

UACES Scholarship 2010

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Project Outline

My research project seeks to gauge the autonomous power of the European Commission within the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). Two cases form the basis my research, namely, "Quality in Work", a policy issue addressed under the banner of the European Employment Strategy and "Child Poverty and Social Exclusion", a key item on the OMC/Social Protection and Social Inclusion (OMC/SPSI) agenda. A central impetus at the heart of this project is one of ontological pluralism. Rejecting a zero-sum interpretation of the rationalist/constructivist debate, this study constitutes an original plea for a dialogue across paradigms. Concretely, in effecting this theoretical dialogue, "new institutionalist" theory is employed as primary analytical lens and two sets of causal hypotheses are used to drive this research project forward. On the one hand, rational choice institutionalism (principal-agent theory) offers a number of practical conjectures about the Commission's power to transform the conditions of action of national governments. On the other hand, sociological institutionalism conceptualizes the Commission's transformative power (i.e. the power to constitute the interests and identities of individual agents) through the lens of discourse analysis. Drawing on the influential work of Vivienne Schmidt, a number of hypotheses are set forth concerning both the ideational and interactive qualities of a "transformative" discourse promulgated by the Commission in the context of the OMC.

Academic Achievements

My fieldwork trips to Brussels were the chance to meet national officials, Commission officials, researchers and stakeholders directly involved in the OMC processes I am studying. I collected data using in-depth semi-structure interviews which provided extremely valuable findings for my research. In addition to these face-to-face interviews, I also conducted numerous telephone interviews with respondents based in different Member States. I also collected relevant documentation, including policy documents and NGO campaign literature.

Use Made of Resources

The resources provided by UACES and the European Commission were used to cover the travel costs, accommodation and living costs of my fieldwork trips to Brussels in 2010.

Positive and Negative Aspects

My fieldwork trips to Brussels were a central component of my data collection process. Interviewing key actors not only served to shed new light on the political processes I am investigating but was also an enriching personal experience since it allowed me to develop valuable interviewing skills. The only shortcoming of my fieldwork was the necessity to carry out quite a large number of telephone interviews (instead of having them face-to-face) since many of my interviewees were based in different countries of the European Union.

I would like to thank UACES and the European Commission for generously funding my research project.