

European Lobbies Under Scrutiny

About: Marc Milet, *Théorie critique du lobbying. L'Union européenne de l'artisanat et des PME et la revendication des petites et moyennes entreprises*, L'Harmattan

By Chloé Bérut

European lobbies are said to be constantly seeking to influence political decisions. A detailed study of the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, reveals the range of their activities.

What do lobby groups do when they are not busy influencing the decision-making process? This is the question addressed by Marc Milet, lecturer in political science at Panthéon Assas University (Paris II), in his last book. The author begins with the observation that the vast majority of political science studies only look at interest groups through the lens of their participation in the decision-making process at the European level. Hence, in order to measure their influence, researchers have mainly focused on analysing the various means these groups use to achieve their ends. The book's main argument is that this research omits a large part of what constitutes the reality of European interest groups. It hence seeks to look at the organisation in itself, by observing and analysing the different activities it engages in.

Marc Milet develops his argument based on a monograph of a specific European interest group: the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (UEAPME). The association, created in 1979, was formed to defend the interests of craft and small and medium-sized businesses across Europe. As such, it is one of the European social partners (alongside Business Europe and the European Trade Union Confederation), and participates in decisions affected by the European social dialogue.

A Wide Range of Actions

By basing his work on the case of the UEAPME, Marc Milet shows that we can distinguish four logics that permit a classification of the types of activities European lobby groups carry out. The first, a classic one, is the *logic of influence*, which designates activities that seek to weigh upon European decisions, and are widely documented in the classic literature on interest groups.

The second category is the *logic of maintenance*, which designates all the activities that strive to maintain the UEAPME's position within the system of representation created with other European interest groups. As early as the mid-nineties, the UEAPME was forced to fight for a position as a social partner within the European social dialogue space.¹ One of the issues at the time was to ensure a unified representation of SMEs. In this context, participating in the European social dialogue is considered particularly important, as it allows the organisations involved to take an active part in the decision-making process in the area of social policy. Article 155 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union includes the provision that social partners can initiate negotiations and reach agreements on any subject that falls within their remit and comes under the purview of the European Union.

The third logic, called *promotion*, covers the activities the European interest group engages in to gain recognition, beyond participation in a specific decision-making process. According to the author, this is how one can describe the UEAPME's investment in the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). As a consultative body, the EESC's main activity is to express non-binding opinions. Marc Milet thus shows that the only real reason to approach this institution is likely to be a desire to gain recognition for the organisation as, by definition, the EESC carries little weight in the decision-making process.

Lastly, *relay logic* looks at activities that transform the UEAPME into a European vector, or an agent that encourages the spread of European values, and hence the legitimisation of this level of government. Among this type of activity Marc Milet lists, for example, the UEAPME's actions that serve to share European information with its members, information sometimes directly borrowed from the European Commission, or that transmit messages supporting the development of Europe. The author also classifies active participation in European projects, and the organisation's support for the implementation of European public policy, amongst these activities.

¹ On this question, see also H el ene Michel's works on European employers: <https://laviedesidees.fr/Une-Europe-des-patrons.html>

Remaining Adaptable in the European Sphere

In addition to the new typology of European interest group activity suggested by the author, one of the book's main aims is to question the rationalist viewpoint usually applied to lobbying activities. This perspective tends to present lobbyists as groups with coherent interests and strategies when it comes to exercising their activity at the European level. By looking back over history, Marc Milet shows that this view is extremely reductive. The institutionalisation of the UEAPME has more to do with uncertainty, and is dependent on numerous external elements beyond the control of its members. The organisation was thus primarily formed on the lines of a transnational friendship model, long before it became an organisation with exclusively European aims.

In reality the history of the UEAPME began with the creation, in 1947, of the International Union of Craft and SMEs (UIAPME). This mainly took the form of two major gatherings a year, with no clearly established aims. At that time, the member organisations were little involved in the process, a situation that lasted until the 1990s. This was followed by the slow development of an institutional structure, starting with the creation of an office specialising in European issues within the UIAPME. This developed into the UEAPME as we know it today. The shift in the actors' motivations, and the aims of the organisation over time, show that one cannot analyse the institutionalisation of interest groups on the basis of a theory that postulates the existence of fixed preferences and actors who follow a devised strategy.

The author also uses his analyses of the UEAPME's motivations to counter rationalist claims. While the latter predicate the existence of a strong desire to engage in a process of influence at the European level, Marc Milet shows that, on the contrary, this develops over time, as a result of sometimes highly national considerations. For example, in France, the Union Professionnelle Artisanale (UPA- Professional Artisan Union) developed a policy for entering the European market in the 1990s, in order to enhance and stabilise its position as the third largest employers' organisation at the national level. Thus, at the time, the argument behind the UPA's participation in European activities, via the UEAPME, was to differentiate itself from its competitors who represented SMEs.

Beyond European Decision-Making: the Internal Issues

While the classical literature on interest groups focuses on their role in decision-making, Marc Milet's work highlights the various issues and power plays that occur internally within an interest group. Thus the question of formulating interests is approached from the

perspective of identity, and reveals deep conflicts between the various members of the UEAPME group. Marc Milet looks at three moments of tension during which the position of craft was increasingly diminished to the benefit of the larger SMEs. The last one, in 2010, clearly shows the interest group's strong identification with employers, although its initial vocation was essentially to represent independent craftsmen. Marc Milet analyses this identity shift as the result of the Europeanisation of the UEAPME. The overwhelming disparities between national crafts, as well as the entry into the European social dialogue, seem to have encouraged the construction of an employers' identity to the detriment of the independents.

Lastly, still seeking to better identify the UEAPME's internal issues, Marc Milet shows us how the European environment also affects the way the group is structured. For example, he reveals how, during debates that sought to modify the internal voting process, one of the models discussed was nothing less than the institutional reform adopted in the Nice treaty (weighting of voices according to the number of countries). Similarly, becoming a participant in the European social dialogue has partially transformed the way the organisation functions, as it has had to adapt to new organisational restrictions.

Marc Milet thus sheds a completely new light on lobbying activities at the European level, and his book allows the reader to renew his or her view of this category of actors that is the object of numerous representations. We can add a comment to elucidate the title of the book, as in this case, the critique mainly targets the theoretical perspectives the author considers dominant, and does not seek to denounce the economic forces at work in Brussels. The wealth, the precision and the variety of the empirical sources mobilised, allow us to better grasp the reality of the UEAPME, an interest group that now plays a key role in European social dialogue.

Reviewed: Marc Milet, *Théorie critique du lobbying. L'Union européenne de l'artisanat et des PME et la revendication des petites et moyennes entreprises*, L'Harmattan, 2017. 258 p.

First published in *laviedesidees.fr*, 26 November 2018.

Translated from the French by Renuka George with the support of the Institut français.

Published in *booksandideas.net*, 21 February 2019.