

BOOK REVIEW

Les politiques publiques dans la crise. 2008 et ses suites

ABSTRACT

The book edited by Patrick Hassenteufel and Sabine Saurugger begins with a classic paradox in the study of public policy: while crises are generally perceived as difficult periods capable of shattering existing equilibria, empirical analysis of the Great Recession also reveals significant continuities. Consequently, the book does not merely seek to assess the scale of change following 2008; rather, it asks through what mechanisms a crisis becomes—or fails to become—a driver of change. This reformulation is crucial: the crisis ceases to be an independent cause and instead becomes a set of circumstances whose consequences are mediated by institutions, power dynamics, available ideas, and prior trajectories.

KEYWORDS Crisis · Public policy · Window of opportunity · Change · Continuity · Power relations

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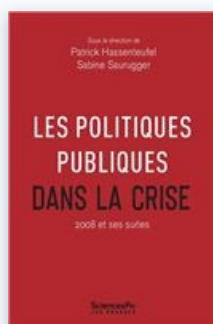
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REVIEWED BOOK

TITLE	Les politiques publiques dans la crise. 2008 et ses suites
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1. Introduction

The volume edited by Patrick Hassenteufel and Sabine Saurugger starts from a classic paradox in the study of public action: crises are generally perceived as difficult moments capable of disrupting previous equilibria, whereas empirical analysis of the Great Recession also reveals strong continuities. The book therefore does not simply seek to assess the extent of change after 2008. It asks through which mechanisms a crisis becomes, or does not become, a factor of change. This reformulation is decisive: the crisis ceases to be an independent cause and becomes a conjuncture whose consequences are mediated by institutions, power relations, available ideas, and previous trajectories.

The proposed framework is explicitly relational. It connects three dimensions that the analysis must consider together. The first is temporal: to attribute a transformation to the 2008 crisis, one must distinguish what began with the crisis from what continued reforms already underway. The second is relational: the consequences of the crisis depend on the resources held by actors, their alliances, their veto powers, and their ability to impose a legitimate interpretation of the situation. The third is multilevel: the same crisis may strengthen supranational constraints while producing more gradual or opposing effects within states. Accordingly, transformation and continuation are not mutually exclusive categories; an institution may acquire new tools without completely overturning underlying power relations.

This analytical framework explains why the book challenges a uniform interpretation of the 2008 crisis. The crisis may constitute a window of opportunity, an accelerator, an argumentative resource, a mechanism for selecting among competing priorities, or a budgetary constraint. Its impact therefore depends less on its intensity alone than on the ability of certain actors to turn an exceptional situation into lasting decisions. It is precisely this political conversion of crisis that provides the common thread running through the ten chapters.

2. Summary of Contents

The first group of contributions shows that the most visible changes appear in financial management and European governance, but do not necessarily amount to a complete break. Claude Dostie Jr and Stéphane Paquin describe the macroprudential turn: after the crisis, supervision no longer focuses solely on the soundness of each institution considered separately, but increasingly on systemic risk and the interdependencies liable to undermine the entire financial system. New tools, stress tests, capital requirements, and strengthened supervisory structures give concrete expression to this shift. Nevertheless, the authors describe a paradigm still under construction: macroprudential policy represents a major cognitive and instrumental adjustment, yet remains difficult, contested, and unfinished. The analytical value of this case is therefore to show that a crisis can change the categories of public action without immediately producing a stabilized paradigm.

The chapter by Sabine Saurugger and Fabien Terpan develops this idea further by examining the economic governance of the European Union. Their study does not attribute the strengthening of rules to the intensity of the crisis. It compares windows of opportunity and shows that the 2009 to 2013 period enabled an alliance more favorable to tightening legal constraints. The crisis operates at this level because it simultaneously alters power relations and the possibilities for alliances. The shift toward more hard law, with more explicit standards, more rigorous oversight, and the possibility of sanctions, therefore illustrates an institutional transformation arising from political work rather than a functional and mechanical response to economic fragility.

Clément Fontan further sharpens this political interpretation in relation to the European Central Bank. The ECB does not merely expand its technical instruments: by intervening extensively in markets and contributing to the monitoring of reforms in countries facing difficulties, it moves away from its original role of maintaining

price stability. However, this shift is not neutral. The chapter highlights the asymmetry between the conditionality imposed on states and that applied to financial institutions, as well as an understanding of the economy that gives a prominent place to market preferences. The politicization of the ECB is consequently the counterpart of its functional expansion: the more decisive its intervention becomes in allocating constraints and resources, the more debatable the boundaries between monetary expertise and political choice become.

