International Relations Theory and European Integration*

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Abstract
The explicit effort to theorize about the process of European integration began within the field of international relations (IR), where neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism long remained the dominant schools of thought. With the relaunching of the integration process in the 1980s and 1990s, however, IR scholars have begun to approach the study of the European Union using more general, and generalizable, theoretical approaches. This article examines the recent debate among realists, liberals, rational-choice institutionalists, and constructivists regarding the nature of the integration process and the EU as an international organization. Although originally posed as competing theories, I argue, realist, liberal and institutionalist approaches show signs of convergence around a single rationalist model, with constructivism remaining as the primary rival, but less developed, approach to the study of European integration.

Introduction
The explicit effort to theorize about the process of European integration began within the political science sub-field of international relations (IR), and the

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field of integration theory was, until recently, dominated largely by American students of international relations such as Ernst Haas, Leon Lindberg and Stanley Hoffmann. During the first few decades of the integration process, the literature was essentially divided between neofunctionalists (who theorized integration as a gradual and self-sustaining process) and intergovernmentalists (who emphasized the persistent gate-keeping role of national governments). Although originally intended as general theories of economic and political integration, however, both neofunctionalism and its intergovernmentalist critique were limited in practice to the analysis of the European case, and had little impact on the larger study of international relations.\(^1\)

With the relaunching of the integration process in the 1980s and 1990s, however, students of international relations have begun to approach the study of the European Union using more general, and generalizable, theoretical approaches. The bulk of this article therefore examines the recent debate among realists, liberals, rational-choice institutionalists, and constructivists in IR theory as to the nature of the integration process and the EU as an international organization. Although originally posed as competing theories, I argue, realist, liberal and institutionalist approaches in IR show signs of convergence around a single rationalist model which assumes fixed preferences and rational behaviour among all actors in the EU (including individuals as well as member governments and supranational organizations) and examines the ways in which member governments adopt institutions which subsequently constrain and channel their behaviour. This rationalist approach is now the dominant approach to the study of European integration in international relations theory, I argue, with constructivism remaining as the primary rival, but less developed, approach to the study of European integration.

I. The Emergence of a Rationalist Research Programme

**Realist Approaches**

Realist theory, with its emphasis on material power and the resilience of the state, provided the theoretical underpinnings of the intergovernmentalist critiques of neofunctionalism in the 1960s and 1970s. With the exception of Hoffmann (1966, 1995), however, few realist scholars have made any significant effort to predict or explain the subsequent course of European integration or the operation of the EU as an institution. Neorealist theorists have been even more explicit in their dismissal of international institutions such as the EU,

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\(^1\) A thorough discussion of the neofunctionalist/intergovernmentalist debate is beyond the scope of this article, which deals primarily with IR theorizing about European integration in the 1990s. For representative works and commentaries, see Haas, 1958; Hoffmann, 1966; Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970; Pentland, 1973; Haas, 1976; and Taylor, 1983.
which are generally considered to be epiphenomenal reflections of the underlying distribution of material power in the international system. Thus, for example, in his seminal statement of neorealist theory, Kenneth Waltz (1979, pp. 70–1) attributed the (uneven) progress of European integration to the fact that the United States had emerged after World War II as the guarantor of West European security, leaving the Member States of the European Community free to pursue integration without concerns about security threats from their European partners. Similarly – and entirely consistent with the underlying assumptions of neorealist theory – John Mearsheimer predicted in 1990 that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent return of a multi-polar international system would lead to an increase in concerns about security and relative gains among EU Member States, and place a significant check on the future course of European integration (Mearsheimer, 1990).

In contradiction to Mearsheimer’s lucid and testable prediction, however, European integration has continued its uneven but impressive course throughout the 1990s, including the creation of a European Union and a single currency in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, and the subsequent deepening of integration in the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty which extended the use of qualified majority voting and the delegation of powers to supranational institutions. These developments presented a puzzle to neorealists, according to Joseph Grieco, the neorealist who has devoted the greatest intellectual attention to the study of the European Union. One neorealist response to the relaunching of European integration, according to Grieco, would be to posit the resurgence of the EU during the 1980s as Europe balancing the emerging economic threat from the United States and Japan. However, as Grieco acknowledges (1996, p. 286), the timing of the Maastricht Treaty also coincides with the end of the Cold War, the unification of Germany, and the rise of concern about German economic hegemony among the other Member States of the Union. In this view, the insistence upon Economic and Monetary Union by France and Italy appears not as balancing behaviour, but rather as bandwagoning with a potentially hegemonic Germany, which poses a challenge to both traditional realist and neorealist theories.

In response to this challenge, Grieco posits a ‘neorealist voice opportunities hypothesis’ which, he argues, is consistent with the core hypotheses of neorealist theory, and generates new insights into the ‘institutional rule trajectory’ of the European Union. Specifically, Grieco draws on the earlier work of Albert Hirschman regarding the possibilities for ‘voice’, i.e. the expression of dissatisfaction with existing institutions. When negotiating new international institutions, Grieco argues, ‘states – and especially relatively weak but still necessary partners – will seek to ensure that any cooperative arrangement they construct will include effective voice opportunities’, which
are defined in turn as ‘institutional characteristics whereby the views of partners (including relatively weaker partners) are not just expressed but reliably have a material impact on the operations of the collaborative arrangement’ (Grieco, 1996, pp. 288–9). Where such voice opportunities are absent, Grieco hypothesizes that states will attempt to renegotiate the terms of the institutional arrangement, and may reduce or withdraw their commitment to the organization if such attempts fail. In empirical terms, Grieco argues that the French and Italian entrepreneurship in favour of Economic and Monetary Union can be explained not simply by the functionalist desire by all of the Member States to commit credibly to their joint aim of monetary stability, but rather (or also) by their eagerness to secure a voice through their representatives in the new European Central Bank.

More recently, Michael Mosser (2000) has built upon Grieco’s insight to examine the ways in which small and weak states ‘engineer influence’ through international institutions. Despite the standard neorealist view that small states in the international system are faced with no choice other than to balance their more powerful neighbours, Mosser argues that – under certain conditions, including the ability to ‘get in on the ground floor’ of institutional choice – small states can bind large states into institutional rules that provide systematic voice opportunities for small states, while at the same time establishing norms against the use of certain types of power (such as the use or threat of force). In the case of the EU, Mosser analyses the use of EU institutions by the Benelux countries, which were present at the creation and have steadfastly resisted any change to institutions that provide them with systematic over-representation in the Council – as witnessed most strikingly in the tense final negotiations of the Treaty of Nice in December 2000.

Taken together, the work of Grieco and Mosser focuses our attention on how small states can participate in the design and amendment of international institutions so as to provide themselves with opportunities for voice, while at the same time binding large states into institutional rules and norms that limit their ability to exploit material power resources. However, as Legro and Moravcsik (1999, pp. 41–3) point out, nothing in Grieco’s voice opportunities hypothesis is distinctive to realist theory, with its emphasis on the conflictual nature of international relations, the importance of relative gains, and the ultimate recourse to the use of force – none of which is explicitly mentioned in Grieco’s analysis. Indeed, Grieco’s basic assumptions of international anarchy, the central role of states, and actor rationality are consistent with neoliberal institutionalism, as well as with liberal intergovernmentalism and rational-choice institutionalism, each of which offers more detailed and explicit hypotheses about the determinants of European integration and the
workings of EU institutions. It is to these two schools, therefore, that we now turn.

**Liberal Intergovernmentalism – and its Critics**

Liberal theories of international relations are generally rationalist, as are neorealist theories, yet they generally adopt different assumptions about the preferences of states (particularly regarding the respective importance of absolute and relative gains and the importance of security in states’ calculations of their interests), and about the implications of anarchy for the prospect of international co-operation and international institutions. With regard to the progress and future of European integration, liberals generally argue that, even if the origins of the EU can be attributed to the effects of bipolarity and American hegemony in the West, the future of the EU after the Cold War is unlikely to be as bleak as neorealists argue. Simplifying a large literature, liberals argue that peace is likely to be maintained in post-Cold War Europe because of the rise of democratic governments in those countries (the so-called ‘democratic peace’), or because of the rise of interdependence among European countries which makes war unprofitable among the members of the EU.

For our purposes, the most important and influential liberal theory of European integration is Andrew Moravcsik’s ‘liberal intergovernmentalism’ (LI), as laid out in a series of articles during the first half of the 1990s (Moravcsik, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995). Moravcsik’s theory has been widely read and cited, and requires little elaboration here. Put simply, liberal intergovernmentalism is a two-step, sequential model of preference formation (for which Moravcsik draws on liberal theories of IR and international political economy) and international bargaining (drawn from bargaining theory and from Putnam’s two-level games analysis). In the first stage of the model, national chiefs of government (or COGs) aggregate the interests of their domestic constituencies, as well as their own interests, and articulate national preferences toward European integration. In the second stage, national governments bring their preferences to the intergovernmental bargaining table in Brussels, where agreements reflect the relative power of each Member State and where supranational organizations such as the European Commission exert little or no causal influence.

