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KENNETH ARMSTRONG (2010) 'GOVERNING SOCIAL INCLUSION: EUROPEANISATION THROUGH POLICY COORDINATION', OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Book review

This paper seeks to offer a review of the book 'Governing Social Inclusion: Europeanisation through Policy Coordination'. One of the reoccurring topics discussed throughout the book is the 'Open Method of Coordination' (OMC). The OMC provides a focal point for those hoping to understand the current social policy coordination architecture. Although there remains debate over the effectiveness of the OMC, this book provides an insight into the potential strength it may, one day, harbour. Through analyses of the practical activities exercised throughout the OMC process, it is possible to understand the extent to which the governance of social inclusion can be 'Europeanised'. The book begins by addressing the core issues concerning member states regarding social inclusion and policy making itself, then continues to offer a more detailed portrait of attempts to achieve true policy coordination. The history of policy coordination legislation is discussed alongside the previous failed attempts to constitutionalise social policy coordination. Additionally, towards the end of the book, the underlying intentions of the OMC are addressed. Pivotal to understanding the process is the fact that the OMC is not a mere mechanism for EU imposed, converged policy outcomes. The author makes an important distinction between the objective of meaningful policy coordination versus the aim of policy convergence. The argument put forward is that the notion of inclusive cooperation and the mutual learning of member states lies at the heart of the OMC process.

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The initial chapters seek to define and contextualise the basic issues surrounding social inclusion and the social OMC. Armstrong notes that much of the literature and research surrounding poverty tends to be conducted within the national framework.

Therefore, statistical information, such as relative poverty indicators set within national income distributions, can be problematic when trying to address the problem at the EU level. For policy coordination to be successful, comparisons based on representative and fair data aggregation are of utmost importance. In addition, in order to understand the meaning of the 'Europeanisation' of policy, Armstrong defines the phenomenon as one which is able to penetrate national systems of governance, one which is politically unifying and one which fosters institution building (p5).

Armstrong emphasises the fact that the OMC process was not intended as a means to impose a 'harmonised European solution' on member states but rather one which fosters a process open to a range of internal and external influences (p3). Openness and inclusivity, alongside transparent means of policy making and strategy - formation, in the form of the creation of National Action Plans which will be later elaborated upon, underpin the process. Through peer reviews and monitoring processes, the OMC is able to exert pressure on member states to deliver substantial, quality policy making. In 2006, the European Council released common objectives for the OMC. Issues of social cohesion and equality were placed at the forefront of the agenda, alongside the need for economic growth and good governance. Emphasis was additionally placed upon the need for transparency and the active involvement of a variety of key actors throughout the policy making process: from design to implementation.

Tension remains over whether the aim of the OMC should ultimately be policy convergence. Possible mechanisms which could potentially be implemented to achieve such an aim would be: voluntary binding policy objectives, peer pressure, structured coordination, legally binding policy objectives (with sanctions) and finally, legally binding regulations. The author argues throughout the book over whether convergence would be the most practical and sensible aim. Unlike in the field of economic and employment policy, there exists no overarching legal document which forms a unitary legal basis for the OMC process. Armstrong convincingly argues that the reluctance of citizens to support constitution reforms has rendered the OMC as "an unwanted child of a marriage of convenience between the social democratic aspirations for European constitutionalism and a liberal constitutionalist concern with limited government" (p255). Although this comment may come across as somewhat scathing, it arguably does adequately reflect the current state of the OMC.

The OMC process hosts joint reports and peer reviews regarding National Actions Plans for Social Inclusion (NAPincls) (p72). NAPincls first emerged as a result of the Nice Objectives. NAPincls were viewed as a way to ensure access to employment, the prevention of exclusion, help to the vulnerable and the mobilisation of actors. States were initially requested to outline major challenges of their country, the strategic approach they intend to adopt and any planned policy measures. In addition, states were encouraged to measure progress using six common 'social cohesion' indicators. Joint reports are thus able to act as feedback loops and also a mechanism through which states are able to elaborate their political priorities. However, Armstrong argues that the peer review process is

one which appears to be more symbolic than substantive. Peer review is "devoid of real meaning" as member states have only 15 minutes to present their report on their country (p175).

However, in spite of such issues, the OMC process remains able to impose obligations and encourage competitiveness between states through the use of several different effective practices. Armstrong describes the OMC architecture as consisting of three core elements: common objectives, indicators, and the mechanism for multilateral surveillance (p89). The notion of "naming and shaming" has also proven to be a useful tool for the OMC process (p171). Although there remains some confusion over whether NAPincls constitute policy strategies or summaries of current problems, they are still an important part of policy coordination. Through the establishment of performance tables, peer review and report requests, policy coordination through the OMC process is able to carry more significant weight. Therefore, through utilisation of such mechanisms, the OMC is able to exert its influence and to encourage states to participate meaningfully in the process.

Moreover, debate remains over the effectiveness of centrally imposed targets. One of the problems highlighted in the book is the fact that EU-wide targets create an atmosphere where some states feel less inclined to push forward with target-orientated policy progression if they feel as though other states will do the work. Consequently, those states who are active in their target reaching efforts can be undermined by the lagging performance of others. Such EU wide targets have ultimately proven risky as they also can trigger short term solutions rather than more carefully crafted, sustainable policies. In response to this issue, the potential benefits of Member State's setting their own "ambitious but achievable" targets were realised and encouraged (p87). The decision to encourage states to set their own targets may be viewed as brave, however it reflects the underlying belief of the OMC process; states should be trusted to be proactive in their approach to improving social inclusion. Ideally, there should not be a need for centrally imposed targets or centrally imposed policy solutions.

Looking forward, Armstrong concluded by offering the following valuable suggestions of measures which could potentially help to revitalise the OMC system. Firstly, it is argued that streamlining issues into broad concepts such as 'social inclusion' may be more of a hindrance than a help. Through separating issues into individual key problem areas, the OMC would have more chance of making meaningful progress. Armstrong continues to argue for more stability and continuity surrounding EU indicators. Consistency is necessary in order to formulate quality policy analysis and comparison. In addition, the intended purpose and content of NAPincls should be more explicit. The role of such documents, be it information sharing or real policy strategies, must be clear in order for them to be utilised effectively. Finally, it is argued that EUROSTAT could potentially play a key role in the production of reports which depict key trends and developments based on the use of common indicators. These recommendations hold significant weight as each one poses a remedy to the aforementioned problems of the OMC process. However, on a more critical and general note, this book was heavily centred upon the OMC process itself. It would have been valuable for Armstrong to give more examples

of issue specific good practice, or more detailed explanations of potential policy coordination practice which could result in positive social inclusion policy outcomes.

Overall, the OMC process appears to hold great potential. Although such potential may not have been fully exercised of yet, Armstrong lays out strong arguments as to why the OMC is a necessary mechanism which has the power to improve social inclusion through the making of effective policy solutions. It is clear that the OMC, in conjunction with NAPincls, has the potential to facilitate meaningful social policy coordination between EU Member States, it just needs to be adequately recognised and built upon. One of the most notable features of the book was the emphasis placed on process rather than outcome. The very notion of 'Europeanisation' is based upon a collective, inclusive and cooperative style of governance. Shared data indicators, shared objectives and shared policy making ideas contribute to the sustenance of a quality, 'European', policy making arena. To conclude, the book scrutinised each of the practical and ideological issues surrounding EU policy coordination to a great degree and offered plausible, effective remedies to the obstacles which currently hinder the OMC and the 'Europeanised' governance of social inclusion.

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