Foucault’s initial idea, Foucault 1998 (1972): 11, discourse “ist die Macht, derer man sich zu bemächtigen sucht”; 29: “Die Unterwerfung der sprechenden Subjekte unter die Diskurse und die Unterwerfung der Diskurse unter die sprechenden Individuen”

<sup>6</sup> Left: Mouvement des Citoyens (MDC, Chevènement) ; right : Mouvement pour la France (MPF), Charles Pasqua, Philippe de Viliers

CT). In the next sub-section, I reconstruct several prominent arguments used in the left no-campaign<sup>7</sup>.

#### b. Reconstructing discourses

Several concrete arguments of the no-side clarify the way social practice made it difficult for the “yes-side” to counter arguments that inscribed themselves in the legacy of the national / social situations and their antecedents. Those examples taken from the no-side are not all obviously wrong, but referring to a very special, French and mainly (extreme-)left genealogy. As much of the republican mythology in France is coming out of the tradition of the revolutionary – that is now: leftist – movement of 1789 and of the Third Republic (1871, 1905, 1944), these arguments can claim a much broader influence than in other national political contexts. At least since the *Résistance*-movement and the birth of the Gaullist branch in French politics, the French political legacy and the mythology it has inspired confounds itself with the *republican* legacy and mythology. Therefore, if framed in a way that sees the CT as menacing the narratives and legacies of the French left, it menaces the very foundations of the French *Republic*. This is the way in which the partisan discourse of the left “no” could gain a nation-wide dynamic and claim a legacy that went far beyond the natural supporters of the Jacobin and leftist cause.

A first example I want to present concerns women’s rights, gender equality and more specifically abortion. While the CT contains some advancements with respect to existing EU-law, it of course does not equal all the existing national provisions. In taking up the discursive equivalence made between Constitutional Treaty and *constitution* (in a first time made by the yes-camp), the no-camp could easily point out the apparent shortcomings of the European constitution. One special focus of the debate was the right to abortion. This aspect concerns one of the mythological campaigns (won in 1974, law on *l’interruption volontaire de grossesse*, in itself a partisan labelling) of the French left. Referring to the emotional and mythological souvenirs of this combat, whilst pretending that the CT would take away the fruits of this combat, allowed for a rather “free” interpretation of the provisions of the CT<sup>8</sup>. The clause that the French left referred to concerns the article “Everyone has the right to life” in the second part of the constitution (II-62-1). The partisans of the “oui” take this article as a guarantee against death-penalty in Europe, and actually article II-62-2 claims: “No one shall

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<sup>7</sup> Mainly for reasons of time, I have to rely on online-sources resuming these arguments. An infinite source of material is the online *dossier* of *L’Humanité*, the French communist daily, on the constitutional debate (<http://www.humanite.fr/journal/dossiers/67/guidecitoyendureferendum/> and <http://www.humanite.fr/journal/dossiers/62/debatsurlaconstitutioneuropeenne/>)

<sup>8</sup> On the use of emotional memories to overcome logical incoherence, see also Seidendorf 2005.

be condemned to the death penalty, or executed”. The concerns of feminists and French leftist campaigners went in the direction that the first provision could be interpreted in the “catholic” sense, granting a “right to life” to the unborn child, or, at least not forcing Poland, Ireland, Malta, Portugal to adapt their anti-abortion legislation.

For the French campaigners, it is not the possible democratic will of these countries that imports, but the French (or left) *mission civilisatrice* in its modern understanding that has to be brought to the oppressed... Of course in a normative and “meaty” understanding of “political order”, made up of legally equal citizens, it seems hardly acceptable that one part of these citizens, due to its country of residence, has access to certain rights that others do not have. Still, it should be the entirety of the citizens that vote about these rules.

A second example in this respect is the French understanding of *laïcité*. Especially for the left part of the political spectrum, a quasi-mythological reference is vowed to the law of 1905, that organised the separation of church and state. This reference not only comes from the extreme and far-left, but is to be found in large parts of the socialist party and the Jacobin sovereignists. As the CT makes no explicit reference to *laïcité*, but states on the other side: The Union is “recognising [the churches] identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations” (I-52-3), the French left sees the foundations of the Republic menaced by the CT. Of course the paragraphs prior to I-52-3 (1 and 2) recognize explicitly the *national* legislation in this concern. Therefore, the above-mentioned “national argument”, the interpretation that Europe is acceptable if it does not menace the national polity or identity, is only part of the story. In the specific French campaign, we are also confronted with the conviction of the left no-camp to possess and transfer the universal values that should apply to the whole of Europe, rejoining the original *mission civilisatrice* of the French left since 1789.

A third example: liberalism and economic order. The left regularly refers to the program of the *Conseil national de la Résistance* (national resistance council, bringing together French resistance fighters from different boards, communists, Gaullists...) of 1944, that established the historic compromise between communists and Gaullists after WW II<sup>9</sup>. It stated, amongst others,

“l’instauration d’une véritable démocratie économique et sociale, impliquant l’éviction des grandes féodalités économiques et financières”, “une organisation rationnelle de l’économie assurant la subordination des intérêts

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<sup>9</sup> The entire program can be found on <http://www.france.attac.org/a2326> (checked 15.09.06), of all sites...

particuliers à l'intérêt général", "le droit au travail et le droit au repos", "un plan complet de Sécurité sociale, visant à assurer à tous les citoyens des moyens d'existence, dans tous les cas où ils sont incapables de se le procurer par le travail", and "une retraite permettant aux vieux travailleurs de finir dignement leurs jours."<sup>10</sup>

These rights were integrated in the French constitution<sup>11</sup>, but of course none of them can be found in the CT that confines itself to accept these rights where they exist while transforming into a "constitution" the existing European laws on free economic concurrence and liberal economic order. Linked to the fatal claim of representing a "constitution" (coming with its special meaning in the French discourse and remembering the constitutions of 1792...1946, 1958...), it was an easy task for the French left to "prove" that *this* constitution is not – as trumpeted by president Chirac (and others) – the daughter of 1789, and that it is certainly not representing "us", the French citizens.

