Hubert Heinelt and Sybille Münch (eds.), Handbook of European Policies. Interpretive Approaches to the EU


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In the Handbook of European Policies, its editors, Hubert Heinelt and Sybille Münch, bring together 28 authors who created 20 comprehensive chapters covering all important policy areas in the European Union. Handbooks introducing EU policies are widely published in various languages but this one offers in-depth explanations grounded in the theoretical approach of post-positivism and interpretivism, which might no longer be unique, but remains an original perspective. The authors believe that the handbook is suitable for both undergraduate and graduate courses despite using difficult conceptual and methodological approaches. This belief is supported by the structure of the handbook, which begins with a detailed overview of post-positivist research and its fundamental concepts, followed by a survey of EU policies in the main chapters. Each chapter delivers very rich references, which allow for further exploration of given topics. Nevertheless, the work requires some considerable understanding of the concepts developed within international relations, European studies and political sciences, and so it should really be addressed to advanced students and to researchers.

From the Editors’ Introduction we learn that the interpretive approach is seen as a kind of umbrella under which a plethora of constructivist, ideational, interpretive, and discursive approaches exist, where both hermeneutical and post-structuralist researchers conduct their policy analyses, usually deeply disagreeing about the sense of political subjectivity. However, they all share a common view that the explanation of social phenomena and processes demands uncovering actors’ intentions, that the meaning that shapes behaviour and actions is central, that dialogue, discourse, narrative, the concept ‘frame’, have to be followed and understood (even if the particular definitions of these concepts vary). The Authors had a free choice of using their preferred methodological and conceptual approaches. This has resulted in many fruitful analyses revealing a full picture of variations within the interpretivism paradigm in the public policy analyses.

The first part of the handbook, focused on more general, conceptual aspects, consists of five chapters. The first, written by Sabine Saurugger, describes how constructivism entered EU public policy studies, presents the limits and advantages of this approach and suggests that actor-centred constructivism (‘strategic constructivism’) can overcome some limits. Nowadays, however, this approach
cannot focus on elite policy actors only, but must include numerous public opinions. In the second chapter, Vivien A. Schmidt is also searching for new tools of analyses in time of crises within the EU. Her perspective of discursive institutionalism is used to demonstrate how analysts and EU actors think/talk about the EU and its future governance and legitimacy. An in-depth example of the Eurozone crises offered by the Author shows both the value and the limits of this approach (including a range of possible variations). The next chapter written by Claudio M. Radaelli focuses on the Europeanisation of domestic policymaking in search for the relationship between this field and interpretivism. He critically evaluates the related theoretical and empirical literature, considering how the EU uses pressure and how various actors comply with it, pointing out that “the multi-dimensional crisis and the responses given by EU institutions and member states suggests that Europeanisation can be reversible” (p. 67). It means that for interpretive policy studies new areas of analysis are opening. Frank Nullmeier in his chapter asks ‘How to explain discursive change?’ returning to an actor-centred approach. He argues correctly that many interpretive authors avoid explanations, and proposes at the end of his chapter a six-stage model, which could be used for EU policies empirical studies, seeking to explain discursive change. Development of his first provisional proposal can point to important new analytical tools. In the last chapter of the first part of the handbook, Falk Daviter focuses on a key theoretical concept – framing. He reviews various framing perspectives and discusses how empirical studies thus far have addressed the framing of EU. Thanks to this chapter, as in the case of others, the reader learns about leading perspectives and methodological debates which helps to follow analyses from the next two parts of this book.

The second part consists of thirteen chapters, covering important EU policy areas. The authors use various approaches in their interpretative analyses, but the structure of all the chapters is ordered, usefully, according to the same system. Thus, every author presents his own methodological perspective at the outset. Every contribution considers issues of perceptions leading to policy action as well as altering perceptions/interpretations, which lead to policy change. Discursive interactions, including different institutional contexts, are explored and the general question of how policy formulation is translated to practice is reflected on.

