

Book Review for *Reviews & Critical Commentary (CritCom)*/Council for European Studies

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The European Commission and Bureaucratic Autonomy: Europe's Custodians

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Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York/Melbourne/Madrid/Cape Town/Singapore/São Paulo/Delhi/Mexico City, 2012, 250 pp., Hardback

ISBN: 978-1-107-02321-5, £ 60

This addition to the literature on the European Commission constitutes a contribution to studies of the post-Santer Commission. The book takes the bureaucratic autonomy literature as a theoretical basis (Chapter 2) and rests empirically on a survey of nearly 200 top Commission officials (Chapter 3). In both aspects, the book can be characterized as a trend-follower rather than a trend-setter: Theoretically, it sets forth the trend of the public administration turn in EU studies (Trondal 2007); empirically, the study not only rests on the assumptions of Hooghe's (2001) study of the Commission but also studies the same group of management-level Commission officials, albeit the population 10 years later.

The book is written up very clearly and concisely, presenting its arguments in a systematic fashion. The authors make the following arguments, which they introduce in the very beginning of the book and deal with separately in the empirical chapters of the book:

- The multifocal nature of the organization of authority in the EU results in less legitimacy but more autonomy of the Commission (Chapter 5).
- The Commission shares a cohesive supranational organizational culture, regardless of national and departmental diversity (Chapter 6).
- External attacks of the Commission and its mission result in the internal closing of ranks and strengthening of organizational loyalty and commitment (Chapter 7).
- The autonomy and supranational ethos of the Commission will enable it to face the divisions arising as a result of the Eurozone debt crisis and to push for deeper integration (Chapter 9).

The authors have taken up the challenging task of interviewing 200 top Commission officials, which has resulted in delivering some interesting findings. We thus learn about:

- the background of Commission officials (Chapter 3),
- their daily tasks, sources of information, their relationship with the Commissioners and their Cabinets, the relations with other EU institutions and interest groups (Chapter 4),
- their views on the aftermath of Kinnock reforms (Chapter 5),
- the existence of a common Commission culture and mission (Chapter 6),
- their views on Euroscepticism and about the future of the EU (Chapter 7),
- their views on the European Constitution, Bolkestein directive, and the Turkish accession to the EU (Chapter 8).

As such, it provides a nice overview of where the top officials stood when they were interviewed in 2005.

Yet, some of the empirical findings either do not come much as a surprise or miss the point due to the fact that the study relies predominantly on analyses of the 1990s Commission (Cini 1996, Page 1997, Hooghe 2001). In line with these analyses, the authors start with the expectation that the European Commission is a fragmented organization due to the diversity of its workforce. Although the authors seem to acknowledge that diversity is inherent to any bureaucratic organization, the authors assume that the multinational, or what the authors call the 'transnational', character of international organizations make the task of achieving organizational cohesion more difficult. In this aspect, the authors do not take note of post-2005 literature showing that nationality is not an overriding factor (Suvarierol 2007); Commission officials have been pre-socialized multiculturally (Georgakakis 2008, Suvarierol 2011); sectoral belongings are more significant in explaining the organizational behavior of Commission officials and Commissioners, and that they resemble their national counterparts in this sense (e.g. Egeberg 2006, Suvarierol 2007, Trondal 2006).

Whereas the survey results lead the authors to confirm that nationality does not explain the views of top Commission officials (Chapter 7), it is a bit puzzling why the authors then still seem to hold on to the assumption that the 'transnational character' of the Commission forms a challenge to its autonomy (Chapter 9). Methodological nationalism (Beck 2000, Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) seems to reign here, as individuals are taken to be shaped by their nationality forever. This assumption is problematic, especially for the group of officials this book studies: The majority of these top officials are long-term expats whose bonds with their country of origin have been transformed over the years. Furthermore, their last national administrative experience (if they had any) is in average (more than) 20 years ago, except for the East European officials, who according to the survey results seem to be even most pro-European officials in the bunch. To stick to the notion that such individuals conserve an absolute loyalty to their national origins reifies them to a static identity.

As a matter of fact, the empirical data provides quite a body of evidence proving that Commission officials are rather detached from their countries of origin - besides for following the national news and voting in national elections (indicators which both correlate positively with supranationalism - and attached to their life, job, and organizational mission in Brussels. At times, one even gets the impression of a Brussels elite in their ivory tower, fitting the stereotypes of Euroskeptics. We learn, for example, that top officials attribute Euroskepticism to the blame game of national politicians and to the failure of communication of the advantages of European integration to citizens. This means in fact that Commission officials themselves put the blame on the national level: the strategic politicians and the ignorant citizens who cannot see the EU light. This conviction leads officials to argue that they serve the interests of an imaginary constituency of 'future EU citizens'. These findings rather seem to point out to a gap between the Brussels elite and European citizens. It is a pity that the authors do not reflect critically on these organizational discourses.

The argument that the Commission will manage to push for more integration, however unpopular this may be, is the most problematic conclusion of the book, both methodologically and empirically. It seems that the authors make this argument on the basis of their theoretical assumption: An autonomous organization is likely to succeed in realizing its mission. This might indeed hold for the European Commission in general, but the authors have no viable evidence to support this argument in the case of the current economic crisis. To begin with, the empirical data has been collected in 2005. The authors refer to 2005 as a “deep crisis” year for the EU due to the rejection of the European Constitution. Although it seemed like a crisis year back then, it has become clear by now that it was nothing compared to the current Euro crisis. To argue that the reaction of the Commission will be comparable to earlier crises does not sound very realistic, even though time will still need to tell. Furthermore, the assertion that Commission will push for more integration is empirically based on the answers top officials have provided as to the ‘ideal solutions’ they envisage for European problems. Yet, the fact that Commission officials *prefer* more European integration (when prompted in a survey) does not necessarily mean they will actually push for it when writing up their policy proposals. The actual policy proposals are shaped in the multilevel, multi-actor arena of EU governance. Within this complex EU system, one of the core tasks of the Commission, as the independent and supranational organ of the EU which defends the overall European interest, is taking all national positions into account and finding the least common denominator across Europe (Suvarierol 2007). Given the increasing politicization and accountability of the Commission (Wille 2012), it is questionable that it is able and willing to push for more European integration, which would presumably only attract more attacks to its legitimacy and raise attempts by other national and institutional actors to curb its autonomy. Refraining from any future prognosis would have been much sounder.

This neatly written analysis on the Commission would have been much more useful if it had been published earlier. Nevertheless, scholars who are specifically interested in a systematic overview of the Commission based on survey data will still enjoy reading the empirical chapters. For the broader EU scholar, it unfortunately does not sufficiently build on/speak to the recent literature on EU institutions and politics, which may make the book’s contribution less substantial than it could have potentially been.

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