David Howarth complements this approach by showing why more regulation does not necessarily mean a decline in banking power. Public recapitalizations and the politicization of finance pave the way for a partial placing of the sector under supervision. Nevertheless, national regulatory choices, the organization of financial systems, and banks' influence continue to shape the direction of reforms. The transformation thus concerns regulatory mechanisms while coexisting with continuities in power relations. This chapter provides one of the clearest illustrations of the book's central argument: the formal scale of a reform is not sufficient to assess the significance of change.

A second set of chapters redirects the analytical perspective toward the state and internal power relations. Denis Saint-Martin examines the expansion of independent fiscal institutions, established to assess the credibility of forecasts and budgetary options. Their significance does not lie solely in the fiscal discipline they embody. They provide a competing source of expertise and thereby challenge the traditional monopoly of finance ministries. The crisis thus changes the structure of bureaucratic authority: it does not simply generate new spending rules, but redistributes the ability to define what constitutes a credible fiscal policy.

Claire Dupuy's study brings out the territorial dimension of this argument. The crisis does indeed strengthen the fiscal constraints imposed by central authorities on regions, particularly through the mediation of European rules. However, it does not automatically lead to political recentralization. In the Spanish, German, and British cases, previous centrifugal tendencies are instead contained or adjusted. This counterintuitive finding is essential: increased budgetary pressure can coexist with the strengthening of political autonomy. To analyze this, the chapter broadens the concept of resources beyond fiscal and institutional capacities alone, incorporating the territorialization of interests, citizens' choices, and partisan resources. The crisis therefore alters a balance of power that it did not create from nothing.

The third group of contributions argues that, in national sectoral policies, the 2008 crisis generally acts more as a vehicle or filter than as the source of change. The case of French defense is particularly revealing. Catherine Hoefler, Jean Joana, and Frédéric Mérand place the post-2008 constraint within a trajectory of reorganization initiated at the end of the Cold War. Budgetary pressure exists, but it is offset by the sector's own institutional and political resources and, in particular, by the proliferation of military commitments and security crises. The case therefore illustrates competition between several crises: the economic crisis encourages spending cuts, whereas security crises reinforce the justification for military expenditure. The outcome cannot be deduced from a macroeconomic indicator.

Louise Lartigot-Hervier reaches a similar conclusion regarding the social protection system, while emphasizing the long history of reform coalitions. Changes after 2007 advance a dynamic that began in the 1990s: the growing role of the private sector in certain areas, more targeted services, changes in financing, and approval of previously blocked programs. The explanation therefore does not rest on a simple crisis effect. It lies in the prior restructuring of alliances and power relations between programmatic actors. The crisis makes certain reforms easier to justify or implement, yet the actors capable of carrying them out and the orientations they defend already existed. This chapter thus provides a clear empirical illustration of path dependence: continuity is not immobility, but the gradual deepening of an established trajectory.

The chapter by Mehdi Arrignon and H           on employment shows even more precisely how a crisis can be politically reinterpreted in order to maintain a previous policy direction. In France, the reform of the active solidarity income survives the change in economic circumstances because government officials had committed to it before the crisis, a lengthy experiment had already generated political investments, and the policy's justifications could be adapted to the new context. The flexibility of these arguments thus makes it possible to preserve the activation approach despite economic circumstances that might have called it into question. Flexicurity follows a similar pattern: subsequent reforms continue the flexibilization of employment relations, even though trade union and political structures shape different trajectories in France and Portugal. The chapter's added value lies in showing that ideas do not survive solely through inertia; they are actively reinterpreted by actors.

Finally, Aur           and Simon Persico explain the fundamentally contradictory effects of the Great Recession on the environment. At the beginning of the crisis, green recovery made environmental protection and economic growth compatible in discourse and in certain instruments. From 2010 to 2011 onward, the return of austerity reversed the hierarchy of priorities and turned the environment into an adjustment variable. Change affected both the objectives and instruments of public action. Yet the European comparison again challenges any simple causal explanation: reversals were less evident where environmental policies were more institutionalized. The crisis thus sorts competing priorities through national institutional filters and actors' strategies of adaptation.