Peter H. Feindt deals with one of the oldest, completely europeanised but also most controversial policy – agricultural. He adopts the concept of ideational power to debate how three discourses – agricultural exceptionalism, farm income policy and productivism – influenced the shape of the CAP and became hegemonic. The discursive contestation from the 1980s embraced multifunctionality and neoliberalism and this pluralistic discourse initiated reforms of the CAP. Hubert Heinelt and Wolfgang Petzold show how the meaning of cohesion policy developed becoming formally established as a policy field from the end of 1980s, and how this narrative has evolved since the 2000s. They noticed that even if some ideas are changing, the narrative “developed through interactive discourse can have lasting effect” (p. 151).

Agriculture and structural funds are established areas of the EU policy, while spatial planning (European Spatial Development Perspective) has a different character, essentially that of an intergovernmental document. It emerged as a result of ‘discourse coalition’, it is weakly institutionalised and the EU lacks legal competences in this area. This is a reason why Rob Atkinson and Karsten
Zimmermann argue convincingly in their chapter that emerging spatial planning can be best analysed from an interpretive/social construction approach. Katharina T. Paul and Holger Straßheim also deal with an interesting challenge, focusing on EU consumer policy, as it overlaps with other policies and creates a puzzling concept of ‘a European consumer’. They try to grasp the meaning of the latter in the context of continuity and change, using critical policy analysis as well as critical legal studies.

Unlike consumer policy, which in the history of European integration has been on the margins, EU trade policy played a leading role and was crucial in respect to supranational competences. Nevertheless, as Yelter Bollen remarks, the interpretivist perspective was not often used in analysing trade policy. He reviews research done in this field until now, disclosing the dominance of rationalist institutionalism. Finally, he suggests a complementary programme of research, as a way leading beyond current state-of-the-art: “an exploration of the language, the ways of thinking and the overall institutional and discursive context in which DG Trade, national trade administrations and ‘the public’ is embedded” (p. 202).

EU environmental policy, with which Miranda A. Schreurs deals in her chapter, seems to be a perfect subject for interpretivist analyses. In this case, many narrations meet, discourse coalitions are built, ideas are formulated. This variety of interpretations and framings, as well as their meaning for the EU environmental policy, is analysed in the chapter. It begins with the evolution of the perception of ‘environment’ and its protection and later focuses on narratives concerning this topic during the Brexit referendum as an example of resistance to the transition of the EU towards advanced regulating methods.

Environmental policy is not widely questioned, but many controversies are certainly connected with establishing energy policy that it is highly politicised within the EU and among member states. In her chapter, Michèle Knodt explains the development of this policy, indicates the frames of security, sustainability, and competitiveness, and claims that the deadlock of this field is to be explained through the understanding of what drives conflicts between these three frames. Two competing discourse coalitions accentuate either a sustainability frame, linking energy to the climate change (e.g Denmark, Germany) or a security frame expecting solidarity in protecting them from external dependency (mainly Visegrad states).

EU research, technological development and innovation policy (RTDI) became a very important instrument of Europeanisation. This process accelerated from the 1980s, and RTDI secured for itself a significant position and budget. Peter Biegelbauer and Matthias Weber argue convincingly in their chapter that RTDI is an excellent example of “the important role of policy frames with the function to underpin policy initiatives” (p. 241). The four main narratives (namely Europe as Laggard, European Paradox, European Research Area, Grand Paradox) shaped policy and went unchallenged for a long time. However, the crises of the last few years are opening up new possibilities for a different set of values, norms and discourses. Dorota Dakowska’s and Kathia Serrano’s chapter explores a field similar to RTDI, that of European higher education policy. It is an area very well suited for interpretive analysis, with many actors included in the discourse and very limited legitimisation of the EU Commission involvement as the policy area belongs to member states (the subsidiarity clause). Hence, building coalitions, mutual adjustment, learning processes were necessary in educational activity at the supranational and intergovernmental levels. All of the above were, according to
the authors, “marked by power struggles, competition, and strategic convergence” (p. 262). Both, however, the discourse and its effects in this field point towards a broad acceptance for coordination and Europeanisation among various actors.

