

Book Review

Wolfram Kaiser, Brigitte Leucht & Morten Rasmussen, eds (2009)

The History of the European Union: Origins of a Trans- and Supranational Polity, 1950-72

Abingdon: Routledge

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Until recently, academic literature on the origins of the now European Union (EU) has focused almost exclusively on the role of individual countries, national governments and domestic actors in the process of European integration. Even more acute has been a seemingly inherent and steadfast refusal by both political scientists and contemporary historians to allow for any form of collaboration between the two fields, remaining as they do isolated in both working practices and methodological outlook.

This recent offering can be seen as part of growing trend to eschew what the editors describe as this “endemic intellectual disease” (p. 4). In reaffirming their respective revisionist credentials, the contributors to this volume examine supra- and transnational development of the EU in an historical perspective. However, rather than relying on traditional historical practices which the authors see as narrow, and to correct some of the failings they see in the works of Haas (1968), Lipgens (1982) and Milward (1984; 1992), this book takes as its foundations two key ways to reconceptualise the history of the EU. Firstly, the authors explore the creation of a “transnational political society” formed from cross-border networks - whether formalised cooperation of parties and pressure groups through to informal business and media networks - within the political space created from the nascent supranational Community (p. 4). Secondly, they work to conceptualise the EU as a unique multi-level political system involving myriad actors that combine in the complex and institutionalised maze of European-level government. Above all, the editors call for a change to empirical studies so that they are situated in theory-driven analytical frameworks (p. 9).

The book is logically structured, with two ‘conceptual’ chapters that form the basis of research. Kaiser shows how early networks performed a number of important functions, reconceptualising postwar integration “as the slow emergence of a multilevel polity” (p. 27). Rasmussen continues, concluding that only through consideration of five empirical questions originating from institutional analysis can contemporary historians understand the wider supranational environment in which Member States were operating (p. 50).

These ground the following eight empirical articles, based on four broad themes. Two look at American-German interstate negotiations in developing the European Coal and Steel

Community (ECSC) anti-trust laws in the first instance, and the 1969 Hague summit as the apogee of transnational Anglo-Franco-German journalist networks in the second, as examples of supranational policy-making and networking within a European and Atlantic sphere. These are followed by case studies of where transnational automobile and social democratic networks became agenda-setting and socialising forums on a transnational level. Chapters eight and nine tell the story of the active role the nascent supranational organisations took to develop and strengthen the Community's policies and image. The two case studies concentrate on the Directorate General IV on competition and the creation of a Community press agency, both of which saw the institutions develop a dynamic policy dependent on a Member State led or controlled initiative. Finally, there are examinations of the complex horizontal and vertical decision-making process. Knudsen refocuses the influence of the European Parliament as an agenda setter in the development of the Community's own budget resources. This is followed by Ludlow's particularly convincing article which looks at Coreper as a key group that has helped streamline decision-making processes in the Community on the one hand, while also remaining the last bastion of national interests on the other. The overarching emphasis, aptly described by Warleigh-Lack in the final chapter, is the essential need for interdisciplinary cooperation between historians and political scientists, a message to both historians and political scientists to collaborate in order to achieve "theoretically informed, source-rich and analytical" research (p. 206).

From the outset the editors make the rather bold statement that they "promise fundamentally to transform the way we conceive of national history and European policy-making" (p. 4). Certainly the book is impressive in a number of respects. The source-based chapters are mostly well researched, wide-ranging and comprehensive accounts, each lending themselves to the overarching theme of the book: the need for "cross-fertilisation of political scientists and historians" (pp. 213-4). All of these are set within an impressive chronological period from the ECSC of the early 1950s through until the first enlargement in 1973.

Yet the extent to which the book *fundamentally* transforms our conception is questionable. To take Steinnes' chapter on Anglo-Nordic socialist networks, there can be drawbacks from denouncing so strongly state-centric research (pp. 93-4). For example, Steinnes makes considerable use of a meeting between premiers Wilson and Krag in April 1965 which seemed to suggest an impending British application (p. 95). However, had Steinnes consulted the British archives, or appreciated more recent work on Wilson's turn towards membership such as the recent monograph by Parr (2006), it would have been clear that there were several other events after this date in which Wilson continued to guard against an opening of negotiations. This is indicative not of a failure of Steinnes' research, which is essential to our understanding of the entry negotiations, but rather how research of the type in this book should be treated not as a fundamental correction to state-centric literature, but rather as a useful supplement to the national approaches. Moreover, the insistence of future interdisciplinary research while lucidly carried throughout, fails to take advantage of the situation by calling for greater collaboration *within* disciplines rather than simply *between* disciplines. This is too easily brushed over (pp. 208-9), which takes the bite out of an otherwise much needed argument.

Some of the chapters can at times be a difficult read, surprising for a book that aims to fundamentally transform academic outlook. Notwithstanding this or the comments above, the book is of intrinsic interest to students and specialists in all areas of the EU, and valuable to historians and political scientists alike. Indeed the *leitmotif* of the need for academic cohesiveness in a truly comparative and theoretically grounded framework proves a vital lesson on how all future research in the field should be conducted. It is

perhaps this more than anything that makes *The History of the European Union* a seminal piece in the undoubtedly crowded library of European integration literature.

References

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