Book Review

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LOBBYISTS AND BUREAUCRATS IN BRUSSELS: CAPITALISM'S BROKERS

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Abstract

The book illustrates the complex relationship between the lobbyists and bureaucrats, often misunderstood by both media and academics. While the term 'lobbying' gives an image of working solely for business interests of certain companies, Laurens provides rather comprehensive insights of interactions between the European institutions and the business communities to share a wide range of information and knowledge – hence, the subtitle 'capitalism's brokers'.

Keywords

European Commission; lobbyists; interest groups; bureaucracy; democratic deficits

We often downplay (if not forget) the notion that European integration is an unprecedented regional project with a complex governance mechanism. The knowledge of 'who's who' within the European institutions is highly valuable for facilitating communication among stakeholders and increasing efficiency. Since the capitalist economies triumphed out of the Cold War, it is rather natural for the policymakers of the European Union to include business communities in its decision-making process. At the same time, the recent financial crisis casts a light of doubt on the cosy cohabitation between the European institutions and business representatives, or lobbyists, in Brussels. While their day-to-day interactions by no means suggest corruption, the frustration of economic depression often turns into an anger against pre-crisis regulatory mechanisms. This 'how-could-have-happened' impulse leads to an opinion that the pre-crisis regulations were somehow inadequate to supervise business activities, and this inadequacy was often understood as a goal of lobbyists. This book is a myth-buster in this respect.

Sylvain Laurens lays out an entertaining introduction to the world of lobbying in Brussels by sharing insightful anecdotes and interviews, beyond what is reported (somewhat misleadingly) in the media and analysed in the scholarly works. Being trained as a sociologist, Laurens focuses not only on institutional structures and arrangements, but also on individual activities and organisational evolutions. As such, his interviewees are not limited to elites (i.e. heads of organisations), but anyone who have experienced the changing characteristics of lobbying at large, including those who conducted regular meetings between institutions and organisations. Some of his case studies are thoroughly detailed while others are more of overviewing surveys, depending on the context in which they are presented. Thus, to a certain extent, the book reflects his Francophone academic tradition, presenting a historical and evolutional background of the lobbying in Brussels as a basis for further institutional analyses. The book first appeared in French as *Les Courtiers du capitalisme*, published in 2015 (Editions Agone). As the lobbying in Brussels evolved alongside the development of the so-called 'Eurocracy', Laurens' narrating style to incorporate individual accounts into his institutional analyses seems to fit well with the purpose of the book.

Excluding the introduction and conclusion, the book is divided into seven chapters. The first two chapters provide an analytical framework in a historical context; the former chapter deals with up to 1980, while the latter deals with from 1970 onwards. In other words, Laurens' periodisation is not strictly placed but the chapters chronologically overlap each other. The first chapter, entitled 'Entanglement: a new administration in search of economic interlocutors (1958-1980)', takes a case of Common Agricultural Policy and surrounding agriculture and food industries, in order to highlight how the EC/EU tries to survey the impact of their policies among the business communities. Here, Laurence implies that both the policymakers and lobbyists sought what makes the Brussels administration 'European'. The second chapter, entitled '1970-2010: how Brussels became crucial to the private sector', narrates such interactions from the lobbyists' point of view. A particular attention is given to the rise of 'direct' access to the Commission as an advantage for Brussels-based business organisations. In a sense, these two chapters set historical and perhaps evolutional context in which the rest of book is presented.

The next two chapters illustrate a typology of lobbying: 'Lobbying: harnessing bureaucratic resources as a weapon for business' and 'Routine lobbying: the personal appropriation of administrative knowledge'. The last three chapters characterise these activities: 'Containing the political and depoliticization: behind the closed doors of the administration', 'Serving the scientific standardisation of markets: the technical extension of commercial wars', and 'Expertise in the service of business: lobbying and the European Chemicals Agency'. While these titles are already informative and intriguing, the detailed (both primary and secondary) interview quotes from the lobbyists, the concise charts to clarify the institutional arrangements, and the topic 'boxes' for case studies make these chapters more entertaining and accessible for the readers, even when a certain topic does not fall into their expertise (e.g. a CAP scholar reading a case about the chemicals market).

For political scientists, these chapters (implicitly) highlight three intertwined themes surrounding the administration and lobbying in Brussels. First, the European institutions, the Commission in particular, are able to utilise their constant contacts with the lobbyists for surveying the business environments in Europe. Yet, such cohabitation assumes that those lobbyists truly represent the industries' voices. Second, the national division (or division between the Old and New Member States) may well come from the uneven access to the Commission by the national business representatives. This issue, however, is rather complicated as their weak representation is not only on the Brussels' level, but also on the individual business association's level. Third, the asymmetric information on the EU administration among the lobbyists creates a competitive market for the European 'governance' – those who accumulate the knowledge of the EU administration can easily

Volume 14, Issue 3 (2018)

Tom Hashimoto

work for the EU itself, mixing the labour markets for policymakers and lobbyists entangled. In this sense, one of Laurens' own conclusion 'Lobbying as a race to manipulate bureaucratic capital' (208), unfortunately, might be misunderstood, or even misleading. We do not know who 'manipulates' whom.

Laurens, in a sense, likes to place intriguing – sometimes provocative – subsection titles. For example, while the chapter is called 'Routine lobbying', day-to-day (read: boring) interactions between the European institutions and business representatives, one of its subsections is entitled 'Lobbyists: an intellectual, intermediary element of the business bourgeoisie' (86). He then introduces an interview with 'a French 27-year-old graduate from Sciences-Po in Paris' (87) to illustrate the hiring mechanisms of many business organisations in Brussels. This technique to build a case from individual storytelling is more effective with Laurens' choice of subsection titles.

An unfortunate item in Laurens' conclusion is 'democratic deficit' (210). It was nuanced throughout the book, but it was never elaborated until the very end of its conclusion. As the book's main analytical focus is the interaction between the policymakers and lobbyists, the democratic deficit – a relation between the policymakers and general public – is secondary, to say the least. However, casual mentioning of such a heavy analytical item ignites the readers' curiosity, and the unextinguished flame becomes a source of frustration.

Nevertheless, I enjoyed this book very much. Being trained as both economist and geographer, the book deepened my understanding on the socio-institutional dimension of the capitalist policymaking with a geographical anchor, 'Brussels'. Agglomeration of actors in Brussels was well depicted beyond institutional concentration. Moreover, the interchangeable nature of their labour markets (and how NGOs are segregated from such markets) is remarkable in light of institutional learning. It may take several years for other scholars to provide complementary studies, but I believe this book can easily be a concept maker in European studies and beyond.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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Routledge, 2018

ISBN: 978-1-138-28927-7; £105; 223 pages