Although often mischaracterized as neorealist by his critics, Moravcsik’s theory represents a two-fold departure from neorealism, insofar as national preferences are assumed to be domestically generated and not derived from a state’s security concerns in the international system, and insofar as bargaining power is determined by the relative intensity of preferences and not by military or other material power capabilities. In empirical terms, Moravcsik argues that major intergovernmental bargains, such as the Single European Act or the
Maastricht Treaty, were not driven by supranational entrepreneurs, unintended spillovers from earlier integration, or transnational coalitions of business groups, but rather by a gradual process of preference convergence among the most powerful Member States, which then struck central bargains amongst themselves and offered side-payments to smaller, reluctant Member States. The institutions adopted in such bargains, finally, do serve to provide Member States with information and reduce transactions costs, but they do not lead to the transfer of authority or loyalty from nation-states to a new centre, as neofunctionalists had predicted. Rather, Moravcsik argued, European integration actually strengthens national executives vis-à-vis their domestic constituencies, since COGs enjoy a privileged place at the Brussels bargaining table from which domestic interests are generally excluded.

During the 1990s, liberal intergovernmentalism came to occupy a strange but central place within the literature on European integration. Indeed, few scholars other than Moravcsik have explicitly identified themselves as liberal intergovernmentalists, while nearly all American and European students of the EU defined themselves as being against one or other aspect of liberal intergovernmentalism. Oversimplifying a complex literature, the response of international relations scholars was three-fold:

First, Moravcsik’s model of national preference formation has been criticized by a number of scholars who may be inelegantly lumped together under the rubric of ‘reflectivist’, ‘constructivist’, or ‘sociological institutionalist’ approaches. Drawing on the theoretical work of Wendt (1999) and Ruggie (1998), these authors argue that ‘membership matters’ in altering the preferences and even the identities of national elites involved in the process of European integration (Sandholtz, 1993, 1996; Risse, 1996; Lewis, 1998). Liberal intergovernmentalism, they argue, employs a model of preference formation which ignores the endogenous effects of EU membership, thereby ignoring one of the fundamental features of the integration process.

A second group of scholars, who can be assembled under the rubric of institutionalist theory, have generally accepted Moravcsik’s assumptions about national preferences, but have disputed his parsimonious model of intergovernmental bargaining, arguing that existing EU institutions shape and constrain intergovernmental policy-making in ways not captured by liberal intergovernmentalism. Pierson’s (1996) historical institutionalist approach, for example, focuses on the ways in which integrative decisions become ‘locked in’ and difficult for member governments to change, even when gaps open in Member State control over policy outcomes. Similarly, various rational-choice institutionalists have argued that the EU legislative process cannot be understood as a strictly intergovernmental process, but is instead shaped by EU institutions that allow for qualified majority voting, for ‘condi-
tional agenda setting’ by the Commission and the European Parliament, and for an independent causal role for the EU’s supranational agents.

A third group of scholars reject LI entirely, opting for models of EU governance informed by comparative and American politics. Thus, for example, Gary Marks and his colleagues have argued that the EU should be understood as a system of ‘multi-level governance’, in which member governments, while still of importance, have become one among many subnational and supranational actors in a complex and unique system of governance (Hooghe and Marks, 1995, 1999; Marks and McAdam, 1996; Marks et al., 1996a, b). Other scholars have drawn on the comparative politics literature to examine the workings of policy networks in the EU (Peterson, 1995a, b; Peterson and Bomberg, 1999), or to compare the EU to federal systems such as the United States which combine territorial and non-territorial principles of representation (Sbragia, 1994; Leibfried and Pierson, 1995), while social movement theorists have noted the rise of transnational social movements within the European Union (Tarrow, 1998; Imig and Tarrow, 2000). The culmination of this literature is arguably the governance approach to the European Union, ably described in this issue by Markus Jachtenfuchs, and criticized at length by Simon Hix (1998a). In the remainder of this article, I therefore concentrate on the two other approaches identified above, namely the new institutionalism in rational choice (which challenges Moravcsik’s model of intergovernmental bargaining) and the constructivist or sociological institutionalist school (which challenges the rationalist model of preference formation).

**Rational-choice Institutionalism**

The new institutionalism(s) in political science did not, of course, originate in the field of EU studies, but reflected a gradual and diverse reintroduction of institutions into a large body of theories (such as behaviouralism, pluralism, Marxism, and neorealism) in which institutions were either absent or epiphenomenal. By contrast with these institution-free accounts of politics, which dominated American political science between the 1950s and the 1970s, three primary ‘institutionalisms’ developed during the course of the 1980s and early 1990s, each with a distinct definition of institutions and a distinct account of how they ‘matter’ in the study of politics. In rational-choice theory, scholars like William Riker and Kenneth Shepsle discovered that institutions, defined as the formal rules of the game, could induce an equilibrium outcome in games that would otherwise be subject to indeterminate ‘cycling’ among unstable decisions; and subsequent work attempted to model these institutions and their effects formally on the outcomes of collective choices, particularly in American politics. By contrast, sociological institutionalists defined institutions
much more broadly to include informal norms as well as formal rules, and they argued that such institutions ‘constitute’ actors, shaping the way in which we view the world, and a ‘logic of appropriateness’ for human behaviour. These scholars, together with their constructivist counterparts in IR theory, examined the process by which institutional norms are diffused and legitimized among actors in both domestic and international politics. Historical institutionalists, finally, took up a position in between the two camps, focusing on the effects of institutions over time, in particular the ways in which a given set of institutions, once established, can become subject to increasing returns or lock-in effects, constraining the behaviour of the actors who established them (Hall and Taylor, 1996).

Not surprisingly, all three of Hall and Taylor’s new institutionalisms have been adopted by students of European integration – with results that have been reviewed extensively elsewhere (see, e.g., Pollack, 1996; Jupille and Caporaso, 1999; Aspinwall and Schneider, 1999; Dowding, 2000). Interestingly for my purposes here, the initial applications of rational-choice institutionalism were a reaction against both neofunctionalism (which was rejected for its lack of microfoundations) and liberal intergovernmentalism (which was rejected for its minimalist account of EU institutions). Within this literature, scholars such as Geoffrey Garrett and George Tsebelis have established the general lines of rational-choice inquiry in the EU, as well as formally modelling the roles of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) and European Parliament, respectively.2 Simplifying considerably, we can say that some of the earliest rational-choice work on the EU focused on the judicial process and the independence of the ECJ, while later work examined the questions of supranational delegation and agency, as well as the EU legislative process and the agenda-setting role of the European Parliament.

In his early work on the EU, Garrett focused on the European Court of Justice, drawing on principal–agent (P–A) analysis to argue that the Court, as an agent of the EU’s member governments, was bound to follow the wishes of the most powerful Member States. These Member States, Garrett argued, had established the ECJ as a means to solve problems of incomplete contracting and monitoring compliance with EU obligations, and they rationally accepted ECJ jurisprudence, even when rulings went against them, because of their longer-term interest in the enforcement of EU law (Garrett, 1992). In such a setting, Garrett and Weingast (1993) argued, the ECJ might identify ‘constructed focal points’ among multiple equilibrium outcomes, but the Court was unlikely to rule against the preferences of powerful EU Member States, as

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2This analysis omits discussion of Fritz Scharpf’s seminal (1988) article on ‘joint decision traps’ in the European Community, which was arguably the first rigorous application of rational-choice analysis to the EU, but was not followed up by subsequent work in the rational-choice tradition.

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Burley and Mattli (1993) had suggested in a famous article drawing on neofunctionalist theory. Although Garrett’s early work overestimated the control mechanisms available to powerful Member States and the ease of sanctioning an activist Court – resulting in a wave of critiques and empirical studies suggesting considerable judicial discretion (Mattli and Slaughter, 1995; Stone Sweet and Caporaso, 1998; Stone Sweet and Brunell, 1998a, b) – the approach has proved useful in the study of the Court, and rational-choice models of judicial policy-making have become more complex, and have been subjected to greater empirical testing in response to critics (see, e.g., Garrett, 1995; Garrett et al., 1998; Kilroy, 1995; and the review in Mattli and Slaughter, 1998).

Related to this ECJ debate, another group of scholars have focused on the delegation of power to, and agency and agenda-setting by, supranational organizations such as the Commission. These studies generally begin by asking why and under what conditions a group of (Member State) principals might delegate powers to (supranational) agents, and they go on to examine the central question of principal–agent analysis: what if an agent – such as the European Commission, the Court of Justice, or the European Central Bank – behaves in ways that diverge from the preferences of the principals? The answer to this question in P–A analysis lies in the administrative procedures which the principals may establish to define ex ante the scope of agency activities, as well as the procedures which allow for ex post overseeing and sanctioning of errant agents. Applied to the European Union, principal–agent analysis therefore leads to the hypothesis that agency autonomy is likely to vary across issue-areas and over time, as a function of the preferences of the Member States, the distribution of information between principals and agents, and the decision rules governing the application of sanctions or the adoption of new legislation (Pollack, 1997; Tsebelis and Garrett, 2001).

