

REVIEWS

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development—Unimportant or Under-Researched?

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Carroll, Peter and Aynsley Kellow, (2011) *The OECD: A Study of Organisational Adaptation*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 320 pages, ISBN 978 1 84542 954 6, £89.95 (hardback).

In 2011, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) turned fifty. Ever since its establishment, the organization has offered its members a forum to reflect on policy issues in a wide range of areas such as trade, environment, taxation, or development cooperation. During these discussions OECD members share among each other information on specific issues and a number of good policy practices are indicated. Given this strong emphasis on policy path finding, the OECD is often referred to as a think tank. However, the OECD is far more effective than most (real) think tanks since its policy recommendations are likely to be followed because the organization represents all major (Western) industrialized countries. As a result, it can be concluded that the OECD is an important international organization (IO). Nonetheless, “the OECD is a much cited but little studied institution and its role in international governance is poorly understood” (Mahon and McBride 2008). Especially compared to other IOs, the OECD attracted only little scholarly attention. As a result, this volume of Peter Carroll and Aynsley Kellow (2011) on “The OECD: A Study of Organisational Adaptation” is a more than welcome contribution to the academic literature.

The volume itself has its origins in a shared frustration by the authors on the absence of literature on the OECD. As a result, both professors came up with the idea to jointly publish a book on the history and functioning of the OECD. In recent years, however, two other volumes appeared on the organization. Driven by the same gap in academic literature, Mahon and McBride (2008) published an edited book covering a wide range of (specific) OECD activities, and Woodward (2009) offered a brief historical, institutional, and theoretical overview on the organization. Nonetheless, compared to both volumes, the work of Carroll and Kellow has a clear added value since it is the first examining the OECD in considerable depth. In doing so, both authors drew extensively upon interviews with key informants (e.g., present and past secretaries-general) and OECD archival documents. Since most of the organization’s working documents are only recently declassified, one can conclude that Carroll and Kellow are likely the first authors offering a complete (and in-depth) perspective on the OECD.

The book itself is divided into fourteen chapters dealing with all important aspects of the OECD’s work. The first sections take a closer look at the institutional set-up and functioning, while other chapters elaborate on important topics such as the accession process or the relations between the OECD and other international actors. To fully understand the current (and future) nature of the OECD, Carroll and Kellow also included five chapters on the institution’s history. Starting with the establishment of the OECD in 1961, each chapter provides the reader a lengthy overview of all important events that occurred during the subsequent decades. With regard to the content, especially the first chapters on the OECD’s institutional setup and

decision making stand out. In an easily accessible language both authors elaborate on the nature and role of (and the relationship between) all important intra-organizational players. Therefore, this book succeeds like no other before in offering a sharp and thorough insight on the OECD's functioning.

The authors also address the international role of the OECD. Throughout the book (and especially in chapter eleven on the relationship with IOs) it becomes clear that the organization plays an important role in global governance. The reason is twofold: First, the OECD is a far more flexible organization than most of its counterparts. As new committees can be established without much effort, the OECD has always been one of the first to work on new (neglected) international problems, e.g., environment in the 1970s. As a result the organization is able to fill in emerging gaps in the international system. Second, the OECD is very successful in distributing and promoting (soft law) principles agreed upon in the organization. In doing so, the OECD largely relies on its network of IOs as the latter are willing to pick up these new concepts, norms, and good policy practices. This is possible because other IOs do not look upon the OECD as a competitor but as an important source of both information and policy recommendations (see also Marcussen 2004). As a result, the OECD upholds strong relations with most important IOs, e.g., the World Bank or the EU. In recent years, however, the OECD's international role is challenged by the lack of involvement of the emerging powers. Especially China, India, and Brazil (still) have little interest in both adopting OECD norms and becoming a full member of the organization. Therefore, chapters eight and fourteen put great emphasis on the organization's enhanced engagement strategy with regard to these countries. On the one hand, Carroll and Kellow argue that one of the major strengths of the OECD is the like-mindedness of its members since this facilitates the confident setting in which all committees operate. On the other hand, the authors also point at the adaptation strength of both the organization and its members. Especially the recent accession of atypical countries like Mexico or Chile proves the OECD can deal without many problems with new emerging powers. As a result, both authors share an optimistic view on a possible (stronger) involvement of China and India (and others) in the organization's work.

As with all books, this volume also has some minor weaknesses. First, compared to most literature on IOs and/or the OECD (e.g., Woodward 2009), both authors fail in providing a theoretical framework. Although Carroll and Kellow give evidence of a number of strong theoretical insights throughout the different chapters, they fail in linking them consequently with the empirical findings. A second and final remark corresponds to the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD. Unlike most OECD committees, the DAC plays a leading international role (on development cooperation). Moreover, the committee holds a quasi-autonomous position within the OECD framework. As a result the DAC is best seen as an IO in the OECD. Therefore it would have been better to dedicate an entire chapter to this unique committee, especially since most literature makes a clear distinction between both institutions (e.g., Mahon and McBride 2008).

Nonetheless, adding all the previous together, Carroll and Kellow published a state of the art reading on the OECD. Given both the prominent and underestimated role of the OECD and the lack of in-depth studies on this organization, this volume is a must-read for all scholars and students interested in international relations. Given the OECD's wide range of activities, this book will also strongly appeal to academics and public servants active in policy fields such as international business or public administration. Moreover, one could strongly hope that this volume will be followed by other publications on the organization.

REFERENCES

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