A Journey into Eurocracy

By Camille Herlin-Giret

Through an ethnographic investigation behind the closed doors of the European quarter in Brussels, Sylvain Laurens studies the relationships between the business community and European institutions, showing that their proximity derives less from ideological complicity than from a shared history.

Reviewed: Sylvain Laurens, *Les courtiers du capitalisme. Milieux d'affaires et bureaucrates à Bruxelles* (Agone: Marseille, 2015), 464 p.

Sylvain Laurens' latest book plunges its readers into the heart of the European quarter in Brussels and sheds light on the everyday work of business representatives, European Commission civil servants, and other experts, considered as brokers of capitalism. This ethnographic inquiry conducted over several years in the heart of European bureaucracy and the business community undeniably opens up new avenues for thinking about 'the role of bureaucracy in analysing power relationships' (p. 406).

In a book published several years earlier,[1] the author had already highlighted the working environment of state elites, underscoring the substantial role played by high-ranking civil servants in constructing a 'problem' of immigration and related policies. The reader crosses paths with a lot of bureaucrats in his most recent research too, but S. Laurens focuses more on how business representatives re-appropriate bureaucratic know-how. Both the range of material used – archives, interviews, and observations – and the very structure of the book itself enable to describe what some call the 'field of Eurocracy' from varied points of view.[2]

The book analyses the genesis of the European administration and the morphology of companies' political representation in Brussels and charts the work done by lobbyists. Along with the case study at the end of the book, this analysis suggests breaking out of the influence paradigm when studying lobbying (1). The author account for the emergence of a small community at the intersection of 'public' and 'private' sectors (2) by providing original answers to the question of how large companies' interests are maintained, viewed through the lens of the work done by business representatives (3).

Beyond influence

Throughout the book, a set of commonplaces about lobbying practices is being discussed. The figure of the lobbyist, who confidentially meets, influences, and even manipulates and corrupts the most highly placed decision-makers in the European Parliament is replaced here by the halo of everyday practices of business representatives and bureaucrats in the European quarter of Brussels. From the outset, the author argues that lobbying 'cannot be reduced to buying amendments' (p. 17) and goes on to challenge a set of hypotheses surrounding 'influence'. The latter presupposes the existence of two conflicting worlds: 'private' and 'public' sectors, opposed in terms of both interests and distinct work practices. In a framework where large transnational companies supposedly contrive, almost by magic, to impose their point of view upon the administrative officials of European institutions, lobbyists appear as simply passing on orders, reflecting business interests, and contenting themselves with overseeing the work of European civil servants.[3] By stepping outside the confines of this media representation of lobbying, centred on influence, the author shifts the focus. The heart of the issue does not lie with European deputies and large businesses, but instead behind the closed doors of an administrative world with little exposure, where lobbyists and European Commission civil servants co-exist.

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[1] Sylvain Laurens, *Une politisation feutrée. Les hauts fonctionnaires et l'immigration en France*, (Paris: Belin, 2009).
[2] Didier Georgakakis (ed.), *Le champ de l'eurocratie, une sociologie politique du personnel de l'UE*, (Paris: Economica, 2012).
[3] On this subject, see the article by Franck R. Baumgartner 'EU Lobbying: A View From the US,' *Journal of European Public Policy* 14, n° 3 (2007), p. 482-488.

The brokers of capitalism, at the intersection of 'public' and 'private' sectors

The reason lobbying cannot be reduced to the influence of one sphere on another is that business representatives and bureaucrats belong to a 'micro-community' (p. 218) in which everyone knows everyone else. The often-deplored proximity of the business community and European institutions is less about ideological complicity than it is rooted in a shared history.

On the one hand, the administrative officials who flooded into the nascent European institutions in the early 1960s contributed to the emergence and shaping of European representation of business interests in several ways: by taking up the branch classifications,[4] by implementing certain instruments such as the CAP (p. 60), or simply by restricting the number of seats in consultations (p. 57). Federations were thereby encouraged to adopt multinational modes of representation and to form coalitions of interests beforehand. On the other hand, the support of the business community was decisive in allowing this nascent administration, which began with limited means, to gain legitimacy, particularly with national administrations. The micro-community that put down its roots in the European quarter is also characterized by frequent circulation between spaces. Business representatives have often been interns in European Parliament and could potentially move across to the Commission; conversely, Parliamentary assistants have often worked for interest groups in the past.

