

Book Review

**Edward Best, Thomas Christiansen
and Pierpaolo Settembri (2008)**

***The Institutions of the Enlarged
European Union: Continuity and
Change***

Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing

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E.H. Carr once wrote of nation states: "They are an anomaly and an anachronism in a world which has moved on to other forms of organization" (Carr 1946: 37). The first part of his statement, made over sixty years ago, may be a stretch but the latter part seems somewhat more salient in light of the 2004 enlargement of the European Union to include twelve new member states. This new edited volume turns its attention to the issue of EU enlargement and, more specifically, to the issue of the Union's stability in its aftermath.

As the preface informs us the book collates research conducted by a number of scholars working under the auspices of the EU-CONSENT program that spans Europe, bringing together research focused on the widening and deepening of the EU. The purpose of the collection is clearly articulated by the editors and is two-fold:

First, to expand earlier academic contributions with regard to a time frame which allows more solid conclusions and an approach that charts change beyond and across individual EU institutions; second, to complement rushed ex post assessment performed by the EU institutions themselves, in a way that its findings can be meaningfully used in a debate on the future membership and institutional settlement of the EU (p. 2).

Measured against these criteria the book should be considered a success. In seeking to investigate how the institutions of the EU have responded to the arrival of twelve new member states the editors present eleven clear and well-researched chapters. Eight deal with specific institutions with a further three focusing on legislative output, comitology and EU governance in general. I must admit that after I browsed the titles of the chapters and read the introduction I was preparing myself for a somewhat dry exploration of the EU's institutional apparatus. Thankfully these preliminary expectations were unfounded and whilst the book is far from a page-turner (even in political science terms) there is enough fresh content to hold the attention of those interested in the EU's development.

Methodologically the book is impossible to capture in the space of a review. The contributors – all experts in their fields – have been unshackled save for the requirement of academic rigour. Suffice it to say that they all take that requirement seriously and each chapter discusses its methodological approach with clarity and concision. This more than compensates for the lack of uniformity.

A simple question permeates the book, namely how has the EU avoided breaking down in the aftermath of admitting twelve new member states? Simplifying somewhat, the answer provided is through a combination of assimilation of the new members and adaptation of the existing system. Crucially, there has been no fundamental transformation of the institutions. Three broad conclusions are offered. First, the direct impact of enlargement on the institutions of the EU has been limited but sufficiently significant to keep the wheels turning. Second, enlargement has interacted with trends already present in the EU, especially the trend towards decision-making taking place through informal channels. Third, enlargement increased the pressures for reforms targeted at improving the efficiency of the EU's machinery. The message is clear: enlargement itself cannot be isolated as a single cause of any changes. As ever, context is of fundamental importance.

A key theme running through the book is the tension between administrative efficiency and democratic accountability. It is in relation to this tension that the book offers what I consider to be its most interesting and also its most troubling findings. The post-2004 trajectory seemingly places a premium on efficiency at the expense of accountability. Findings across the chapters report that the EU has enhanced its administrative efficiency since 2004. But in the drive to maintain efficiency in the face of increasing complexity and a greater number of actors decisions are more frequently taken behind the scenes, through informal arrangements or are being shunted into technical and bureaucratic areas. This new research suggests that the ability of citizens in the member states, and in particular the new member states, to hold decision-makers to account is weakening. The European Parliament, the supposed democratic institution of the EU, has seen its powers increased through a reform of comitology. The Lisbon Treaty, currently languishing in political purgatory, promises to extend the Parliament's powers still further. Yet, despite this, the Parliament has failed to become more efficient as a guardian of accountability. It is, of course, for individuals to decide what a suitable trade-off between efficiency and accountability looks like but for the Euro-sceptics this research provides further ammunition to the old democratic deficit charge.

But the Euro-sceptics are not the primary target audience for this book. During my reading it struck me, as someone who completed a specialised masters degree in EU politics, that this would be an excellent addition to the syllabus of such programs. Providing an up to date consideration of *all* EU institutions – not just the glamorous ones – it would appeal to postgraduate students who may struggle to keep up to date with such a rapidly changing institutional environment. Used in tandem with a core EU text this book would extend students' basic knowledge and the contrasts to be drawn between a generic text and a text that focuses explicitly on the impact of enlargement would unquestionably be fruitful. But the appeal does not end there. Advanced undergraduates may find much of interest here although 'advanced' is a word I would stress. Readers lacking a solid grasp of EU basics run the risk of getting lost in the thicket of abbreviations and acronyms. Students aside, the book is to be recommended to anybody engaged in analysing or reporting on the EU who may find that what they think they know has subtly changed in the post-2004 setting.

In short, this is a timely offering that informs us that the EU is assimilating new members and adapting to new pressures without undergoing a fundamental transformation. One major caveat is that although enlargement has yet to cause significant distress the effect

may be delayed. The contributors and editors are reflexive enough to draw attention to this. The conclusion, effectively 'more of the same' is far from the most exciting but is somewhat comforting nonetheless. But the darker side of the findings remain the most contentious and the meticulous work presented in this collection deserves to spark further research into the EU's weakening democratic accountability. EU scholars take note.

References

Carr, E.H. (1946) *Nationalism and After*. London: Macmillan.
