

Book Review

John Loughlin (et al.) *Subnational Democracy in the European Union* Oxford University Press

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Remember those heady days of the mid-1990s when devolution, subsidiarity and ‘growth poles’ were all the rage, and journals were chock-full of articles detailing the rise of regional Europe and the decline of the nation-state? A decade on, and what have we got? The Committee of the Regions has been a huge disappointment, voters in Northeast England have rejected a regional assembly, pro-EU nationalist parties eye the EU’s constitutional treaty with suspicion, the French National Assembly steadfastly refuses to ratify the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, and so on. In other words, the region is beginning to look positively *démodé*. Perhaps now is a good time to step back, survey the institutional terrain and ask: how and why has the nature of the nation-state changed over the past few decades; how has this change affected the machinery of government at the sub-state level; and what implications do these changes have for citizen-state relations and the practice of democracy? These questions are at the heart of *Subnational Democracy in the European Union: Challenges and Opportunities*, a ‘revised and updated’ version of a 1999 Committee of the Regions publication. This new edition is aimed at an academic audience and benefits from the addition of an analytical framework that will greatly facilitate future comparative research on subnational democracy in Europe. The reader should be warned that the empirical content of the book has not been updated—we are still in the 1990s, and the most recent EU member states are not discussed. Nevertheless, this is an important book that should prove useful for anyone with an interest in the changing nature of democracy in Europe.

In his introduction, principal author John Loughlin identifies two bodies of literature to which he sees this volume contributing. The first is dealing with the transformation of the nation-state. Too much intellectual sweat and blood has been shed, we are told, on debating whether or not the nation-state is disappearing. Yes, globalization and Europeanization have eaten away at sovereignty from above, while sub-state actors make claims from below, but the nation-state is here to stay for the foreseeable future. Therefore, Loughlin and his collaborators (Udo Bullman, Frank Hendricks, Daniel-L. Seiler, Eliseo Aja, and Anders Linström) set out to explore the reconfiguration of the nation-state and how this change has in turn affected democracy at the subnational level.

The second body of literature Loughlin cites is that dealing with regional and local democracy in Europe. The problem with this literature, in his eyes, is that scholars have been over-reliant on theories from the US (namely rational choice and new institutionalism). These theories under-value the central importance of the State for the practice of democracy in western Europe, and they also fail to take into account the variation in state traditions and conceptions of democracy across western Europe. While not dismissing such theories outright, he says they should at the very least be buttressed by a ‘specifically European social science approach’ (p.6). Loughlin therefore provides an overview of different state traditions, which he groups into Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, Napoleonic and Scandinavian “families” (based on administrative and policy styles and cultures), and the distinct conceptions of democracy on which they are based. These tradi-

tions, he argues, have shaped the nature and practice of democracy at the regional and local level.

Each of the 15 EU member states is allotted a chapter, and each chapter/case study roughly follows a five-part template that Loughlin lays out in the introduction. Each case study begins with an historical overview of the theory and practice of democracy at the state and subnational levels. There follows a description of the institutions of government at the national and subnational levels. Thirdly we learn how democracy works—or fails to work—in practice. Fourthly we see the challenges and opportunities for subnational democracy given the changing nature of the state, and finally we discover how each state is attempting to adapt to changing circumstances. Although the need to cover 15 cases in a single volume means each case is treated somewhat superficially, Loughlin's template facilitates comparison between cases and lends the book a coherence lacking in so many edited volumes.

The book provides a useful summary of the myriad of institutional and administrative strategies governments have employed to meet the forces of change coming from the supranational and subnational levels; and although there is much variation both within and across states, Loughlin helps us navigate through this chaos by highlighting important trends common to all cases. The first of these is the decline of the welfare state, which has led to 'competitive regionalism' as subnational actors, deprived of funds from central government, scramble for foreign investment and a slice of the EU pie. At the same time, regional and local government administration and policy implementation increasingly bear the hallmark of neo-liberal principles. This change has been most radical in the UK, where the Labour government has continued many of the practices of the previous Conservative government (e.g., privatization, compulsory competitive tendering). Yet, as Lidström's chapters show, even in the Scandinavian strongholds of social democracy, one sees the creeping influence of 'New Public Management', with its emphasis on the citizen as consumer and efficiency over effectiveness. The impact of these changes on the expression and practice of democracy is more difficult to discern. The authors draw on election surveys and opinion poll data, but the quality and quantity of these data vary from case to case and have not been subjected to rigorous analysis. Loughlin is therefore tentative in his conclusions, but he clearly believes neo-liberal policies have eroded traditional community solidarity, leading citizens to disengage from politics. These trends, he believes, are unhealthy for democracy. Undoubtedly some readers will disagree with the book's underlying critique of neo-liberalism; others will take issue with the assumption that voter apathy is a sign of ailing democracy. As such, this book should serve to foment much needed debate about what constitutes—in theory and in practice—a healthy democracy in the twenty-first century.

