

**Decentring European governance Mark Bevir and Ryan Phillips Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019, ISBN: 9780367661069; £36.99 (Pbk) [Book review]**

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# Decentring European governance

Mark Bevir | Ryan Phillips

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The starting point for this collection of essays is the view that dominant interpretations of European policy-making and governance are rooted in a conventional positivist approach that seeks explanations based on commonality across multiple cases in which actors' motivations and practices are reduced to some form of fixed rationality or institutional assimilation. In order to counter this sidelining of subjectivity and agency the editors and contributors to this volume set out to explore how a “decentred theory” approach can be applied to different aspects of EU governance. Rather than relying on objective social abstractions such as efficiency, national identity or economic interdependence, decentred theory instead frames policy and governance as “contingent constructions of actors inspired by competing beliefs (and) rooted in different traditions,... (explaining) shifting patterns... (through) actors' own interpretations of their actions and practices,... locating them in historical contexts... (and focusing on) narratives that explain actions by relating them to the beliefs and desires that produced them” (pp. 1–2). In other words, it blends constructivist, historicist, interpretivist and discursive elements with an emphasis on interests, agency, context and contingency.

In taking this approach it highlights meanings that inform the actions of individuals involved in all kinds of policy practices—what the editors terms “the social construction of governance”. The focus is on “subjective and inter-subjective understandings of policy actors” (p. 6); in this formulation “... policies arise as conflicting beliefs, competing traditions and varied dilemmas generate, sustain and transform diverse practices..., (focusing) attention on the diverse ways in which situated agents make and remake policies as contested practices” (p. 2). A central feature is how the historical traditions within which actors operate become modified in response to the issues and dilemmas faced, and thus on the “meanings in action” expressed through elite narratives, social science rationalities, and resistance from other actors in the process. Therefore, research within this framework needs to explore the ways in which people construct their worlds not so much in terms of geographical position, professional identity, network membership or social status, but rather with respect to how they understand these dimensions, the norms that they operate within and their interests in the varying roles they play.

Thus, governance is characterized not as “fixed essences” but rather as a set of disparate social practices created and recreated through concrete meaningful activity. Researching it in empirical terms involves exploring narratives, rationalities and resistance. “Narratives” are the different stories people use to make sense of their world, to explain past practices and events, to understand contemporary conditions and to identify possible solutions and means of overcoming obstacles. “Rationalities” relate to the multiple and competing social scientific beliefs and associated technologies that govern conduct, as well as the ways in which knowledge is drawn upon to construct policies, actions and practices. Finally, “resistance” from other policy-makers, on the ground practitioners or through citizen action can lead to adaptation or even rejection of plans and proposals formulated by a particular set of elite decision-makers.

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The bulk of the book is a series of case studies which seek to apply this approach to a range of European policy domains and issues. Topics range from agricultural cooperation through cultural policy and higher education to security governance and Council for the EU consensus-seeking. Perhaps not surprisingly given its particular requirements, not all of these treatments join up all the dots of decentred theory. For example, Curry's chapter on social policy peer review through the Open Method of Cooperation (OMC) process reveals a primary emphasis on outputs rather than policy mechanisms, thus undermining the goal of mutual policy learning by focusing on ends rather than means. That said, the findings add further weight to the perception of OMC as a mode of governance heralding the move away from EU-wide harmonization on all matters. Similarly, the work by Dakowska on the Bologna Process around higher education reveals an "agree to differ" outcome that represents a diminution of original policy intentions and the payment of lip service to mutual recognition protocols by several member states.

Other chapters like Norman's on security and development policy uncover dualities in specific policy domains between mutual understandings that help to steer European cooperation in new directions and other aspects that are never able to transcend "tensions and conflictual institutional relations" (p. 185). However, the chapter by Lewis on decision-making by the Council of the EU is perhaps the most instructive. It reveals a number of subcultures among members, in spite of its apparent success in building consensus, and examines some contingent and contested shifts in response to particular issues. Given the aims of the book, this chapter stands out because its analysis actually goes beyond decentered theory per se, blending it with other tools and insights drawn from an eclectic blend of network theory, international relations and the sociological study of organizations.

While this shows the flexibility and adaptability of decentered theory, at the same time it debunks the editors' claims that their approach is the only way to go. Indeed, the main criticism of the book is that it advances its arguments in isolation from the other relational approaches which have become a mainstay of policy and governance research in recent years. Instead, it makes its case for decentered theory by aiming at the wispiest of straw men, devoting just one page to examples of the positivist genre and dismissing everything they say due to the analytical and epistemological weaknesses of such approaches. The treatment also ignores the rich body of governance research following parallel theoretical frames that has emerged in the last two decades. While the centrality of agency is certainly welcome, the focus tends to major on individual subjectivity at the expense of what intersubjectivity involves and how it can be investigated. Highlighting "family resemblances" rather than ideal types and stressing the contingent nature of actions, practices and institutions are also important, but they are not the sole preserve of decentered theory. In summary, this book adds considerably to the panoply of texts on governance and policy-making, but readers will have to decide for themselves where it might fit within their preferred mode of investigation and analysis.

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