Much of this literature on delegation and agency focuses on the rather arcane question of comitology, the committees of Member State representatives established to supervise the Commission in its implementation of EU law. Although often depicted by legal scholars as the site of technocratic deliberation, in which the aim is collective problem-solving rather than control over the Commission bureaucracy (Joerges and Neyer, 1997), comitology committees actually come in seven different variants with distinct voting rules. These have been shown in formal models to place varying degrees of constraint upon the Commission in its activities (Steunenberg et al., 1996, 1997). In recent empirical studies, moreover, Dogan (1997) and Franchino (2000) demonstrate that the EU’s Council of Ministers adopts systematically distinct committee structures across issue-areas, suggesting that comitology is indeed employed consciously as a control mechanism by Member States. Direct studies of
Commission agency, however, have been plagued by the phenomenon of rational anticipation, whereby an agent such as the Commission anticipates the reactions of its principals, and adjusts its behaviour to avoid the costly imposition of sanctions. If this is so, then agency behaviour that seems at first glance autonomous may in fact be subtly influenced by the preferences of the principals, even in the absence of any overt sanctions. Thus, although there is no shortage of empirical studies asserting an independent causal role for the Commission (see, e.g., the essays in Nugent, 1997), many of these studies are guilty of selecting on the dependent variable for most likely cases of Commission influence. Few make any attempt to identify the conditions for Commission influence, and even fewer attempt to deal systematically with the consequences of the ‘law of anticipated reactions’. Schmidt (1997) and Pollack (1998) have undertaken preliminary efforts to test principal–agent hypotheses through the use of comparative case studies and process-tracing, but these cases do not constitute a representative sample of Commission activity, and the findings remain tentative.

A third and final strand within the rational-choice literature on the EU has attempted to model the EU legislative process, including both the relative voting power of Member States in the Council of Ministers, as well as the variable agenda-setting powers of the Commission and the European Parliament under different legislative procedures. As Dowding (2000) points out, this literature has thus far focused on three primary questions: (1) the utility of power-index analyses for the understanding of member governments’ influence in the Council of Ministers (see, e.g., Garrett and Tsebelis, 1996, and the special issue of the *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 1999, Vol. 11, No. 3); (2) the conditions for the EP’s agenda-setting powers under the cooperation procedure (see, e.g., Tsebelis, 1994; Moser, 1996a, b; Tsebelis, 1996); and (3) Tsebelis’ controversial claim, based on a formal model, that the European Parliament has lost agenda-setting power in the transition from the cooperation procedure to the Maastricht version of co-decision (Tsebelis, 1997; Tsebelis and Garrett, 1997a, b; Crombez, 1997; Moser, 1997; Scully, 1997a, b, c, d). By and large, each of these debates has focused on the proper specification of the formal models in question, rather than on the empirical support for the models, with the result that these debates have been effectively ‘tuned out’ or disregarded by the majority of qualitatively oriented non-modellers in EU studies. In the past two years, however, several studies have appeared using both qualitative and quantitative methods to test the various models (Kreppel, 1999; Tsebelis and Kalandrakis, 1999; Tsebelis *et al.*, 1999), and the recent creation of two major databases of EP votes should increase the
quality and quantity of empirical tests in the years to come. Overlapping with these studies of the EU legislative procedure, finally, are the growing number of rational-choice analyses of decision-making inside the European Parliament, whose party system, committee procedures and voting behaviour have been studied by scholars in legislative studies (Tsebelis, 1995; Hix and Lord, 1997; Raunio, 1997; Scully, 1997a; Hix, 1998b, c; Kreppel and Tsebelis, 1999).

In short, the rational-choice approach to EU institutions has developed quickly over the past decade, beginning with Tsebelis and Garrett and their students in the United States, but spreading as well to rational-choice bastions in Europe such as Konstanz and the London School of Economics, where new generations of students are modelling an ever-growing array of legislative, executive and judicial procedures, and testing these models with both quantitative and qualitative evidence. From the perspective of non-rational-choice scholars, these studies may seem highly abstract, concerned more with theoretical elegance than with policy relevance, and somewhat off-putting in their claim to be doing ‘real’ social science. However, as Dowding (2000) points out, rational-choice scholars have made genuine progress in the past decade in both the specification of formal models and the gathering of empirical data to test them. More generally, rational-choice institutionalism holds the promise of re-examining old neofunctionalist topics like supranational agency, and doing so within a framework that provides theoretical microfoundations, testable hypotheses, and a set of assumptions broadly consistent with other rationalist approaches.

*Liberal Intergovernmentalism Redefined*

At this point in the story, we need to return briefly to Moravcsik, whose 1998 book, *The Choice for Europe*, elaborates on his original liberal intergovernmentalist model, while at the same time bringing that model closer to rational-choice institutionalism in terms of both core assumptions and the addition of an explicit theory of institutional choice as a third step in the model. At the level of basic assumptions, Moravcsik employs

a ‘rationalist framework’ of international cooperation. The term framework (as opposed to theory or model) is employed here to designate a set of assumptions that permit us to disaggregate a phenomenon we seek to explain – in this case, successive rounds of international negotiations – into elements each of which can be treated separately. More focused theories – each of

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3 The first of these databases, collected by George Tsebelis with a grant from the National Science Foundation, is publicly available on Tsebelis’ website («www.ucla.org/polsci/faculty/tsebelis»); the second is part of a larger multinational project on the 1999–2004 Parliament by the European Parliament Research Group, currently underway.

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course consistent with the assumptions of the overall rationalist framework – are employed to explain each element. The elements are then aggregated to create a multicausal explanation of a large complex outcome such as a major multilateral agreement. (Moravcsik, 1998, pp. 19–20, emphasis in original)

Specifically, Moravcsik nests three complementary middle-range theories within his larger rationalist framework: a liberal theory of national preference formation, an intergovernmental theory of bargaining, and a new theory of institutional choice stressing the importance of credible commitments. The first two steps are familiar from Moravcsik’s original (1993) statement of liberal intergovernmentalism, but the third is new, and most relevant in the context of the institutionalist literature discussed above.

Moravcsik begins his discussion of institutional choice by making explicit what had been implicit in his earlier works, namely that supranational organizations might enjoy greater agenda-setting powers (or other forms of influence) outside the five intergovernmental negotiations studied in the book:

While the formal powers of supranational officials and qualified majority voting do not extend to major treaty-amending negotiations – hence the scepticism about their influence over the bargains studied in this book – the everyday legislative process within the Treaty involves pooling of sovereignty in majority voting arrangements and substantial delegation directly to supranational officials. Here there is much variation. In some areas extensive powers of implementation and proposal have been delegated to central authorities. In others, qualified majority voting governs interstate decision-making. In still others, national vetoes and unanimity voting have been retained. How are the various choices of governments to delegate and pool sovereignty to be explained? (Moravcsik, 1998, p. 8, emphasis in original)

Moravcsik’s answer to this question, moreover, bears a close resemblance to the views of a large number of rational-choice institutionalists. After rejecting two competing hypotheses which focus on ideology and technocratic expertise, respectively, Moravcsik develops a parsimonious model of institutional choice. In this model, the pooling and delegation of sovereignty serve as mechanisms to increase the credibility of Member State commitments, particularly in areas where member governments (or their successors) would have a strong temptation to defect from their previous agreements (Moravcsik, 1998, p. 9). In the empirical chapters of the book, Moravcsik seeks to support this claim, arguing that most decisions to pool or delegate sovereignty in the EU’s constitutive Treaties can be understood as an effort to solve problems of incomplete contracting, monitoring and compliance.

My aim in the previous paragraphs was not to provide a comprehensive or critical review of Moravcsik’s book – a task already undertaken at great length
by many of the leading scholars in the field (see, e.g., Wallace et al., 1999) – but rather to suggest that Moravcsik’s liberal intergovernmentalism, which was widely considered as a rival to rational-choice institutionalism only a few years ago (cf. Garrett and Tsebelis, 1996), in fact shares most of its basic assumptions, including the notion that states aggregate interests and act rationally to advance their preferences at the EU level, and that member governments rationally select institutions that are designed to maximize their utility (e.g. by allowing for credible commitments). In empirical terms, moreover, Moravcsik makes clear that his scepticism about supranational influence is limited essentially to claims about informal agenda-setting or entrepreneurship in unanimous treaty-amending decisions, and does not apply to the day-to-day policy-making within the treaties that is the bread and butter of rational-choice institutionalists. In other words, the primary difference between LI and a rational-choice institutionalist approach is one of empirical emphasis, with Moravcsik focusing on the intergovernmental choice of political institutions in IGCs, and institutionalists focusing primarily on the day-to-day workings of those institutions.