3. Critical Evaluation

3.1. *Strengths*

Taken together, these cases highlight the book's central idea. First, the effects of the crisis differ according to the levels of public intervention: the European level experiences substantial institutional innovations, whereas national policies are more strongly shaped by previous trajectories. Second, change occurs at different depths: it may affect instruments, oversight bodies, dominant alliances, objectives, or explanations without transforming all these dimensions at once. Third, temporality is an essential explanatory factor. A reform launched after the 2008 crisis was not necessarily caused by it; conversely, the crisis may prove decisive by unlocking or intensifying a transformation prepared earlier. Finally, actors do not merely undergo the effects of the crisis: they redefine it, rank it alongside other problems, and use it to justify particular solutions.

This reasoning is the book's main contribution. It avoids two related forms of reductionism: treating crisis as an exogenous rupture that causes all change, or concluding that no effect exists whenever an earlier paradigm persists. Instead, the relational approach makes it possible to understand gradual changes, shifts in power, and partial institutional transformations. It also encourages a distinction between the date on which a policy is approved and the history of its ideas, mechanisms, and supporting coalitions.

3.2. *Weaknesses*

The critical discussion can nevertheless be developed on three points. First, the book's comparative unity is also a source of heterogeneity: the chapters do not always operationalize the notion of change in the same way. Depending on the case, it refers to a modification of instruments, a redistribution of power, a cognitive shift, a strengthening of legal rules, or a redirection of budgets. This diversity enriches the discussion but makes a systematic comparison of the extent of transformations across sectors more difficult. A common framework explicitly distinguishing changes in objectives, instruments, institutions, and coalitions would have strengthened the cumulative nature of the analysis.

Second, placing actors at the center raises a causal question that the volume does not always resolve consistently: how can one distinguish the strategic use of crisis from material constraints that genuinely reduce the range of available choices? The chapters show very clearly that actors possess agency, but this agency is unevenly distributed. The ECB, a finance ministry, a coalition of banks, a region, and a trade union have neither the same resources nor the same ability to determine what counts as an economic necessity. The relational approach would therefore benefit from a more systematic examination of the structural asymmetries that make some interpretations of the crisis easier to impose than others.

Finally, the predominantly European geographical focus lends the volume strong institutional coherence but limits the external reach of its findings. The role of European integration, common fiscal rules, and the ECB is clearly among the mechanisms shaping several cases. A comparison with systems where supranational constraints are weaker would help clarify what belongs to a general theory of crises and what is specific to the European political structure. The opening proposed by the contributors toward other crises, especially health crises, is therefore promising, provided that the same analytical requirement is maintained: not to assume that an exceptional situation produces a rupture, but to reconstruct the sequences, alliances, and instruments that connect crisis to decision.

4. Contextualization in the Literature

The volume stands at the intersection of the sociology of public action, historical institutionalism, and political economy. Its distinctive feature lies in its challenge to two overly categorical analyses of crisis.

On the one hand, it distances itself from approaches that see crisis as an automatic break, such as theories of critical junctures, focusing events, or punctuated equilibrium associated with Baumgartner and Jones. On the other hand, it does not fully adopt institutionalist analyses focused on path dependence and continuity, particularly those associated with Pierson's work. Hassenteufel and Saurugger instead propose a relational analysis: a crisis creates a particular conjuncture, but its consequences depend on how actors interpret it, mobilize it, and build coalitions.

The volume therefore connects with Kingdon's reflections on windows of opportunity, Hall's work on paradigm shifts, and Sabatier's work on coalitions of actors, while giving them a strongly multilevel dimension: national, subnational, and European. Its principal contribution is thus to show that crisis alone does not explain change: it can accelerate a reform already underway, strengthen certain actors, or, conversely, reinforce continuity.

From this perspective, *Les politiques publiques dans la crise* occupies a distinctive middle position: neither a theory of rupture nor a theory of simple continuity, but a theory of the political and relational uses of crisis.

5. Conclusion

In short, *Les politiques publiques dans la crise* does not demonstrate that crises have no effects; it shows that their effects never exist in a pure form. The Great Recession changes constraints, opens or closes windows of opportunity, redistributes certain resources, and provides new justifications, but these changes always pass through preexisting institutional and political configurations. The merit of this volume is therefore to move the question from 'Did the crisis transform public policies?' to a more demanding inquiry: under which configurations, by which actors, through which instruments, and across which dimensions of public action does a crisis truly become transformative? It is this causal and relational shift that gives the book its theoretical significance beyond the case of the 2008 crisis.