Anyone from the advanced undergraduate to the seasoned academic will find in this book a handy reference guide to the machinery of regional and local government in western European states. More importantly, however, *Subnational Democracy in the European Union* is a treasure-trove of possible research topics, touching as it does on theories of democracy, political geography, nationalism, public opinion, comparative politics, public policy, civil society, social movements, and identity. By raising many questions and providing few answers, Loughlin and his colleagues have laid the groundwork for a new generation of scholars about to embark on the never-ending process of theory building and theory testing.

Simiona Milio, London School of Economics and Political Science

1. Brief summary of the book (i.e. its subject area and main points)

This book is the updated and revised outcome of a research project commissioned by the EU's Committee of Regions in 1999. It represents a thorough survey of the 'state of the art' of regional and local democracy covering all the fifteen Member States of the European Union. It examines, by recalling the philosophical and historical background, the main features of the origins and evolution of the concept of democracy in each state in the European Union. Furthermore, it explores different mechanisms through which the national and subnational governments have

tried to increase subnational democracy.

The author considers theoretical implications of various events such as integration, globalization, regionalization, societal changes and technological development, in order to shed light on the variations of democracy across Member States and also within each State between the national and the subnational level. At the end, a variety of mechanisms and reforms are proposed as innovative approaches with a twofold aim: first, to improve regional and local democracy; secondly to respond to today's challenge and opportunities.

As stated by the author: "The book aims to contribute not only to the literature on regional and local government but also to the understanding of a key dimension of the functioning of the European Union". It raises the question of the complexity of the concept of "democracy" and lays out the many ways in which this is understood in a European context.

Throughout the analysis of each Member State, which is conducted by six different authors, the book's overall message is clearly revealed: "there is no uniform democracy and no consent among Member States on what democracy is about".

The book is divided into 5 parts, which follow after an introductory chapter that lays out the theoretical framework. Each part (excluding the fifth which provides the conclusions) addresses a general State tradition, namely Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, Napoleonic and Scandinavian. The chapters, which singularly focus on each Member State, are organized under the respective State tradition. Each chapter has an analogous structure and it covers basically the similar areas. This format, on one hand gives coherence to the book and on the other guarantees a comparative dimension to the study.

2. Balanced evaluation of its content and arguments

The book fulfils its aim of examining, from the point of view of democratic practice the consequences at the subnational level of transformations occurring at the global, European, and national levels. In so doing, it adopts both a European and a subnational perspective, which provide a thorough analysis of the evolution of regional and local government within each Member State.

However, the volume origins as a report are still marked mainly because most of the chapters have a highly descriptive component. The analytical and theoretical dimension, which has been clearly added to the original version, is unevenly strong among the various chapters.

Although the different classification of the 15 Member States under a typology of four different state traditions is arguable, it is useful in supporting Loughlin's hypothesis that institutional development, both at the national and subnational level, is influenced by different institutional traditions or models.

The areas covered by each country chapter are very detailed. The information contained in each report, not only provides a comprehensive assessment of the state of democracy, but also supports the argument that regional and local government are becoming increasingly important. Though, the empirical evidence presented in some cases does not seem to be persuasive (e.g. Italy).

In each chapter the issues covered include:

- 1) The history and concept of democracy, which provides a useful background;
- 2) The analysis of the institutional expression of democracy, which is conducted not only at the different levels but also considers the role of political parties;
- 3) The practice of subnational democracy, which is explored by taking into account the role of policy networks, pressure groups, and citizen attitudes toward local government;
- 4) The challenges and opportunities for the future, which give a clear picture of what has still to come;
- 5) The innovative approaches to improving subnational democracy, which suggest various paths that the Member State could follow.

Clearly, the advantage of using a similar structure in each chapter favours a more transparent comparative analysis, although not all chapters contain the same level of information due to the different state of research on democracy being performed in each country.

What is clear from the studies presented in the book is that the old frameworks – i.e. north-south or centre-periphery – are no longer applicable when responding to today's challenges. The six

authors evidently show how integration, globalization, and regionalization have affected all the 15 Member States of the European Union, but the conclusions drawn by Loughlin are mainly kept to a general level. He states that although significant changes have taken place these have been unevenly distributed within and between counties and so it is not yet possible to identify a general theory applicable to all cases.

3. Recommendation on its potential readership

Until now, there has been little systematic theoretical work on the question of regional and local democracy in European States, this volume has the merit of boosting this understudied subject. The format and content of the book gives the reader a complete overview of the different patterns of territorial organization and politics, the degree of decentralization and regionalization of the political system as well as the varieties of democracy in European Union Member States. Furthermore, the country reports highlight challenges to subnational democracy resulting from European integration, globalization, regionalization, societal and technological changes. The book should be seen as laying out a framework for future research in this area rather than a definitive statement about the question of regional and local democracy. Indeed, since the book was published, there has been a series of relevant developments both at the European level with the recent eastward enlargement, and at the national level with respect to the introduction in some Member States of further reform of subnational government. This must be kept in mind when reading the content of each chapter.

The volume is definitely very practical and provides a lot of information, which is corroborated in the analysis. It is a must-read for those who want to have a comprehensive view of the development of subnational democracy in each of the 15 Member States until 1999. Furthermore, it is recommended for comparative analysis and should be read by those interested not only in democratic theory and practice but also in subjects such as regionalism and multilevel governance.