More generally, I would argue that liberal intergovernmentalism, rational-choice institutionalist analyses, and even Grieco’s purportedly neorealist voice opportunities hypothesis are all part of an emerging rationalist research programme which is rapidly establishing itself as the dominant paradigm in European integration theory, at least in the United States. Whether we label this research programme ‘liberal intergovernmentalism’, ‘rational-choice institutionalism’, ‘regime theory’ or simply ‘rationalism’ is less important for our purposes than the fact that there exists in the United States (and increasingly in Europe) a community of scholars operating with similar basic assumptions and with few or no systematic differences in empirical findings across the ‘isms’. Within this rationalist camp, we find not only Moravcsik with his tripartite grand theory, but also a large number of scholars putting forward ‘middle-range theories’ about delegation, legislation, political parties, regulation, judicial discretion, bureaucratic agency, and many other aspects of political life that are central to the EU as a polity, and generalizable beyond the EU to other domestic and international political systems. In any event, the differences in basic assumptions among these three approaches are minor in contrast to constructivist and sociological approaches, which question the basic assumptions underlying the rationalist approach, and indeed the very ‘ontology’ of such rationalist studies.
II. Constructivist Approaches

As Jeffrey Checkel (1998) has most lucidly pointed out, rational-choice institutionalists and constructivists generally agree that institutions matter, in the sense of exerting an independent causal influence (not reducible to other factors) in social life generally, and in international relations in particular. However, the two approaches differ fundamentally in their arguments about how institutions matter. Oversimplifying only slightly, rationalists generally define institutions as (formal or informal) rules of the game that provide incentives for rational actors to adopt certain strategies in pursuit of their (exogenously given) preferences. In contrast, constructivist scholars generally define institutions more broadly to include informal norms and intersubjective understandings as well as formal rules, and posit a more important and fundamental role for institutions, which constitute actors and shape not simply their incentives but their preferences and identities as well. In the view of such analysts, rational-choice approaches may capture some part of the effect of institutions, but they are incapable of grasping and theorizing about the more profound and important effects of institutions.

In the field of EU studies, numerous authors (Sandholtz, 1993; Risse, 1996; Jorgensen, 1997; Wind, 1997; Matláry, 1997; Lewis, 1998) have argued that EU institutions shape not only the behaviour but also the preferences and identities of individuals and Member States within Europe. This argument has been put most forcefully by Thomas Christiansen, Knud Erik Jørgensen, and Antje Wiener in their introduction to a special issue of the Journal of European Public Policy on ‘The Social Construction of Europe’:

A significant amount of evidence suggests that, as a process, European integration has a transformative impact on the European state system and its constituent units. European integration itself has changed over the years, and it is reasonable to assume that in the process agents’ identity and subsequently their interests have equally changed. While this aspect of change can be theorized within constructivist perspectives, it will remain largely invisible in approaches that neglect processes of identity formation and/or assume interests to be given exogenously. (1999, p. 529, emphasis added; see also their elaboration on p. 538)

The authors go on to argue that a constructivist perspective is based on a ‘broader and deeper ontology’ than rationalist approaches, and can therefore offer a basis for understanding a broader range of ‘social ontologies, i.e. identity, community, and collective intentionality’ (Christiansen et al., p. 533).

Although taken out of the context of a skilful review of the constructivist literatures in international relations and EU studies, these quotations – and numerous others from the literature – illustrate a tendency among constructiv-
ists to *assume* the existence of certain phenomena (or ‘ontologies’) such as identity or preference change as the starting point of analysis, and consequently to reject rationalist approaches for their purported inability to predict and explain these phenomena.\(^4\) As it happens, Christiansen *et al.* invited critiques from both a reflectivist perspective (by Steve Smith) and a rationalist perspective (by Andrew Moravcsik). Given the thrust of this article – namely that the rationalist perspective has become the dominant one in IR approaches to the EU, and that the rationalist–constructivist divide is the most salient theoretical cleavage in the contemporary literature – Moravcsik’s critique deserves further analysis here.

Constructivist theorists, according to Moravcsik (1999, p. 670), pose an interesting and important set of questions about the effects of European integration on individuals and states, which are worthy of study. Yet, Moravcsik argues, constructivists have failed to make a significant contribution to our empirical understanding of European integration, because – despite their general acceptance of social science and the importance of empirical confirmation of theoretical claims – most constructivists have shown a ‘characteristic unwillingness … to place their claims at any real risk of empirical disconfirmation’. The problem, according to Moravcsik, is two-fold. First, constructivists typically fail to construct ‘distinctive testable hypotheses’, opting instead for broad interpretive frameworks that can make sense of almost any possible outcome, but are therefore not subject to falsification through empirical analysis. Such a failure is *not* endemic in constructivism, according to Moravcsik, but it is a common weakness in much of the literature.

Second, even if constructivists *do* posit hypotheses that are in principle falsifiable, they generally do *not* employ methods capable of distinguishing the predicted outcome from those predicted by alternative (rationalist) hypotheses. In the absence of such methods, Moravcsik argues, constructivists cannot be certain that their ‘confirming’ evidence is not in fact spurious, and that the observed phenomena might not be explained more parsimoniously by another (presumably rationalist) theory. He therefore concludes by encouraging constructivists to focus, not on the creation of more meta-theory, but on the specification of testable hypotheses, and on the rigorous empirical testing of such hypotheses against their rationalist counterparts (Moravcsik, 1999, p. 678).

Constructivists might, of course, respond that Moravcsik privileges rationalist explanations and sets a higher empirical and methodological standard for constructivists (since, after all, rationalists typically make no effort to demonstrate that preferences are *really* exogenously given and *not* shaped by

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\(^4\) For similar claims, and similar rejections of rationalism, see, e.g., Sandholtz (1993, p. 3); Jørgensen (1997, pp. 5–6); Wind (1997, pp. 27–31); Matláry (1997, pp. 206–7); Risse and Wiener (1999).

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institutions). Many reflectivist or post-positivist analysts, moreover, dispute the very project of social science, with its claims of objectivity and of an objective, knowable world, and would reject Moravcsik’s call for falsifiable hypothesis-testing as a power-laden demand that ‘nonconformist’ theorists play according to the rules of rationalist, American, social science. In this sense, the EU debate over constructivism bears a striking resemblance to the earlier debate in IR theory sparked off by Keohane’s (1989) call for reflectivists to develop ‘a clear research programme that could be employed by students of world politics’ (1989, p. 173). As Knud-Erik Jørgensen (1997, pp. 6–7) points out in an excellent review, Keohane’s call became a standard reference in subsequent debates, with some analysts agreeing with Keohane’s plea for a testable research programme, while others adopted the mantle of a defiant Dissent refusing to adopt the standards of a dominant Science.

Within the ranks of constructivist scholars, there remain a substantial number of post-positivist scholars who continue to reject hypothesis-testing and falsification as the standard of social-scientific work, and who arguably construct theories that are essentially unfalsifiable ‘lenses’ through which any outcome confirms the social construction of European identity and preferences. Nevertheless, if constructivism and rationalism are indeed emerging as the defining poles of international relations theory, as Katzenstein et al. (1998) have suggested, and if these two approaches begin with fundamentally different assumptions or ‘ontologies’ about the nature of agency and social interaction, then I would argue that we must necessarily fall back on careful, empirical testing of rationalist and constructivist hypotheses as the ultimate, and indeed the only, standard of what constitutes ‘good work’, and what constitutes support for one or other approach.

As Moravcsik points out, there is no inherent reason why constructivists cannot specify testable hypotheses, and indeed the past three years have witnessed a spate of constructivist works that attempt rigorously to test hypotheses about socialization, norm-diffusion, and collective preference formation in the European Union. Some of these studies, including Hooghe’s extensive study of the attitudes of Commission officials and Beyers’ survey of attitudes among national officials in Brussels, use quantitative methods to test hypotheses about the determinants of officials’ attitudes, including socialization in national as well as European institutions. Such studies, undertaken with methodological rigour and with a frank reporting of findings, seem to demonstrate that EU-level socialization plays a relatively small role in the determination of elite attitudes by comparison with national-level socialization and other factors, or that EU socialization interacts with other factors in complex ways (Beyers, n.d.; Hooghe, 1999a, b, c). Other studies, including Checkel’s (1999) study of citizenship norms in the Council of Europe, and Lewis’s (1998)
analysis of decision-making in Coreper, utilize qualitative rather than quantitative methods, but are similarly designed to test falsifiable hypotheses about the conditions under which international norms are internalized by national officials, and focus on explaining variation in the acceptance of such norms. Such studies represent a significant maturation of the constructivist research programme on European integration, in which scholars like Checkel and Hooghe seem genuinely interested in understanding the conditions under which norms constitute actors, genuinely willing to subject their hypotheses to falsification, and genuinely prepared to report findings in which norms appear not to constitute actors. Above all, such studies promise to engage with rationalist theories and subject their hypotheses to the common standard of empirical testing, overcoming the current dialogue of the deaf among rationalists and constructivists in EU studies.

