



Book Review: *The Making of the Democratic Party in Europe, 1860–1890* by Anne Heyer, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 289 pages. ISBN: 978-3-030-8774-7, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-87748-4>

BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

In her new publication *The Making of the Democratic Party in Europe, 1860–1890* Anne Heyer tries to enrich our understanding of parties and party organization by looking back into the formative years of modern parties in Western Europe. If parties are not merely perceived as structural phenotypes, but also as actively created organizations by concrete actors in a specific context, this perspective might pave the way for a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of political parties. Heyer proposes that a contextualizing view back into the ideas, narratives and practices paving the way of party formation in the 19th century, may enrich our current understanding of parties as dynamic and lively practiced organizations that are indeed capable of innovative change. If they are recognized as active, lively and energetic, crisis might not be the final stage of a linear evolution of parties – it might be the starting point of party innovation instead of party decline.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

D'Avis, Annika. 2023. "Book Review: *The Making of the Democratic Party in Europe, 1860–1890* by Anne Heyer, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 289 pages. ISBN: 978-3-030-8774-7, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-87748-4>" *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 26(1): 79–84. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.401>

A NEW CRISIS OR A NEW DYNAMIC OF POLITICAL PARTIES?

Even though parties are seen as a ‘natural’ entity of democracy, they are increasingly perceived as being in crisis, just as representative democracy itself (Mair 2013; Merkel & Kneip 2018). Parties are met with shrinking membership numbers, declining voter turnout, less trust in party politicians, and an acclaimed lack of responsiveness due to elitism (Lisi 2019). In this context, one might wonder if the ascribed crisis necessarily leads to the decline of parties—or if it may be perceived as a chance for political innovation of and with political parties? That is Anne Heyer’s intriguing starting question in her new publication, *The Making of the Democratic Party in Europe, 1860–1890*, which tries to enrich our understanding of parties and party organization by looking back into the formative years of modern parties in Western Europe. If parties are not merely perceived as structural phenotypes, but also as actively created organizations by concrete actors in a specific context, this perspective might pave the way for a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of political parties. Heyer proposes that a contextualizing view back into the ideas, narratives, and practices paving the way of party formation in the 19th century may enrich our current understanding of parties as dynamic and lively practiced organizations that are indeed capable of innovative change. If they are recognized as active, lively, and energetic, the crisis might not be the final stage of a linear evolution of parties—it might be the starting point of party innovation instead of party decline.

The book is therefore an intriguing contribution to the academic discussion whether the evolution of political parties is grounded more either on structural or on genetic and agency features. In this pendulum, Heyer accentuates the latter approach: By drawing on the theoretical framework of Nipperdey (1961), social movement theory, and the work of Angelo Panebianco (1988), Heyer employs the perspective of parties as dynamic entities, as historically grown (and still growing) as well as ever-adapting organizations that merged from single-issue groups into steady democratic institutions under the ideational narratives composed and spread by party leaders. In her historiographic research, Heyer demonstrates that the formation of parties was not a self-explanatory or “natural” process resulting from macro-developments, specifically industrialization, socioeconomic changes, and democratization (Heyer 2022, 15, 30). Parties are not only the logical consequence of a “larger scheme of things” and progressed linearly from this point onwards—their emergence is, more accurately, the result of deliberate efforts and practices by specific agents, most prominently party leaders. Thereby, Heyer highlights the role played by concrete actors and brings agency back into party research.

BRINGING AGENCY BACK INTO PARTY RESEARCH

Taking a transnational perspective, Anne Heyer aims to show how the organization of a party became a logical course of action in various regional contexts. While choosing England, the Netherlands, and Germany as regional focus points, the case selection is also based on parties that combined parliamentary and extra-parliamentary organizations and positioned themselves as representatives of the interests of the masses. Heyer demonstrates via the examples of the German Social Democratic Workers’ Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei, SDAP), the Dutch Anti-Revolutionary Party (Anti-Revolutionaire Partij, ARP), and the British National Liberal Federation

(NLF) how the formation of political parties in various European nations has not been a linear or automated process: It was, and probably still is, the deliberate effort of specific agents and activists. By focusing on the role played by party leaders in each case—August Bebel, Abraham Kuyper, and Joseph Chamberlain, respectively—Heyer shows how these leaders merged the prevailing ideas of democracy in each regional context with a modern mass organization, whereby they combined democratic ideals with political calculation. With a scholarly view enriched by a strong commitment to contextualization without losing sight of the need for abstraction, Heyer's publication fuses historical and political research on parties in a unique way, with some invigorating argumentative twists.