Even when pointing out the manifest unfoundedness of the no-arguments, the yes-side could not really counter them. They gained their force as being part of a national and political discursive environment. As such, they were presented and understood in an emotional way, menacing "us" (France, French way of life) and the very foundations of "our" political order. In this context, it was helpful that a large part of the French electorate – precisely those having voted "no" – are showing a disillusioned attitude towards their political personnel, taking for possible or even probable every meanness and manipulation of the truth by their politicians.

On the other side, a large part of the French electorate still seems to believe into universal values that were gained or at least identified within the French context first, but that should be spread to the rest of the world, or at least Europe, before accepting that those "others" could have a say in French political matters. In 1992, it was precisely the discursive construction of the European Union as "France writ large" by president Mitterrand<sup>12</sup> that justified, in the eyes of a slight majority, the adherence to the Maastricht Treaty. In 2005, the no-camp can convincingly prove that Chirac's case of France having inspired the CT is

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<sup>10</sup> "The instauration of a true social and economic democracy, implying the eviction of the large economic and financial feudalities", "a rational organisation of the economy, assuring the subordination of particular interests under the general interest", "the right to work and the right to retire", "a complete social security plan, giving the security to all citizens of having means of existence in all cases where they find themselves incapable to procure these means by their work", "a pension that allows old workers to finish their days in dignity" (my translation).

<sup>11</sup> The constitution of the IV. Republic (1946) in its preamble re-affirmed the *declaration universelle des droits de l'homme* of 1789 and these new (social) rights. The constitution of the V. Republic (1958) declares itself attached to the declaration of 1789 and the preamble of 1946.

<sup>12</sup> For example in a speech to students of the IEP Paris, 5<sup>th</sup> June 1992, accessible in F. Mitterrand (1996): *Onze discours sur l'Europe (1982-1995)*, Paris : Editions de l'EHESS.

manifestly not “true”, at least not in their – the no-campaigns – understanding of what would be a “French inspiration”.

If “social practice” has its own value in analysing social problematiques, then the understanding of discourse as “social practice” should not only contain an interpretation and reconstruction of a discursive genealogy. It should also take into account the social structure(s) of the discourse, its situational conditions, possibilities of voice and access and even its material supports. In this respect, “discourse as social practice” may have something more to say than “just discourse analysis”. In the last sub-section, I want to push further reflections in this sense

### c. Practices of discourse

One of the obvious particularities of the referendum campaign was the very large use of “new media”. Especially the no-camp seems to have made heavy and successful use of internet, mass e-mailing and blog-posts. Classical discourse analysis is struggling with the analysis of this phenomenon: There is no clear hierarchic situation and no obvious power structures that decide about “voice” and “access”. One argument in this respect would be the “digital divide”, meaning that access to the new modes of communication and information is limited to a certain elite that has the material and intellectual possibilities to use these techniques.

In the French case, either this is not true, or the elite that had access to internet was so heterogeneous, that it contained both the yes- and no-camp. For the time being, an analysis of the effects of this campaign must limit itself to some cursory examples. The numerous blogs, the contributions of the multitude of political foundations and associations are waiting to be analysed, in their content as well as in the social structure of its readers / users. The same goes for the internet dossiers of the daily and weekly nationals (Le Monde, Libération, L’Humanité, Nouvel Observateur).

Googeling “constitution + Europe + referendum” brings some 6.330.000 results, limiting the answers to French pages brings still 3.000.000 results. Moreover, even individual mass-emailing could make it to Google’s top-scores: Moritz Jahnke, a German lawyer, sent a *lettre d’un ami allemand* supporting the yes-campaign and denouncing some of the contestable no-arguments<sup>13</sup>. Googeling “lettre d’un ami allemand” brings 2.410.000 results, the same plus “constitution” still 139.000 results. Of course, this needs a much deeper

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.voteroui.freeze.org/texte/allemand.pdf> (checked 14.09.2006)

analysis in terms of content and “social practice”, but supposedly interesting insights may come from such an enterprise.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper was interested in explaining the French vote on the referendum of 29<sup>th</sup> may 2005. It soon turned out that understanding the referendum campaign is one of the keys to this enterprise. The first two parts presented “classical” approaches based on individual and structural accounts. Both were revealing, but not entirely satisfying.

A third part asked if understanding the discourse of the referendum campaign as “social practice” could be an alternative approach that allows to link individual action and structural processes to explain the dynamics of the campaign. Of course, the results of this paper are very preliminary, work in progress, but still it seems that further investigation in this direction is promising. Such an encounter of “action and structure” would on the one hand need conceptual clarifications and especially theoretical re-consideration of the relationship between discourse and practice. On the other hand, the empirical analysis especially of the mentioned “new media”-campaign waits to be done, but seems to need a considerable amount of resources...

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