III. Conclusions

In place of the old neofunctionalist/intergovernmentalist dichotomy, the last half of the 1990s has witnessed the emergence of a new dichotomy in both IR theory and EU studies, pitting rationalist scholars, who generally depict European institutions as the products of conscious Member State design, against constructivist scholars who posit a more profound role for EU institutions in socializing and constituting the actors within them. Is this new dichotomy in international relations theory just a replay of the old neofunctionalist/intergovernmentalist debate under another name, or has the field actually progressed over the past decade? The question is a difficult one, and there is a real danger that the current line-up of rationalist and constructivist schools may devolve into a dialogue of the deaf, with rationalists dismissing constructivists as ‘soft’ and constructivists denouncing rationalists for their obsessive commitment to parsimony and formal models.

Nevertheless, on balance the current state of EU studies in international relations theory seems healthy, and superior to the old intergovernmentalist/neofunctionalist debate, in three ways. First, whereas the neofunctionalist/intergovernmentalist debate was limited almost exclusively to EU studies and contributed relatively little to the larger study of international relations, the rationalist/constructivist debate mirrors the larger debate among those same schools in international relations theory generally. Indeed, not only are EU studies relevant to the broader study of international relations, they are in many ways in the vanguard of international relations, insofar as the EU serves as a laboratory for broader processes such as globalization, institutionalization, and (possibly) norm diffusion and identity change.
There is, however, a second and perhaps more important virtue of the rationalist/constructivist debate in EU studies, which is that both schools are actively challenging the traditional distinction between international relations and comparative politics. Within the rationalist school, Putnam (1988), Milner (1998), Moravcsik (1998) and others have argued that the assumptions of rational choice allow us to model the interaction of domestic and international politics, including the effects of globalization on actor preferences and political outcomes at the domestic level, the aggregation of actor preferences within the domestic institutions of individual states, and the two-level games played by chiefs of government. The new institutionalism in rational-choice analysis, moreover, has allowed IR scholars to import theoretical concepts such as incomplete contracting, principal–agent relations, and agenda-setting to the field of international relations, thereby enriching IR theory and reducing its traditional parochialism and exceptionalism. Similarly, an increasing number of scholars in the constructivist tradition have begun to test domestically derived hypotheses about socialization at the international level, and about the interactions of international and domestic norms.

Third and finally, it seems clear that both rationalist and constructivist analyses have advanced considerably over the past decade, in both theoretical and empirical terms. At the start of the 1990s, the rational-choice literature on the European Union was in its infancy, concerned primarily with the elaboration of formal models in the absence of empirical testing, while the constructivist literature consisted of equally tentative assertions of collective identity and collective preference formation in the absence of brittle, falsifiable hypotheses. By the end of the decade, both approaches had produced more detailed models, testable hypotheses, and at least a few examples of ‘best practice’ in the empirical study of EU politics.

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References


The Governance Approach to European Integration*

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Abstract

This article argues that the study of European integration is divided into two distinct approaches: classical integration theory for which the shape of the Euro-polity is the dependent variable; and the governance approach for which it is the independent variable. An historical and conceptual overview of the approach focuses on the efficiency side of governance and excludes issues of democracy and legitimacy. From a sociology of knowledge perspective, the first part traces the roots of the present discussion back to three bodies of literature, namely studies on Europeanization, regulatory policy-making and network concepts. The second part presents the achievements of the approach: putting EU studies in a comparative perspective, directing attention towards democratic governance and bypassing old dichotomies on the future of the nation-state. The final section evaluates present shortcomings, most notably a bias toward problem-solving, the proliferation of case studies and the lack of a coherent theoretical perspective.

Introduction

In the last decade, the study of European integration has definitely come through the ‘dark ages’ (Keohane and Hoffmann, 1991, p. 8) of the 1970s and

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early 1980s, a term that seems to be justified more with reference to the general mood prevailing at the time but which does not show up in time series of macro-quantitative data on the EU’s development (Wessels, 1997, p. 285). In any case, since that period the quantity of scholarly work has increased considerably, theoretical issues rank high on the agenda of the sub-field and a number of substantive discoveries have been made. Still, the field is in rapid development and has a far from consolidated status with established theories, methods and a broadly consensual corpus of general knowledge and propositions. This article attempts to give an overview of the governance approach that has played an important role in the vitalization of European integration studies. Although it does not seek to discuss the concept of governance itself, governance can be understood as the intentional regulation of social relationships and the underlying conflicts by reliable and durable means and institutions, instead of the direct use of power and violence (Zürn, 1998, p. 12). An even more straightforward definition of governance is to regard it as the ability to make collectively binding decisions, although in this case the definition of governance comes close to that of politics. The article is deliberately one-sided in that it looks only at the efficiency side of governance and for reasons of space entirely excludes the responsibility side, i.e. the question of democratic and legitimate governance. The argument proceeds in three steps. The first part traces the roots of this approach on the basis of a sociology of knowledge perspective, the second presents a more general overview and synthesis of the approach, and the third contains a critical evaluation and an outlook for the future.

I. From Polity-Making to Governance

Conceptual Roots

The early phase of European integration studies was characterized by the search to understand the nature of the Euro-polity and the causes of its development (Haas, 1964, 1968; Hoffmann, 1966; Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970, 1971). In this respect, the 1960s saw a lively debate between two theoretical orientations, neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism. Whereas neofunctionalism saw the main dynamics of European integration in a broad social process of modernization, the rise of technocracy and what we today would call ‘globalization’, intergovernmentalism – while not denying the importance of these factors – insisted that nation-states would not adapt smoothly to these social changes but that their reactions were shaped first and foremost by the competitive dynamics of the anarchical international system.

After its leading scholar had declared its ‘obsolescence’ (Haas, 1975), regional integration theory vanished from scientific discussion. Students of
regional integration directed their attention to other fields. The fundamental ideas of neofunctionalism proved to be extremely fruitful for other fields of research, symbolized by figures such as Joseph Nye for interdependence theory (Keohane and Nye, 1977), John Gerard Ruggie for regime theory (Ruggie, 1975) or Philippe Schmitter for neocorporatism (Schmitter, 1974). Others, such as Leon Lindberg, left the international realm and directed their attention towards domestic issues, such as the governance of the American economy (Campbell et al., 1992) or value change in western societies (Inglehart, 1977).

Hence, European integration studies appeared moribund in the mid-1970s. The emerging polity that had been so exciting both politically and scientifically seemed to have lost its momentum and its transformative power in the European state system. The standard rules of international relations seemed to apply and govern the relations between states in the European Union (EU) as well as elsewhere in the world. From this perspective, European integration was no more than a sub-field of the study of international relations and international organization.

However, research on European integration declined only if seen from the perspective of international relations theory. Scholars who were not interested in the possibility of a fundamental transformation of the international system but simply fascinated by the actual working of the new European institutions increasingly dominated the field. A major work from this perspective is ‘Policy-Making in the European Community’ (Wallace et al., 1977), now in the fourth edition (Wallace and Wallace, 2000).

This policy-oriented perspective on the EU was clearly dominant in the literature of the 1970s and 1980s. Without even attempting to claim comprehensive coverage of this period, three issues were continuously present in the debate and led to a substantially better understanding of the actual functioning of the EU system. These are:

– comprehensive treatments of single policies or policy fields, such as Rehbinder and Stewart’s monograph on environmental policy (Rehbinder and Stewart, 1985) or Puchala’s study on tax harmonization (Puchala, 1984);

– public opinion studies: this is a legacy of neofunctionalism which had claimed that the superior problem-solving capacity of the new European institutions would lead to a reorientation of individual loyalties. Even after the demise of neofunctionalism, it continued because of the more general argument that any political system depends on public support for the maintenance of its stability and effectiveness. Following the pioneering efforts of Inglehart (Inglehart, 1971), therefore, work in this area has been characterized by continuity and steadiness, in particular following the establishment of the Eurobarometer programme which provides for regular standardized opinion
polls in all EU Member States (Reif and Inglehart, 1991). The most important discovery of this literature is the existence of a ‘permissive consensus’ which characterized attitudes towards the EU since the 1960s but disappeared in the early 1990s.

– studies of EU politics, mainly parties and elections: this literature boomed around 1979, when the first direct elections to the European Parliament were held. The main question at the time was whether the new opportunity structure created by the elections would lead to the emergence of genuine European parties. On the whole, the ideological proximity on the left/right scale did not correlate with similar positions vis-à-vis the institutional set-up of the EU. In other words, the European party system is shaped by a dual cleavage (‘left/right’ and ‘pro-/anti-European’) that makes transnational coalitions difficult (Hix and Lord, 1997). Work on European elections has continued since the 1970s (Auchet et al., 1986; Lodge, 1986, 1990, 1995; Niedermayer and Schmitt, 1994) and since then has confirmed that European elections are ‘second-order by-elections’ with a low overall turnout.