First and foremost, she focuses on the role played by party leaders, their actions, and their ability to create or contribute to a political culture, identity formation, and community (Heyer 2022, 97). Second, she highlights the dynamic interplay between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary groups and thereby grasps parties as complex organization consisting of various subgroups and agents that were quite heterogenous in the formative phase of parties, so that party leaders had the difficult task to foster the relationship between mass organizations, political calculation, and democratic ideals. Finally, she commits to the turn to framing, narratives, and the importance of ideas for the emergence and maintenance of institutions (Heyer 2022, 13, 30–38). Instead of arguing for yet another phenotype of parties, Heyer analyzes the attitudes, assumptions, and ideas underpinning political behavior and experience as to show that parties vary in concrete contexts and ideational narratives (Heyer 2022, 77). The internal organization and external agenda of parties were framed by the respective and varying definition of democracy, which were highly contested in the formative phase of parties (Heyer 2022, 118). Based on the conviction that democracy has always been and will always be a contested concept, she focuses on how party leaders understood, framed, and realized democracy as the gradual political inclusion of ordinary people in decision-making processes.

THE IDEAS AND NARRATIVES UNDERPINNING PARTY FORMATION

The overarching narrative used by all three of the party leaders is the idea that political parties are necessary to achieve political participation and inclusion of the formerly excluded masses via organization and education (Heyer 2022, 25, 98). This macro-narrative basically connects to the idea that the ordinary people and political elites are direct political opponents and the masses need a coherent party organization to strive in this conflictual political setting (Heyer 2022, 99–100), which resulted in what Heyer coins “association mania” (Heyer 2022, 46–50). In order to demonstrate that the masses are indeed able to contribute reasonably and wisely to politics, education became a dominant theme for party leaders. Heyer speculates that this may also be due to the fact that Bebel, Kuyper, and Chamberlain themselves personally benefited from education and association to climb the social ladder (Heyer 2022, 48, 219). Consequently, the first quite innovative narrative of party leaders was that quantity and numbers could have political impact—if educated and organized correctly. But the question remained how the ideal organization to best implement political emancipation should look like (Heyer 2022, 114). While party organization became a transnational blueprint, contextual variances arose from varying convictions and narratives.

THE CONTESTED CONCEPTS OF DEMOCRATIC PARTIES AND DEMOCRACY

A prerequisite for forming parties as mass organization enabling political participation was internal democracy. Heyer elaborates how contested the internal processes of party leader or board elections were and that there was no agreed upon or common depiction of how democracy could be practiced best (Heyer 2022, 124). Heyer indeed tells the meticulously researched story of Kuyper, Bebel, and Chamberlain in forming their respective party along their organizational as well as democratic ideals while also moderating the democratic expectations of members, associations, and voters. In this negotiation—or in the case of Kuyper, it might be better to say authoritative—process, factions were excluded and concessions had to be made to encompass different local associations in the early years of party formation (Heyer 2022, Chapters 4–5). Heyer’s analysis indicates one more time that democratization, just as party formation, is no linear process but a complex string of ideas and practices that might collide or even contradict each other.

Heyer elucidates that the idea of party organization did not automatically lead to one specific kind or phenotype of party but that due to regional and ideological variances, party leaders implemented different structures—from large to small party boards, from controlling formalized procedures to minimizing those, from the strict imposition of conformity as in the case of the ARP to the more leisurely handled party adherence as in the case of the SDAP, from concrete manifestos to broad outlines—in order to realize the same idea: an internally democratic organization that enables external democracy by offering ordinary people a means for political participation.