The process of establishing the EU’s foreign policy can be seen as one of the more challenging activities. Xymena Kurowska in her chapter defines it broadly, by including: Common Foreign and Security Policy and Common Security and Defence Policy (CFSP and CSDP); the international presence of the EU; its enlargement project and involvement in neighbourhood (ENP). It is beyond doubt that all of these elements create a picture of external political activity of the EU, and as the author notes, “they can be seen as a contested narrative that the EU tells about itself” (p. 274). Kurowska, however, does not analyse foreign policy itself in her contribution, but reviews current tendencies in interpretive research on this topic, e.g.: interpretations of the Normative Power Europe narrative or inclusion of reflexivity as a hallmark of interpretive research. The next chapter, on EU development policy by Sarah Delputte and Jan Orbie, links foreign policy in practice and offers a very clear account of adopting a theoretical approach to research strategy. From this contribution the reader can learn why development policy belonging to shared competence areas is such a complex task for policymaking, and for those theorising about it, too. The authors introduce an abductive method, later illustrated by several cases of practical implementation: EU coordination in Africa; increasing policy coherence for development; changing development consensus; and the Europeanisation of aid. This interaction between theory and empirics offers high flexibility and openness to new ideas.

The next chapter, by Sibille Münch on EU migration and asylum policy, follows similar paths. Firstly, she shows how attempts to build a common European approach in this field are uneven, complicated and controversial. Secondly, she reviews relevant literature pointing towards an interpretive turn made by some authors. Thirdly, she excellently presents dominant narratives and frames in migration policymaking, noticing how certain narratives and frames persisted for the last 15 years.

The final chapter in this part of the handbook focuses on gender equality policies. Hence, Johanna Kantola and Emanuela Lombardo tackle another highly debatable and multidimensional field of EU activity. They use a discursive reflectivist approach analysing how discourses connected with gender construct social reality and influence people. They concentrate mainly on how the problem of gender inequality in the EU “has been framed in a variety of policy sectors by different actors; and how solution to the problem of gender inequality in the EU have been framed” (p. 333).

The third part of this handbook deals with two issues, which horizontally connect various policies: the role of think tanks and the development of the doctrine of market competition in public procurement. Both contributions adopt an interpretative approach and both are empirical studies. Jesper Dahl Kelstrup uses existing literature and 16 interviews with think-tank practitioners to reconstruct “the self-perception and intentions of those active in think-tanks in the EU” (p. 353). He detects three waves of development of think tanks in Europe from the 1950s. In each of them think tanks played different role in EU public policy: from institutions affiliated to member states promoting European integration, through technocratic agents interacting with the European Commission, to more transnational roles currently. Detlef Sack and E.K.Sarter tackle the question “why a purely market-oriented European public procurement policy has been opened up to green and social
considerations (mid-1980s to 2014)” (p. 371). They focus on the frames defining state’s individual spending behaviour, the norms which are defined as ‘appropriate’ and notice that public procurement is also a matter of the state’s self-description.

Conclusion

The ambition of this handbook was to give answers to the question: ‘how the ideas, arguments or discourses shape policies in the specific institutional context of the European Union as a multi-level polity?’ (p. 1). Answers which would stem from the theoretical approaches of interpretivism instead of ‘traditional’ positivists theories. This book, however, is not dismissing analyses grounded in institutionalism, behaviourism or rational choice but is adding additional perspectives, fulfilling a gap which positivist approaches are neglecting. Another aim is also satisfied in this way, that of starting ‘a conversation between critical policy studies and European integration theory’ (p. 1). I believe that this Handbook will have a long lasting impact on public policy analysis, encouraging it to develop or challenge its theoretical approach.