

European Objects: The Troubled Dreams of Harmonization

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In *European objects: The troubled dreams of harmonization*, Brice Laurent engages with “European objects” – i.e., the range of entities governed by European policies. The book’s central argument is that making such objects has become a dominant mode of European policymaking. Europe’s “regulatory machinery”, Laurent (2022, 9) observes, “functions on a flurry of material and immaterial objects, some transformed by European policies, others created by them”. Consequently, European objects have become ubiquitous in the daily lives of European citizens. However, in public discourse, they typically only emerge when politicians skeptical of the European integration project point to the tangible consequences of these regulations to simultaneously denounce their absurdity and contest the legitimacy of European interventions. Laurent’s book disentangles European objects from the populist politics of denunciation. Its central objective is to take European objects seriously.

Brice Laurent is a senior researcher at Mines Paris Tech’s “Centre de Sociologie de l’Innovation” (CSI) and Director of the Social Sciences, Economy and Society Department of the French National Agency for Environmental, Food and Occupational Health & Safety. The pragmatist spirit of “CSI Paris” is palpable throughout the book. It is firmly grounded in Science and Technology Studies (STS) methodologies, particularly those developed to follow around scientific and technological objects as they become matters of concern to develop a better understanding of democracies (e.g., Callon et al. 2009) as well as more recent ones developed to better understand markets. Taking European objects seriously – and, consequently, the reasoning and practices of the actors, experts, and authorities they bring together as well as the objects’ materiality – is the book’s central objective *and* methodology. The book builds on and draws together insights from several research projects – some conducted with colleagues – and a thorough reading of secondary literature.

Across 204 pages of text (followed by more than thirty pages of endnotes and twenty pages of references in small print), Laurent traces an impressive number of objects. The objects Laurent attends to are very diverse. They include construction materials, chemicals, financial devices, food products, drinking water, or occupational environments. He follows all of them to “sites of problematization” (p. 12), i.e., sites in which these emerge as a matter of concern, thus further developing a methodology he had described in his previous book, “Democratic

Experiments” (Laurent 2017). Laurent uses sites of problematization as an empirical entry point to explore how, why, and with what consequences policymakers in Europe attempt to transform diverse entities into European objects. He asks: “For the sake of what collective order are European objects problematized?” (p. 15). He unpacks the envisioned collective orders and analyzes the power, authority, and legitimacy that these problematizations rely on. He also draws attention to the undesirable and (un)democratic consequences of European objects and asks whether European objects might be “crucial for envisioning and perhaps rethinking what a desirable Europe might be” (p. 5).

Throughout the book, Laurent shows that interventions on European objects are both the effects of the European objective of harmonization – i.e., the objective of creating a unified regulatory framework across the European Union’s member states to facilitate European integration – and the dominant instrument with which policymakers seek to pursue this objective in practice. Laurent approaches harmonization as a socio-technical imaginary with a “dreamlike quality”, i.e., a “project not always well articulated and at best imperfectly realized by existing practices” (p. 16). He discusses two versions of the dream of harmonization in more detail: a first one involving the creation of markets, in which objects are expected to circulate, and a second one involving science, expertise, and objectivity to exclude some entities from European markets.

Chapters two, three, and four discuss European interventions involving the coproduction of European markets and those European objects allowed to circulate within these markets – both successful as well as unsuccessful ones. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s (2008) work on ordoliberalism, Laurent reminds readers that the vision of creating collective orders through the making of markets gained salience in post-war Europe, eventually shaping the emergence of antecedents to what has now developed into the European Union. Chapter Two focuses on standards for production products, noting that the dominant, though not uncontested, understanding of the appropriate nature of such standards produces an imaginary of a market as an “economy without qualities” (p. 32).

Moreover, Laurent shows these standards to be connected to what he discusses as a twofold “power to disentangle” – a concept that also serves as the title of Chapter Two. On the one hand, this power involves standards that disentangle production products from local sites of production, transforming them into (CE-marked) market objects that can circulate within an economy without quality. On the other hand, this power entails disentangling a sphere imagined as a purely technical matter of market organization from a sphere of political negotiations. Laurent notes that the very legitimacy of European interventions is rooted in the power to disentangle the market from politics and the European Commission’s (EC) “ability to distinguish between the two [spheres]” (p. 39).