– outstanding individual works, such as Weiler (1981, 1982) or Scharpf (1988). Weiler starts from the observation that the predictions of the two past grand theories of European integration – neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism – are both only partially correct. Neither has the EU moved in a more or less linear fashion towards centralization, nor has it degenerated into a classical international organization. Weiler claims that the presence of both centralization and stalemate is explained by two institutional mechanisms that balance each other, namely a supranational juridical system and a decision-making system based on unanimity. Scharpf starts from the same observation, but argues that the EU systematically produces suboptimal policy outcomes because of the ‘joint-decision trap’, an institutional configuration which is characterized by the representation of the institutional self-interests of Member State governments in European decision-making, and the unanimity rule.

In sum, the 1970s and the 1980s should not easily be dismissed as a lost era in the study of European integration just because grand theories in international relations had reached a dead end, and emphasis had moved to other issues. These two decades were full of empirical discoveries and yielded theoretical insights upon which present scholarship still builds. What may explain the bad reputation of this phase is its lack of theoretical focus – but not necessarily of theoretical interest. It did not have a common question that served as a focal point for competing theories and gave rise to substantive debates. Scholarship became fragmented and remained unconcerned with ‘big questions’.

At the same time, normalization gained ground. Studies of party systems, electoral behaviour or policy-making that are part of the established normal science of the study of domestic political systems were increasingly carried out.
with reference to the European Union. The same questions were asked that were asked elsewhere without ever turning to the fundamental issue of whether the basic categories of the sub-discipline of international relations, the nation-state and the anarchical international system – were still in place.

This started to change in the early 1990s. The internal market programme, launched in 1985, had given new political impetus to the stagnating integration process. This had two effects. On the one hand, it served as a stimulus for the question of classical integration theory and a renewed controversy surrounding the old issue of how the development of the Euro-polity could be explained (cf. Moravcsik, 1991 and Sandholtz and Zysman, 1989, for early statements of modern intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism respectively).

On the other hand, a different question gained ground. As the Euro-polity grew more and more important, it became more interesting for researchers who were not genuinely interested in the European integration process as such, but had very different specializations such as comparative politics or policy analysis. In the latter field in particular, the development of the European Union seemed to abolish the conditions for an established division of labour within political science according to which students of domestic and comparative politics, on the one hand, and students of international relations on the other, dealt with rigidly separated fields of inquiry (Hix, 1994; Hurrell and Menon, 1996). Whereas the first had to do with matters within one or more states, the latter were concerned with what happened between states and remained largely unconcerned with domestic affairs.

True, there had been pioneering attempts to bridge the gap between the two camps of political science, raising questions about the impact of the international system on economic policy-making in different states (Gourevitch, 1978; Katzenstein, 1978, 1985). On the whole, however, they remained in a minority.

This was possible because, despite a growing literature on international interdependence, the assumption was that the external and internal relations of states were neatly separated. In other words, the idea that states were internally and externally sovereign remained at least a useful ‘as if’ assumption on the basis of which a large body of substantive research could be produced. In the European Union after 1985, this assumption could no longer be upheld. The integration process blurred the distinction between domestic politics and international relations, and brought into question the assumption of the internally and externally sovereign nation-state. In the fast-growing literature on the impact of the European Union on domestic affairs of its Member States, three major lines of thought emerged. These dealt with the Europeanization of policies and politics, the rise of regulatory policy-making, and the emergence
of a new mode of governance. Whereas the first two developed more or less simultaneously, the third joined in later.

At first sight, these lines of thought and the individual works that are part of them appear to deal with a highly diverging range of issues. They share, however, a common preoccupation which is entirely different from classic integration theory. Instead of asking how and why the Euro-polity came into existence, they take it as given, and look at the impact of the Euro-polity on national and European policies and politics. To put it differently: in classic integration theory, the Euro-polity is the independent variable, whereas in the governance literature it is the dependent one.

Europeanization

The literature on the Europeanization of policies and politics started from the empirical observation that by no stretch of analytical imagination could political processes and policy-making in an EU Member State now be adequately understood without taking into account the influence of the EU. From this starting point, a number of paths of inquiry developed that are not mutually exclusive and indeed are partly overlapping.

Two interrelated major concerns are characteristic of this type of literature. The first is an attempt to arrive at a broad empirical assessment of the degree of Europeanization of public policy across time and sectors (Green Cowles et al., 2001; Schmidt, 1999). In this context, Europeanization is understood as the degree to which public policies are carried out either by the Member State alone, jointly by Member State and EU, or exclusively by the European Union. Several of these assessments are based on a scale originally developed by Lindberg and Scheingold (1970) (cf., for instance, Schmitter, 1996). This scale ranges from 1 (exclusive domain of Member State) to 5 (exclusive Union competence). The overall impression from this literature is, first, that over time and after an initial push of Europeanization most policy fields remain stuck somewhere between 3 and 4. Only in very few areas such as foreign trade policy has the EU has achieved exclusive competence (i.e. a value of 5 on the Lindberg-Scheingold scale). This is not an indicator of the partial failure of integration, but on the contrary of its maturation. An average approximating a value of 5 would amount to a centralist state which is neither likely nor desirable. The present level is by and large comparable to that observed in federal systems but with a different distribution of individual scores, most notably in the field of foreign and security policy.

Second, variation between policy sectors is still huge. Hence, there is no uniform trend towards an ever increasing Europeanization of policy-making as could be inferred from early neofunctionalist theorizing (Haas, 1964). Instead, we find joint policy-making in most fields with no signs of this being only a
transitory stage towards complete Europeanization. On the contrary, joint policy-making seems to be both a general and a fairly stable pattern.

The second concern was with the substance of policies. Although this was often not set out explicitly, this type of literature had a distinct normative concern, namely the fear that national systems of regulation that were perceived as guaranteeing high standards of environmental, social or consumer protection or other valuable achievements were jeopardized by European integration. The reason for this assumption was the functioning of the EU’s decision-making process. As most of the decisions were (and still are) taken by unanimity either *de jure* or *de facto*, it was reasonable to assume that outcomes reflected the lowest common denominator or the position of the least advanced Member State. This becomes problematic in particular if seen in conjunction with the observation above. If an increasing number of policies are at least partly governed by the EU in addition to the Member State and EU decisions are taken at the lowest common denominator level, it follows that in high-standard countries an increasing number of policies are in danger of harmonization towards the bottom.

Theoretical arguments and empirical observation lead to a complex picture with no clear tendency yet visible. Empirical studies have shown that the assumption of a general trend of harmonization towards the bottom is untenable. In the first place, the Europeanization of policy-making does not even lead to increasing uniformity, as one might perhaps expect. On the contrary, European policies present themselves as a ‘patchwork’ (Héritier, 1996), a complex mixture of different policy-making styles, instruments and institutions. The process at work is less one of intentional and detailed harmonization but of ‘regulatory competition’ (Héritier *et al.*, 1996).

Second, if seen together, European policies vary in terms of problem-solving capacity and effectiveness (Scharpf, 1997, 1998). In some fields, the EU was able to adopt policies even beyond those of the most advanced Member States (Eichener, 1997). At present, a number of partial theories seek to explain the observable empirical pattern of how the EU was able to escape from deadlock (Héritier, 1999). They deal with negative *v.* positive integration (Scharpf, 1996), product *v.* process regulation (Rehbinder and Stewart, 1985), regulatory *v.* distributive policies (Majone, 1993), the availability of a credible exit option (Genschel, 2000) or the institutional transformation of conflicts and preferences (Grande and Jachtenfuchs, 2000). Even if one has no fundamental doubts about the possibility of achieving generalizable knowledge about policy processes (Mayntz, 1980), the available empirical evidence and the theoretical explanations to hand seem to indicate that there are no simple links between the EU’s activity in a given policy area and the quality of policy outcomes.

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This type of research can be traced back to the work of a single author: Giandomenico Majone. Starting in the early 1990s, Majone has systematically put forward theoretical arguments and empirical evidence that the European Union is what he calls a ‘regulatory state’. Although his theory has been perceived largely as positive, it has a number of normative consequences that are probably more important than the analytical implications. In addition, Majone’s conceptualization of the EU provided a fresh look at old institutions and opened up new possibilities for comparison.

In the first place, conceiving of the EU as a regulatory institution cuts across the dichotomies of the neofunctionalism v. intergovernmentalism debate in classic integration theory. It leaves aside the latter’s concern with the driving forces of integration and looks at policy outcomes from a specific perspective. Regarding the EU as an instance of ‘regulatory federalism’ (Majone, 1992) thus provides a solution to the intriguing $n=1$ problem of integration theory by comparing it to other (federal) regulatory systems such as the US. It also adopts the analytical perspective of the governance approach as outlined above by asking how the type of polity impacts on the policy adopted.