THE DISCIPLINING ROLE OF ELECTION

The most interesting part in her analysis is the fact that these variances at least started to disappear and internal organization moved toward an aligned understanding of party discipline after the three parties participated in national elections. Even though voting rights in the 19th century were still highly restrictive, the newly formed parties gradually learned to utilize elections for their own goals, although seizing political power was only an option for the British NLF under Chamberlain. While the degree of internal party discipline varied strongly between the three examples—a strong leadership and discipline under Kuyper for the ARP, a less cohesive and authoritative approach under Bebel for the SDAP, and a mixture under Chamberlain for the NLF—after the parties entered electoral competition, according to Heyer, elections were no instrument for seizing governmental influence but first and foremost for establishing internal coherence and discipline and thereby gaining public attention and support (Heyer 2022, 213). Electoral campaigning thereby predominantly led to party discipline and cohesion because both aspects were needed to effectively mobilize public support and show that mass organization can indeed be a viable tool of and for democracy (Heyer 2022, 229). Even though Heyer’s change of perspective aims at offering a new angle of analysis that leads to the important acknowledgement that macro-trends and microlevel-activity are highly synergetic, in this chapter she seems to downplay the structural and constitutional influence on party emergence. This fits her approach of focusing on the interplay between deliberative practices and active framing but might also downgrade the impact of the constitutional design at

least partially. Nevertheless, Heyer highlights the importance of agency and thereby enriches the formerly focus of general developments and cogent macro-trends.

Via her meticulous research on Bebel, Kuyper, and Chamberlain and their most important fellow party members—or rivals—along a comprehensive corpus of primary sources from various archives, collections, and newspapers in all three countries, Heyer achieves an intriguing analysis from the internal perspective of parties while still taking external factors into consideration. The main twist in her framework to perceive parties as active, deliberatively practiced, and dynamically lived organizations enables a vivid as much as concise publication that nudges the reader to change one's perspective on political parties on the level of political research and the formative years of party leaders on the level of historical research. The detailed histographical research of party agents parallelly opens new research options, such as not yet systematically analyzed biographies, for example, of the British Liberal Francis Schnadhorst (Heyer 2022, 102).

PARTY CHANGE INSTEAD OF PARTY DECLINE

Heyer achieves an insightful, detailed, and still accessible analysis that gracefully meets her expectations to also write for an audience that has no expertise in 19th-century history (Heyer 2022, v). Because after reading her book, due to her narration and writing style, as well as argumentative coherence, you definitely want to get more information. But Heyer, first and foremost, fundamentally contributes to an alternative and more nuanced perspective of political parties because she enriches a conception that does not merely depict parties as static entities. Instead of chiming into the fears about the end of parties or even the end of democracy, Anne Heyer's new book aims to show that the recent developments seen with a historically enriched view are also a chance for political innovation of and with political parties. If perceived dynamically, political parties can be evaluated as open for innovative processes or new procedures for elections within or between parties (Sandri & Seddone 2021) without losing sight of the potential detriments of such modifications. However, the book leaves one wondering how such a route of innovation could exactly look like since it does not offer potential examples or a concrete outlook. But maybe the book's aim is to highlight that a change of perspective might also lead to new practical courses of action. Heyer indicates that one possible, and maybe more feasible, course of action in light of the virulent crisis of democracy and political parties might not be finding alternative democratic institutions but adapting and transforming existing ones, including political parties. Thus, Heyer's analysis achieves to show that parties are variable, dynamic, and never final organizations that are indeed able of changes and innovation.

Heyer thereby manages to sharpen our understanding of parties while still broadening it via an alternative scholarly framework that grasps parties as lived and actively practices organizations, as a consequence of agency and committed agents. Her agency approach enables the reader to appreciate parties as historically grown, steadily transforming, and still changing institutions instead of a free-floating macro concept. Perceiving parties as made, maintained, and changeable by agents might also enable actors and citizens to conceive themselves as active part and constructor of political parties—and might lead to an enriched understanding of participation, too.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory

DOI: 10.33134/rds.401

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

D'Avis, Annika. 2023. "Book Review: *The Making of the Democratic Party in Europe, 1860–1890* by Anne Heyer, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 289 pages. ISBN: 978-3-030-8774-7, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-87748-4>" *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 26(1): 79–84. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.401>

Submitted: 13 April 2023

Accepted: 15 May 2023

Published: 07 August 2023

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