Interview - Michelle Cini

https://www.e-ir.info/2017/02/17/interview-michelle-cini/

E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, FEB 17 2017

Michelle Cini is Professor of European Politics at the University of Bristol, where she has been based since 1991. She has been Editor-in-Chief (with Amy Verdun) of JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, since July 2010 and has held a number of visiting positions, including at the EUI as a Jean Monnet Fellow (1999-2000), New York and Columbia Universities (1999), Nanjing University, China (2008), and Harvard University (2014). She has a particular interest in EU policy-making, organisational reform and executive politics, EU competition policy, and public ethics in the EU. She has published extensively in the field of European Union politics, including From Integration to Integrity: Administrative ethics and reform in the European Commission and the textbook European Union Politics (edited with Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Many EU scholars are quick to respond to change in European affairs. The study of the EU has always been a moveable feast, and the best scholarship will acknowledge that. Particularly in the UK, Brexit is the new boom area for research, though it is of course early days. Research on the EU's crises, whether the Euro crisis or the migration crisis, is now provoking some fascinating research findings. Some of this is published in the academic journal I co-edit, *Journal of Common Market Studies*. The really exciting research and debate is around the relationship between the EU and its citizens, including Euroscepticism and populism. While it builds on existing, well-established literatures, there is also a lot of potential in this sub-field as it covers everything from social movements to institutional reform, cuts across all policy domains, and engages scholars using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Like everyone else I expect my understanding of the world is at least partly shaped by those events that make headline news. When I was younger, during the Cold War, it was hard to imagine anything other than a bipolar world of super-states that I was witnessing at the time. It was all I knew. I suppose the end of the Cold War was the big wake up call for me. The realization that the global order and the international system could shift so dramatically in a short space of time really made me think about politics in a different way.

What do you believe are the most important short and long term implications, for the UK and the EU, of the UK's vote to leave the EU?

All we can do at the moment is talk in terms of scenarios, negative and positive. As someone who voted Remain in the UK's EU referendum, I feel dismay over the direction the UK is taking – towards a so-called 'hard Brexit'. And as someone based in a UK institution, it is difficult not to focus almost exclusively on the implications for the UK, which I believe will be largely negative. But what will be particularly interesting to watch is what will happen to the EU. There is some indication that, rather than tearing the EU apart, a tough Brexit process could serve to encourage the remaining EU27 to commit to the integration process. I think we also need to factor the new US President into this question as well. He too might end up helping (albeit unintentionally) to bring Europeans together. Wishful thinking? Perhaps. We are all in the business of speculation at the moment.

The issue of Britain's 'sovereignty' was a common feature of the UK's EU referendum campaign. Can you comment on the use of the term in relation to EU politics?

Sovereignty has different meanings depending on the context. There is a large academic literature, and a long tradition of theoretical reflection on sovereignty. However, many people using the language of sovereignty in the UK context seemed to conflate the sovereignty of parliament with sovereignty as, basically, national independence. Although the two are inter-related, they are not the same. As for the EU, some EU scholars have emphasized that the EU is not in fact engaged in the substitution of national sovereignties, but rather involves a pooling or sharing of sovereignty.

Do you think there is a disconnect between the EU and its citizens? If so, what steps could be taken to bring the EU and its citizens closer?

I think Brexit has, amongst other things, demonstrated how attempts in the past to deal with the disconnect between the EU and its citizens have failed to solve the problem. That said, this is not just a challenge for the EU, but also for governments of all kinds. The EU is here a reflection of a more general problem. It is not that the problem is a new one, unrecognized in the past. Ever since the early 1990s the EU institutions have been discussing how the EU might engage more with citizens by democratizing, enhancing opportunities for participation, and even – dare I say it – holding referendums. There are no easy solutions, despite what populists will tell you. Clearly, the EU does need to be responsive to the citizens of their member states, but they also need to be, and be perceived to be a solution or a conduit for solutions rather than part of the problem. This means focusing on both delivering quality policies, but also finding a way of explaining those policies to citizens. This is easy to say, but not so easy to do of course.

How have EU institutions attempted to counter criticisms of corruption and mismanagement?

The EU institutions have begun to tackle these issues through a variety of means. They have engaged in reforms of various kind. Some, dating back nearly two decades now, sought to improve accountability in areas such as financial management and human resources. Others, more recently, have aimed to improve EU systems by means of removing red-tape, cutting down on the amount of legislation proposed and drafted, and simplifying existing policies. In addition the institutions have taken some early steps towards making themselves more transparent to EU citizens. They have also introduced codes of conduct for Commissioners and Members of the European Parliament, even if these Code were only introduced as a consequence of scandals of one kind or another. There is recognition that the quality of policies can be undermined by what some, who see them as a secondary concern, term 'process issues'.

What are some of the key lessons that can be learnt from the development of the EU's internal governance and policy-making structures?

I think one of the main lessons we can learn is how difficult it is to be innovative institutionally. Even in the distinctive and experimental context of European integration, reform agents tend to end up recreating what they know, and what is familiar to them. 'Thinking outside the box' is not so easy.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of the EU and international politics?

I would say that it is important to try to find a good balance between your own specialisation and your general interests in EU and international affairs. On the one hand, it is good to have a specific research focus, but this does not mean you should not make links with other sub-fields, perhaps by working with co-authors and in teams. It is also important to reflect on how your research might be interesting and engaging for policy-makers and other practitioners. Yet, having too broad and eclectic a research profile might suggest a lack of focus. Remember to set your own agenda first, whilst remaining open to collaboration with colleagues and aware of the wider policy debates in which your research is sited.

—

This interview was conducted by Jane Kirkpatrick. Jane is an Editor-at-large for E-IR.