Majone’s argument is that for a number of reasons, the EU is particularly well suited to regulatory policy-making, whereas at the same time it is ill equipped to deal with distributive or redistributive issues. The first reason is straightforward and simple: as the EU’s budget is small compared to a federal state, policy-makers at the centre (particularly in the European Commission) will propose regulatory policies out of their institutional self-interest in order to increase their power and influence. Regulatory policies do not require substantial financial commitment from public authorities because they put the financial burden of regulation on the addressees of regulation, i.e. mostly on private firms. Regulatory policy-making is by no means conflict-free because private actors may strongly oppose such regulation by referring to competitive pressures (as in the case of car emission standards). In general, however, the level of conflict to be expected is much lower than in the case of distributive or even redistributive policies where winners and losers are often easily visible and find themselves in a confrontational zero-sum game.

Second, the political goal of creating a European market requires a substantial degree of regulatory activity. In this view, markets are not self-constituting and self-stabilizing, but require constant regulation in order to constitute and maintain them. As a result, the Commission 1985 White Paper was by no means deregulatory in the sense of simply abolishing regulations but amounted to a massive reregulation at the European level (Majone, 1990). Again, this is no accident but is rooted in the institutional structure of the European Union. In the EU, a unified economy co-exists with a fragmented
political system in which each Member State has an incentive to defect from European legislation in order to obtain benefits for its own population. In this situation, an institution insulated from political pressures, such as the European Commission, is particularly well suited to implement credible commitments for market preservation (Majone, 1995).

Third, the type of policy normally required in the European market is characterized by a high degree of specialized technical knowledge (e.g. in the field of medical drugs). Here, markets are best served by an efficiency-oriented policy that is best provided by experts independent of political pressure. Behind this is the idea that only in this case may policies achieve the optimal level of collective welfare, whereas political pressure typical of democratic institutions is likely to favour particular interests. Here, the EU institutions and in particular the Commission, the Court and most notably the newly-established regulatory agencies are good examples of an ‘independent fourth branch of government’ or of ‘non-majoritarian institutions’ (Majone, 1994, 1996). In addition, the structural problems of democracy at the European level and the somewhat weak legitimacy provided by the European Parliament make the EU an ideal candidate for efficiency-oriented regulatory policies. Efficiency-oriented policies, the argument says, require at best a weak degree of democratic control because they aim at Pareto-efficient solutions that are in the interest of everyone. Redistributive policies, on the other hand, are by definition not Pareto-efficient. As they make some people, groups or states better off at the expense of others, these policies require a high degree of democratic legitimacy that cannot be provided by the EU. Hence, the EU should concentrate on (efficiency-oriented) social regulation and leave (redistributive) social policy to the Member States (Majone, 1993).

By this point at the latest, the normative implications of the theory become clear. The theory of the EU as a regulatory state not only seeks to understand regulatory growth in the European Union as a function of its institutional structure. At the same time it prescribes a particular institutional model for the EU as a response to the functional requirements of transnational markets, solutions to the problems of credible commitments and structural problems of democratic legitimacy. Contrary to most of the Europeanization literature, it does not confine itself to taking stock of the multitude of patterns, structures, ideas, and processes of European policy-making, but provides a yardstick for assessing the development of the Euro-polity beyond the old dichotomies of ‘federal state’ and ‘intergovernmental organization’.

**Network Governance**

In the policy-analytic literature of the last decade, ‘networks’ is one of the most frequently used terms. With its emphasis on informal, loose structures that
extend across and beyond hierarchies, the network concept appeared particularly well suited to grasp the essence of multi-level governance in the European Union. The network concept seemed to be the main opponent of intergovernmentalism which stressed clear hierarchies and privileged channels of access. In this respect, the network metaphor became a fruitful heuristic device for empirical analysis that considerably increased empirical knowledge about the actual working of EU policy-making at the micro-level, despite criticisms of its fuzziness (e.g. Börzel, 1998).

In the first place, applying network analytic concepts to the study of the EU is another welcome attempt at seeing the EU in a comparative perspective. It appears that, on the whole, the fragmented and fluid institutional structure of the EU and the lack of a strong power centre leads to an increase of channels of access and a larger variation of participants in the policy-making process as compared to governance systems in territorial states. But here, as in so many other fields of inquiry on the EU, we lack systematic and quantitative overall evidence.

A second branch of literature does not look at particular patterns of relationships between social actors in the tradition of socio-metric analysis, but regards networks as a particular mode of governance between hierarchy and anarchy or markets. Benz in particular (1998, 2000) has argued that networks are characterized by a loose coupling of their constituent elements. Hierarchy, on the one hand, is characterized by rigid links between constituent elements, and markets, on the other hand, by no coupling at all. As a result, networks would be particularly well suited to the highly fragmented and decentralized institutional structure of the EU. As a prediction, it follows that networks should be more characteristic for the EU than for the average Member State. In addition, the prevailing mode of network governance in the EU offers an explanation as to why the EU has managed to escape the ‘joint-decision trap’ (Scharpf, 1988). In essence, this is possible because in network governance, negotiators have relatively flexible mandates from their constituencies, whereas in more hierarchical systems such as German federalism, their negotiating position is much more rigid due to ‘narrow coupling’ with their constituencies.

A variant of this literature has an even broader view of network governance: it is characterized by ‘consociation’ as the organizing principle of political relations on the one hand, and the pursuit of individual interests (as opposed to the common good) as the constitutive logic of the polity (Kohler-Koch, 1999, p. 23). Thus, it is not only an analytical concept but also a political ideology, a kind of micro-constitutionalism of the European Union, because it starts from the assumption developed in modern systems theory (Luhmann, 1995) that society is constituted by a number of sub-systems which largely function according to their own autonomous logic. For efficiency as well as for
normative reasons, the autonomy of these sub-systems should be respected. Hierarchical governance in such a setting is not a very promising endeavour. If one adds territorial sub-systems to this perspective, one has an exact image of the European Union. Although this approach is still at an early stage – as is the case with most of the works reviewed above – it has the great advantage that it moves away from the proliferation of case studies on microscopic policy fields which only complicate our knowledge of the EU rather than simplifying it in order to discern characteristic features.

II. Critical Evaluation

Achievements

Much of the new dynamics in the study of European integration in the last decade is due to its governance orientation. This is not to deny that the question of classical integration theory (which forces and actors account for the development of the Euro-polity?) has not also seen a major development, driven notably by the controversy surrounding Andrew Moravcsik’s (1998) liberal intergovernmentalist analysis of constitutional bargains. However, whereas the latter has a narrow focus, the former is much broader in orientation. This is both its strength and its weakness, as the following section claims.

The move in the analytical focus from polity development to governance has two important implications. First, it considerably broadens the field of inquiry and invites contributions from other sub-disciplines of political science, most notably from comparative politics, policy analysis and increasingly from political theory (Hueglin, 1999; Schmalz-Bruns, 1999; Weale and Lehning, 1997; Weale and Nentwich, 1998). As a result, the study of European integration diffuses into a number of sub-fields of political science with no particular interest in the EU as such. European integration has become a part of normal politics in a wide variety of issues and hence has to be taken account of by those working on these issues. With European integration becoming such a cross-cutting theme, its study hardly has any analytical core any longer. Political theory, electoral studies, interest group behaviour and policy analysis all look at the EU from conceptual angles which are so different that the results are hard to communicate beyond the boundaries of the respective sub-discipline. As a result, European integration as a coherent field of study is disappearing. The old battles of the past between grand theories such as neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism still continue, but they have lost their structuring force because they are of interest to only a small fraction of those studying the EU.

This is not a bad development. On the contrary, it is a sign of maturation and normalization, just as there is no theory of American, French or German
politics and no sub-discipline for the study of one’s own political system (at least in the eyes of some). It also alleviates the old \( n=1 \) problem that has plagued students of European integration for so long. As long as one takes into account the differences in the structure of the polity, there is no problem in comparing, say, patterns of interest intermediation or environmental policy-making in the US and the EU.

The second consequence is a certain disjuncture between American and European scholarship, with the former focusing more on classical integration theory and the latter more on the patterns and transformation of governance. This is easily explained by differing degrees of exposure to the object of inquiry. From a European perspective, the emergence of a supranational system that interferes in almost all aspects of political life is hard to deny. The consequences are also important not only for political scientists but for citizens. What from the outside may look like a rather obscure area interesting only to a handful of policy specialists (such as health and safety measures in the food sector) becomes an issue of public debate with constitutional implications if seen from inside (Joerges and Neyer, 1997).

