



Book Review

Politics and the European Commission: Actors, Interdependence, Legitimacy

Andy Smith (ed.)

Routledge/ECPR Studies in European Political Science, Routledge, London and New York, 2004, 230pp.

ISBN: 0-415-32407-6, Price: £65.

Acta Politica (2006) 41, 101–104. doi:10.1057/palgrave.ap.5500125

The crises surrounding the resignation of the Santer Commission and the nomination of the Barroso Commission have resulted in the increased politicization of the European Commission, which was previously seen as merely technocratic machinery. These events have highlighted the importance of implementing administrative reform within the institution, aiming at making it a more transparent, accountable, and efficient bureaucracy. This is bound to be complex, given the multiplicity and scope of tasks the Commission assumes, which have been making the boundaries between its political and technocratic roles increasingly blurred.

The rising public and academic interest in the Commission has resulted in numerous publications focusing on policy-making, the anthropology of the institution, and its presidency. Yet, as Andy Smith points out, the existing literature fails to tackle the issue of the Commission's relationship to politics directly. Showing how this leads to a division between the political and technical functions of the Commission, Smith's book challenges this *politics-technocracy divide* by adopting a sociological/constructivist approach using role conflict theories with the premise that reality is defined in competitive contexts by the actors involved as a starting point. Using original empirical data (interviews with Commission officials), primary (official EU publications) and secondary (literature on European integration) document analyses, this edited book studies the internal dynamics of the Commission in terms of its resources and constraints by focusing on the tensions between its technocratic and political tasks. Based on this empirical evidence, contributors to Smith's volume examine the ways in which the Commission places and justifies its political tasks within a technocratic discourse in different policy areas. This enables the authors to explore the issue of *legitimacy* through an analysis of how actors within the Commission deal with it while performing their work.

The book is divided into two main parts. Part I (entitled 'Actors, institutions and interdependence') tries to answer the question 'What shapes and conditions interdependencies both within the Commission and between its agents and their counterparts in the member states?' and Part II (entitled 'The



media, the Commission and its legitimacy') the question 'How can one explain the relationship between the apparent strength of the EU's institutions and the evident weakness of their legitimacy?'

Cécile Robert's analysis of the PHARE program illustrates how the Commission has resorted to technicization and juridicization in order to legitimize the political power and the role it has acquired in defining and implementing PHARE, which became the main instrument of the Eastern enlargement process. Jean Joana and Andy Smith's contribution deals with the politics of collegiality within the College of Commissioners and shows that the involvement of a Commissioner in non-portfolio issues depends largely on how a Commissioner interprets her/his role, which in turn is shaped by the sources of external and internal support a Commissioner can mobilize through his/her networks. Studying the evolving role of the Secretariat General of the Commission between 1958 and 2003, Hussein Kassim argues that the Secretariat has both played key administrative functions inside the Commission and has contributed significantly to build a system of governance for managing the Commission's interactions with other EU institutions and shows how the Secretary Generals, and in particular Emile Noël, have been crucial in institutionalizing the Commission. Using socialization theories, Jarle Trondal tests the supranational allegiances of seconded national experts working for the Commission. He argues that the study of the dynamics of (what he calls) the parallel administration of the Commission is crucial, as the number of such temporary employees have been rising increasingly. Véronique Dimier focuses on the Directorate General for Development and studies how this DG institutionalized itself and its policy area by using political propaganda tools like visits to Africa and Europe. Another case of institutionalization is brought forward by Sébastien Guigner who explains how the Commission has been compelled to act politically in the field of public health due to the opposition between the economic and health logic and to the lack of its scientific expertise in the field in comparison to other international health organizations.

Didier Georgakakis analyzes the events leading to the resignation of the Santer Commission, rejecting that this crisis was a result of a communication problem. Instead, he argues that it was a legitimacy problem that came about as a result of the disintegration of the usual alliances of the Commission. Olivier Bainsée studies EU journalism, of which the Commission is the dominant information source. He links this to the relationship the Commission has constructed with journalists in Brussels and not to the institution's political power. Looking at the discourse of official EU publications, François Foret shows that the Commission oscillates between an accountable political actor and a neutral bureaucratic agent who hesitantly takes on the role of a *locutor* speaking in the name of Europe. Jeanette Mak studies the case of publicizing the euro to demonstrate the internal (competition between DGs and lack of

political will and leadership) and external (lack of support from national governments) limitations, which prevent a coherent and purposeful Commission information strategy. Helen Drake discusses the role of Commission presidents and assesses the particular legacy of Delors. Defining the role of the President as one of being an ambassador of Europeanism and of providing a Europe-wide political leadership, she explains the politicization of this role during Delors's presidency as being due to his strong personality, his political skills, and the lack of institutionalized power at the center of the EU.

The division of the book into two parts is actually somewhat arbitrary since all contributions deal with the actors, institutions, and questions of legitimacy. Whereas Part I is less coherent as it deals with various policy areas, tools, and actors, Part II focuses on communication policy and its interplay with legitimacy. As the theoretical framework and the main theme of 'Politics and the Commission' are pretty broad, every contribution relates to these in one way or another. The chapters by Robert, Guignier, and Foret are particularly demonstrative in proving the central argument of this book: how the political becomes technical and the technical political within the Commission and how both elements are utilized by this institution to legitimize and strengthen its position as a supranational actor.

Smith's volume is important for at least three reasons. First, it offers interesting in-depth analyses of policy areas and institutions that have not been widely studied development (Dimier), public health (Guignier), communication (Bainsnée, Foret, Mak) and College of Commissioners (Joana and Smith) and Secretariat-General (Kassim) respectively. The historical analyses of Kassim and Dimier are particularly rich in providing a complete overview of how the Secretariat-General and DG Development institutionalized and the role influential individuals and policy tools such as propaganda played in this process. Second, the centrality of internal and external networks (*interdependencies*) in the execution of the jobs of Commissioners and Commission officials, which is a recurrent theme in the book (Joana and Smith, Kassim, Dimier, Bainsnée, Mak, Drake), highlights the need for further research in this field in order to get a better grasp of how the Commission functions. Third, the studies of the Commission's discourse through official documents (Robert, Foret) are important contributions both for illustrating systematically how the Commission depicts itself and for opening the way for new constructivist research on other EU institutions or policy areas.

Although this book offers a new perspective to examining legitimacy in the Commission, its analysis remains incomplete, as the contributions are not normatively grounded. In this sense, 'legitimacy' is a misleading subtitle, as the contributors only deal with '*legitimation*'. For scholars interested in the normative debate on legitimacy, the book does provide new empirical data, but they will not find new normative arguments here.



Despite the underlying theory and recurrent issues that link the contributions to this book, they still remain somewhat loosely coupled around the grand theme ‘Politics and the Commission’. While the book contains high-quality individual contributions based on original empirical data, it does suffer from jumping from topic to topic and from the fact that each researcher has their own focus and data. Particularly the contributions by Joana & Smith and Trondal stretch the theoretical framework and seem a bit out of place in the volume even though they touch upon crucial aspects of the Commission, the College, and seconded national experts, respectively.

On the whole, Andy Smith’s edited book is a valuable contribution to research on the European Commission. Not only does the book provide EU and Commission scholars with interesting empirical evidence and rigorous analyses, it also encourages new research by pinpointing current gaps. Perhaps most importantly, this volume adds significantly to the theoretical debate on European integration by demonstrating the intertwining role of politics and expertise within EU decision-making.

Semin Suvarierol
Utrecht School of Governance, University of Utrecht.