Chapters three and four engage with objects such as food products and energy to show that while the European power to act relies on standardizing objects that circulate on harmonized markets, the markets are not necessarily markets without qualities. Harmonizing objects can also endow them with qualities that resonate with people’s needs, expectations, and concerns. Drawing on a notion developed by Susi Geiger and colleagues (2016), Laurent notes that markets can also be “concerned markets” (p. 65), which can reconnect economic exchanges with collective concerns. Laurent discusses food products whose geographic origins are protected or tobacco products to illustrate that harmonizing objects can also pursue policy

objectives that go beyond market integration, such as the development of rural areas or the protection of consumers from particularly obnoxious cigarettes; however, making markets and standards for objects allowed to circulate in these markets is a requirement for extending the power of European institutions. Creating markets through objects is the European *modus governandi*, yet, a mode which makes space for variations.

The following chapters, five, six, seven, and eight, follow objects such as the Euro, chemicals, and nuclear power plants to engage with the second “dream of harmonization”, which involves the ability of European institutions to describe European objects in scientific terms. This ability is at stake when particular entities are excluded from European markets. Laurent asks: are European institutions able to produce facts “deemed scientifically robust and politically legitimate” (p. 94)? Consistent with the first part of the book, Laurent gives nuanced answers to this question.

Building on and extending recent historians of science and STS scholars’ work, Laurent describes different configurations of objectivity at work in Europe. Objectivity in the form of the “view from nowhere”, as theorized by philosopher of science Thomas Nagel (1989), certainly exists as a pervasive ideal – or dream – of what good European policymakers should strive to enable (as Laurent shows in Chapter Eight, in which he discusses stress-testing banks and nuclear power stations). In practice, however, such a configuration of objectivity can barely be encountered in Europe, with the European Central Bank being perhaps an exception to the European norm. In Europe, objectivity tends to take the shape of an “interested objectivity” which grounds both the production of technical advice and the representation of interested parties, be they member states or concerned stakeholders” (p. 106).

Laurent describes several modes of European interventions involving such an interested objectivity. In Chapter Six, he engages with the regulation of chemicals, “regulatory precaution”, and the multiplication of regulatory categories and sites for collective discussion regulatory precaution entails. Chapter Seven discusses the government of European environments by thresholds – “another mode of European intervention whereby [...] the market is not the vehicle for action but [...] the force that has to be kept in check” (p. 148). Laurent asks whether the interested objectivity, which these modes of intervention rely on, could make space for crafting European policies that are “both democratically satisfactory and environmentally meaningful” (p. 159); or is an “interested objectivity” doomed to amplify the voices of those with more power?

In the concluding chapter, Laurent returns to a question he raised at the book’s beginning, drawing together thoughts and reflections that he left in the empirical chapters’ endings. Could European objects also be used to reimagine European integration? Could they be made by different modes of interventions? Drawing on Sheila Jasanoff’s (2011) writings to reframe the stakes of European objects and European democracy, he argues that answering these questions requires the raising of “constitutional questions”, which involve how European institutions “define the conditions of their legitimacy” (p. 186) or how they imagine the nature of European citizens and publics. Would it be possible to rethink European policymaking in such a way that it might still involve the making of markets, without, however, striving to keep the politics of market-making at bay? Laurent’s answers to these questions seem to be a “perhaps” and “it depends”. He suggests that rethinking European organizations around “European objects that matter” (p. 199) that circulate in “concerned markets”

(p. 191) could help to address these questions affirmatively. However, such a rethinking would involve institutional work through which matters of concern could be identified and dealt with and power asymmetries could be addressed.

Laurent's book is a remarkable engagement with policymaking in contemporary Europe. It uses a diversity of European objects to elucidate the major tenets of the European integration project in action, approaching Europe as a particularly interesting case of contemporary liberal democracies, and the dreams, paradoxes, and contradictions of their *modus governandi*. The sheer scope of the objects the book covers and the breadth and seriousness with which Laurent follows them are impressive. Laurent engages with some of the tension in contemporary European liberal democracy, while also suggesting that these might help us to reimagine European integration – and European democracy – from within. The book is firmly grounded in STS; however, it also engages with insights from other fields of inquiry, such as legal studies or political science. The scope of objects and bodies of literature that Laurent covers sometimes comes at a price; in some moments, I was not sure if I could follow all his arguments. I did not find the book always easy to digest; yet, I took a lot of food for thought from reading it.

What I found particularly remarkable was Laurent's very own mode of intervention – or his mode of representing and intervening in European interventions on objects. The book exemplifies that STS methodologies are helpful tools for exploring the envisioning, making, and contestations of collective orders – and their consequences. It belongs neither to the literature genre, which tells us that we are hopelessly captured and lost, nor to those books that envision scripts for building entirely different worlds. It draws attention to the ambivalence of modes of intervention to start to rethink liberal democracies from within. And it exemplifies a place that scholarship could have in such a project.

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