Chapter 3

Perspectives on the European Commission

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It was not that long ago that each new publication about the European Commission began with the ritual observation that, despite the organization’s centrality to integration and its uniqueness, little scholarship existed beyond the classics by Coombes (1970) and Michelmann (1978), which were becoming rapidly out-of-date. That changed in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the relaunch of ‘Europe’ through the single internal market project and then the Maastricht negotiations and the Treaty of European Union. However, the new literature tended to focus principally on the Commission as a political actor. It was concerned with the Commission’s ability to exert an independent influence on policy (see, e.g., Pollack 1997, 2003), at the extent to which and under what conditions it could act as a policy entrepreneur (Schmidt 2000), and how autonomous it was from national governments (Pierson 1996). Scholars were interested mainly in the Commission’s powers, formal and informal. Though these analyses became more rigorous and more sophisticated, and the literature moved beyond traditional debates between intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism to
draw on more mainstream political science approaches and methodologies (see, e.g., Pollack 2003, Franchino 2007), there was little change in its principal concerns.

Although these were, and remain, important questions, they reflect a research agenda directed almost exclusively towards the Commission’s outward action. The central preoccupation was with the Commission’s behaviour in relation to other institutions and other actors. There was little attempt to investigate the inner workings of the organization, still less was it considered that opening the black box may hold the key to explaining the Commission’s action in particular policy fields, at different levels of decision making and in regard to specific interventions. As a consequence, a series of important questions remained unanswered. First, how the Commission defines its preferences tended to be disregarded. In the spirit of Wildavsky’s observation (cited by Dimitrakopoulos 2006 in another context) that political scientists have been preoccupied by how actors seek to get what they want, but had not paid sufficient attention to how they develop those preferences, scholars of the EU had not sought to investigate the processes by which they arose. How the availability and mobilization of the organizational resources at the disposal of the Commission offers possibilities for, but also imposed constraints upon Commission action, was a second question that was left unaddressed. A third was the extent to which the Commission is organizationally independent. The degree to which it has a free hand in recruiting and promoting its staff, but beyond that its influence over the rules and procedures that govern its use of human and financial resources, as well as the shape of its internal structures, was unexplored. A fourth concerned the identity of officials and their socialisation experiences within a multinational organization. The significance of national identity, the extent to which officials consider that their primary loyalty lies with the Commission, and the content and shaping of their beliefs are three important aspects. A fifth related to management, leadership and coordination within the organization, and
how its proficiency in regard to each shapes not only its own capacities, but, given the Commission’s responsibilities in implementation and enforcement, those of the EU as a political system. A final unaddressed question concerned how the Commission manages its relations with other organizations in the performance of its functions in Brussels and beyond. In short, preoccupation with the Commission as a political actor led to a neglect of the Commission as an organization and administration.

These themes have attracted considerably more interest in the recent past. Indeed, much of the research in which the participants of the CONNEX Research Group 1 (RG1) have been engaged and which they have presented in workshops over the past four years has addressed exactly these themes. They have considerably advanced our knowledge and understanding of the Commission and more broadly of the EU as a political system in significant ways. First, members of RG1 have worked on aspects of the Commission’s organizational independence. With respect to personnel and recruitment, Egeberg (2003) has examined the internalisation of recruitment and appointment processes concerning top officials, Wille (2007a, 2007b) the end of national flags, and Balint et al (2008) the declining politicisation of higher management and degree of openness of career system. In relation to nationality, Egeberg (2006a) has examined the role perception of Commissioners and the primary importance of their portfolio responsibilities in College decision making. Trondal (2006) has found that detached national experts do not receive instructions from their capitals, while Suvarierol (2008) reported that individual official’s task-related formal, task-related informal and leisure networks were not overwhelming national.

Second, Dimitrakopoulos and Kassim (2005), and Kassim and Dimitrakopoulos (2006, 2007) used the Convention on the Future of Europe and the two intergovernmental conferences that followed as cases to investigate processes of preference formation within the Commission. They found an internally differentiated organization that struggled to develop and
present a coherent vision. Third, organizational change has been a concern of several researchers within the group, especially in the wake of the Kinnock reforms undertaken between 1999 and 2005. Kassim (2004a, 2004b, 2008) has focused on the reform process, Cini (2007a, 2007b) on the ethics of reform, Bauer (2008) on the impact of the reform on middle management on whom heaviest burden has fallen, and Bauer and Knill (2007) on the Commission’s experience as compared to other international organizations undergoing management reform.


Whilst the group through the aforementioned publications has made an important contribution to scholarship, several elements of a new research agenda and new possibilities for future research have come into view. First, there are areas where knowledge of the Commission is still limited and which remain relatively unexplored. These included the role conception of officials in different parts of the Commission, especially at the level of the cabinet, the impact of enlargement, and the wider impact of the Kinnock reforms on the Commission’s management, administration, culture and performance. Second, there is a need for large-scale studies. Much of the existing work has been based on relatively small numbers. The next step is to undertake work
of considerably larger scope, creating primary data based on experience of
greater number of respondents. Third, new conceptualizations have been
introduced that need to be tested and explored. These include the notion of
the Commission as the ‘internally differentiated institution’ (Kassim and
Dimitrakopoulos 2007) and the administrative infrastructure of the EU as an
‘integrated administration’ (Hofmann 2008, Hofmann and Turk 2006). While
the former needs to be further refined and linked to theoretical perspectives
in the existing literature, the latter is an important achievement, but needs to
be empirically validated by the charting of links and interconnections, to
examine extent to which the administration is differentiated vertically and
horizontally, and to explaining differences across policy domains. Finally,
there are benefits to be gained from approaching the Commission in
comparative perspective. Egeberg (2006b) and Curtin and Egeberg (2008)
have demonstrated the value of such an approach in regard to
implementation and accountability. Bauer and Knill (2007) have done the
same in relation to administrative reform, while Trondal (2007) has reflected
on the study of the Commission from a public administration perspective.
However, there is still surprising little research on the Commission as an
international administration, the extent to which it embodies and exemplifies
the ideal as set out in the international relations literature, and how it
responds to challenges comparable to those faced by other international
organizations. Comparisons with national administrative bodies are also
relatively scarce, leaving broad scope for the possibility of generating new
insights from the comparative bureaucracies literature. There is limited
empirical knowledge about individual Commission officials, how they work,
and what, if anything, is distinctive about them. In all four areas, there are
considerable research opportunities.
Notes

Though, of course, there were some exceptions. See, for example, Metcalfe (1992), Cram (1994), Ross (1994) and Endo (1999)

References


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