Emmanuel Sigalas, University of Reading

The title of this book would have been more accurate if it read 'Subnational Democracy in the Member-States of the EU'. Contrary to any first impressions the work of John Loughlin and his collaborators (E. Aja; U. Bullman; F. Hendriks; A. Lindström; D. Seiler) focuses on the different layers of government and governance within the nation-state rather than within the broader framework of the EU. Again contrary to any original suspicion, this book –possibly to the disappointment of its authors- does not fall neatly within the literature of the 'Europe of regions'. It does not claim that nation-states are about to be superseded by other forms of political and economic administration such as the EU (supranational 'threat') and/or other regional political entities (subnational 'threat'). On the contrary this book seems to affirm the changing, albeit persistent, nature of the nation-state.

Loughlin et al. examine the institutional and administrative changes that take place at the level of local and regional political authorities within the member-states of the EU. The question they try to answer is: 'what is the present state of affairs and of democracy at the local/regional level?'. Undoubtedly this is an ambitious task given the size of the case-studies. Loughlin et al. examine the latest and most important developments in the fifteen member-states of the EU prior to the recent enlargement. The new member-states were omitted, because they joined the European family after the completion of this research project.

Loughlin et al. divide their fifteen cases into four 'state traditions' (Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, Napoleonic, Scandinavian) and this is where the trouble starts. Although Loughlin tries in his introduction to justify such a division it is by no means obvious to the naked eye why this is theoretically meaningful and insightful. This is part of a wider, and much more important problem. The book suffers from a discrepancy between theory and praxis. It is very important to bear in

mind that this book is the product of an extensive report drawn up for the Committee of Regions (the EU body introduced in the Maastricht Treaty to provide a forum for the regional authorities of the EU member-states). It originally aimed to inform politicians and decision-makers on the present "state of democracy at the subnational level in all fifteen member-states of the EU" (Loughlin, p.29). Inevitably the book is much less theory-driven than primarily descriptive of these fifteen different situations.

Loughlin and his colleagues' work remains, however, important if seen through the rubric of its original aim. The literature on subnational democracy and practices remains scarce and the work of Loughlin et al., without claiming that it is "a definitive statement about the question of regional and local democracy" (Loughlin, p.31), contributes in filling in this gap.

The introduction and conclusion chapters, as is common in edited volumes, attempt to provide a common thread linking all the chapters together into something more than an aggregation of its parts. In my opinion, the theoretical dressing of this work fails to suit closely the empirical cases. The research project was not designed to answer big 'why?' questions, but rather to address the 'what?' questions - like what is happening or has happened recently in the Member States of the EU at the subnational level?

Despite the inappropriateness of their research design the authors try to attribute any changes to factors/forces such as globalisation, europeanisation, or technological and societal changes. Assessing the impact of the aforementioned forces on subnational (and unavoidably sometimes on national) political structures and practices is a very demanding task that requires substantial attention. The authors nevertheless insisted on giving some kind of answer, ranging from one paragraph (!) to one page as a maximum for each member-state.

Among the advantages of this book I consider one to be the relative uniformity of the chapters' structure. A uniformity which was properly compromised by the demands of the peculiarities and different conditions in each country. For example, the cases of Belgium and Germany are quite different despite both being federal states.

Each chapter opens with a brief historical overview of the (national) history of the country and follows with a presentation of the main political institutions and practices at the national, regional (where they exist), and local level. Before the authors go deeper into institutions and practices at the regional and local level they then give us a compact description of, or introduction to, the party politics of the respective country. One should note here that some facts are inevitably a bit dated. The most important part of each chapter is usually called 'the practice of subnational democracy' and this is where the greatest added value of this book lies. I have to say it is difficult for one not to get lost in the maze of (sub)national administration, and therefore it requires careful reading. The chapters include an overview of citizens' attitudes towards subnational (and sometimes national) institutions, policies, and practices, which confirms one's suspicion that the popularity of traditional forms of politics, even at the local level, is in decline. Finally the chapters end with the modern challenges (globalisation, europeanisation etc.) for subnational politics. Unfortunately the authors do not provide, given the size of such a task, anything but a rudimentary account of these forces, and their consequences.

One particular methodological point is worth of mentioning: in several footnotes in the chapter about Greece, Loughlin warns the reader that at some points the opinions expressed are of the Greek delegation to the Committee of Regions, and are thus biased. Although a very honest note it does raise some concern about the methodological soundness of the whole project. Loughlin himself says on page 30: "each country draft was discussed and criticized by the national delegations to the Committee [of Regions]". It is true that the chapter on Greece at certain points seems exceptionally beautified - something which doesn't seem to occur in the other chapters. Unfortunately one can only speculate about why this happens.

The book is most likely to be of interest to practitioners and students of European Politics. Anyone wishing to find out about the latest developments in the power-sharing practices and institutions between (or among) national and subnational authorities should consult this book. Scholars interested to find out why these developments took place should probably look elsewhere.