More fundamentally, the author shows that employees of business associations learn to use and enhance bureaucratic capital, making this sort of career change possible but also creating a resource lending them legitimacy with the companies they represent. By learning to speak the local language, getting to know desk officers,[5] and being aware of potential conflicts between the different Directorate-Generals in the Commission, they can obtain an early draft of a future official text and impose their views within the federations, foregrounding their knowledge of the workings of bureaucracy in the Commission. Thanks to their bureaucratic capital and their 'social capital linked to ties in the quarter,' lobbyists therefore 'maintain the interest of members in funding a federation' and make themselves indispensable. This interlacing of the business community and administrative officials is further extended by the fact they frequent the same spaces of discussion,

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[4] The first business associations federated around the groups of products and classifications used by the DG Internal Market.

[5] Desk officers are employees of the European Commission. They work within one of the Directorate Generals and are below the Director General and the Head of Unit in the hierarchy (see the organisation chart p. 87).

writing, and negotiation, particularly through the development of research platforms with joint funding from the Commission and the private sector.

Ultimately, throughout the book the reader encounters a constellation of actors at the intersection of the business and administrative communities. As this group prospers, the boundary between the public and private spheres[6] is erased, leading to question what such configurations of actors can get done.

Power from the margins

By studying the lobbyists ordinary activities, the book offers several potential avenues for understanding how these professionals – who are not in the highest placed jobs and are not unilaterally under the 'influence' of big businesses – nonetheless ultimately manage to maintain the interests of the latter. Business representatives have managed, first and foremost, to make themselves useful to the administration. Desk officers, in particular, have always used lobbyists' work, whether to compensate for lack of data in the 1960s or to obtain scientific summaries of new European norms today. The Commission is able to delegate some of its work to business representatives because 'the expectations of the bureaucracy being courted are internalised at the heart of the work done to represent businesses' (p. 125). Henceforth, federations can frame themselves as regulators and suggest new standards to the Commission themselves, which, in return, will need to go through them to produce the relevant official texts. Second, the work conducted in these spaces combining lobbyists, researchers, and administrators takes place far from the public eye, before and after it goes through Parliament, and in technical discussions where political and competitive stakes are masked.

This division of work and the investment of business representatives in scientific questions relating to European norms and standards ultimately promote the interests of the largest companies. First of all, the firms in question are those that have included research activities in their competitive strategies to the greatest extent and that, in return, are often most heavily subsidized by the Commission, particularly where internal technological development programmes are concerned. The special resource of bureaucratic capital[7] can also lead to censorship, particularly with the smaller companies that invest little in representation or those that are the furthest away from Brussels, with little knowledge of the workings of European institutions. The numerous

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[6] This tight interlacing even raises the question of the need to keep using a term ('the business world') that essentialises a group which the author repositions historically within a small community of European bureaucrats.

[7] S. Laurens suggests using the notion of bureaucratic capital in order to think about how acquired resources, particularly knowledge of the institutional game, 'produce or do not produce social effects according to the context in which they are used' (p. 168).

discussions that precede and follow votes on an official text and the fact that the formatting and production of standards is delegated to federations also weaken citizen opposition, particularly from non-government organisations (NGOs).

Lobbying is therefore done discreetly. However, this relates less to interpersonal relationships of trust between the business community and high-ranking civil servants than to the lack of visibility and access of the technical discussions that take place behind closed doors, in an administrative space where lobbyists and Commission employees work together. These spaces resemble 'black holes of power'.[8] Through their normative autonomy, business representatives have the power to control implementation of policies and coalitions of interests within federations to benefit the companies that spend most on their representation. S. Laurens' book, far from the usual clichés on the subject, shows the full depth of the European stage and sheds light on these actors from the administrative, business, and research communities, who are often left in the shadows and yet who shape European policy on a daily basis.

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[8] Pierre Lascoumes and Dominique Lorrain, 'Trous noirs du pouvoir. Les intermédiaires de l'action publique,' *Sociologie du travail* 49, n°1 (2007), p. 1-9.