To some degree, this is again a normal effect: interest in details decreases with distance from the object of study. Two points are, however, worth mentioning. First, there is no consensus as to whether health and safety measures in the food sector are a minor policy issue or a major constitutional question. Those who think it is such a question and who on the whole believe that the EU has developed into a political system with a constitution of its own are mostly located within Europe – but not all European scholars share this view. The health and safety example is one of a number of similar issues. Thus, it may seem that perhaps the most exciting and most important aspect of European integration – namely the transformation of traditional nation-states into constituent units of a new transnational political system that is not going to become a state – is largely overlooked from the outside. Second, this is not necessarily the sign of a comparative advancement of European scholars. There is also the risk of substantial parochialism.

On the whole, the governance approach to European integration (cf. the review by Hix, 1998) has in the last three decades developed into a strong alternative to classical integration theory, both in terms of quantity and quality. The main growth period has been the 1990s because of the increasing intermingling of European and domestic affairs. Looking at governance in the European Union is not a competing approach to classical integration theory but a complement. Classical integration theory and the governance approach ask two different but complementary questions, the former on the causes and outcomes of polity development, the latter on forms, outcomes, problems and development paths of governance in the Euro-polity.
Like all dichotomies, this is a simplified image. Neofunctionalism, to take a prominent example from classical integration theory, has had a built-in feedback loop between polity development and governance: precisely because, under the conditions of internationalization and industrialization, governance by the EU was supposed to have a superior problem-solving capacity as compared to governance by the nation-states, social actors were supposed to contribute to the further strengthening of the Euro-polity (Haas, 1964). Still, the basic research questions of the two branches of European integration studies are different. In the first case, the Euro-polity is the *explanandum*, in the second, it is the *explanans*.

The governance perspective considerably enlarges the perspective of looking at the EU as compared to classical integration theory with its strong international relations flavour. Simple as this may be, this is perhaps its most important effect. The fundamental concern of international relations theory is the question whether, to what degree and how international anarchy can be overcome. This is an extremely important question because it concerns the conditions for peaceful, non-violent relationships in a horizontally organized environment with no supreme authority and with no monopoly of the legitimate use of force.

Today, it is all too easily forgotten that classical integration theory began by trying to offer both a political and a scientific alternative to realism: regional integration in general and European integration in particular were seen as processes to overcome the anarchical structure of the international system, at least in limited geographical domains, and were supposed to create durable zones of peace beyond unstable balance-of-power arrangements (Nye, 1971). But this analytical perspective also has the disadvantage of elevating the question of the future of the sovereign nation-state to a fundamental issue of peace and war against which the problems of the European welfare state are just minor technical questions.

Again, this is a stark statement that does injustice to modern approaches of classical integration theory such as liberal intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik, 1998) or ‘multi-level governance’ (Hooghe and Marks, 1999). But the main issue remains: just because classical integration theory is engaged in a debate about the future of the sovereign state with respect to international institutions, it is less interested in a number of important questions that are at the core of the governance approach.

Most prominent in this respect is the question of the possibilities of democratic and legitimate governance beyond the nation-state (both in its analytical as well as its normative dimension) which has been neglected here because a fair treatment would require a separate paper. Second is the concern with the problem-solving capacity of national systems of governance and their
transformation by Europeanization. Third is the question of political conflict as a result of the insertion of national systems of rules and regulations into a European political system.

Finally, by leaving aside the question of the future of the nation-state (for a classic treatment still worth reading, see Hoffmann, 1966) the governance approach is able to bridge the conceptual gap between the opposing ideal-typical worlds of the anarchical international system and hierarchical domestic systems. Both empirical research and theoretical arguments (Mayntz, 1993; Mayntz et al., 1988; Mayntz and Scharpf, 1995) have pointed out for some time now that the idea of the modern state as externally sovereign and internally hierarchical is more an idealization of nineteenth-century political thought than a useful analytical concept for the reality of the twenty-first century. The state is increasingly faced with largely autonomous functional sub-systems and corporate actors. As a result, negotiating systems (Benz et al., 1992; Scharpf, 1993) proliferate. This implies that the clear-cut distinction between the international system and domestic systems is increasingly blurred. A governance perspective has the potential to avoid a reification of this distinction by looking at the institutional forms of governance in negotiation systems.

Critique

The governance approach, however, has a number of shortcomings. Although it considerably broadens the analytical horizon as compared to classical integration theory, it has a strong bias towards effective and efficient problem-solving and almost completely ignores questions of political power and rule. It certainly is not alone in this respect. Apart from the neo-Marxist theory of regulation (Bieling and Deppe, 1996) (not to be confused with Majone’s approach), some works of a broadly defined post-modern flavour (Diez, 1999; Hueglin, 1999; Gottweis, 1999) and some individual authors (Galtung, 1989), these questions are almost completely ignored in the contemporary scientific discussion on the EU. Nevertheless, a perspective that starts from the assumption that the EU has developed into a new type of political system different from traditional nation-states should not ignore these issues.

Second, the strong policy-orientation has led to a proliferation of case studies. Case studies are a legitimate method of political science and they are of particular importance in the political system of the European Union where we still lack solid microanalyses about how policy-making in the European Union works concretely. There is, however, a strong tendency to replicate the fragmentation of EU policy-making in research. The tendency of policy specialists to dig deeper and deeper into their field of specialization, leaving the rest of the world out of sight, is a phenomenon not confined to EU studies. But it does appear to be even stronger in the EU than in national settings.
because the mere complexity of the policy processes at stake considerably increases the workload. This is not only a problem for PhD students. Studies covering more than a single policy and including more than two Member States are extremely rare. Here we risk increasing information without increasing knowledge.

Third, this tendency is furthered by the fact that the governance perspective offers a *problematique* but does not constitute a coherent theory. It does not even attempt to become one. This is not bad in itself as theory-driven (or worse, meta-theory driven) debates tend to be sterile and decoupled from empirical reality. A problem-oriented approach such as the governance perspective offers the potential of innovation by recombining elements of different streams of thinking in the social sciences. To do so, it needs a clear focus. Such a single, overarching thematic focus is not visible – governance as such is too broad an issue. The only eligible candidate to my mind, governance in negotiating systems, is still a largely German enterprise with limited international resonance.

Instead, we can observe several streams of discussion that are more or less autonomous. They may be divided along the classical distinction of polity, politics and policy. The policy-oriented literature is flourishing and taking up elements of both international relations and comparative studies of policy-making. A second stream is the literature on political processes, mainly interest group and party politics and there is a growing literature on legislative politics, particularly from a rational choice perspective (e.g. Moser *et al.*, 1997; Tsebelis and Garrett, 1997). Finally, a polity-oriented perspective looks at constitutional structures and democracy. The challenge for all three discourses is to avoid an exclusive EU orientation and parochialism by adopting a comparative perspective. In the last resort, such a development would integrate the European Union as one object of inquiry among others into standard middle-range theories such as party politics, legislative behaviour, democratic accountability, governmental systems and the like – functional instead of territorial organization.

In the end, there would be no theory of European integration just as there is no theory of Swedish politics. However, international relations theory would not be the only broader theory that is able to say something meaningful about the EU. Donald Puchala’s famous metaphor, ‘Of Blind Men, Elephants and International Integration’ (Puchala, 1971) in this perspective is not the statement of a problem but of a desirable state of affairs. The multi-faceted nature of the European Union has no particular relevance to it. A ‘theory of European integration’ is neither feasible nor desirable. What is sometimes subsumed under this label are mostly theories of international relations applied to the European Union. The governance approach offers to integrate the European
Union in a number of other theories beyond international relations. This is not a trivial exercise. But it is worth pursuing since the EU is the place where fundamental developments that are transforming the possibilities of effective and responsible governance are probably stronger than elsewhere. In this respect, the EU constitutes a unique laboratory for enhancing our understanding of politics in the twenty-first century. To realize this promise is the great challenge of the governance approach.

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The social construction of Europe
Thomas Christiansen, Knud Erik Jørgensen and Antje Wiener

ABSTRACT The article introduces constructivist approaches to research on European integration. While stressing middle-range theory, it recognizes that meta-theoretical choices also matter for theorizing and analysing European integration. Tracing developments in the philosophy of science and in international relations theory, social constructivism is introduced as a way of establishing the ‘middle ground’ in juxtaposition to rationalism and reflectivism – not as a grand theory for the study of European integration. Crucial aspects of the integration process – polity formation through rules and norms, the transformation of identities, the role of ideas and the uses of language – are thereby opened up to systematic inquiry.

KEYWORDS Constructivism; Euro-polity; governance; identity; language; research programme; theory development; transformation.

INTRODUCTION
There is a certain paradox in that what is often referred to as la construction européenne has not received any systematic attention from constructivist scholars. As we witness the rise of a constructivist turn in the social sciences, it is odd that a process so explicitly concerned with the construction of a novel polity has largely escaped the attention of constructivist theorizing. Indeed, the European ‘construction’ is often regarded as so advanced that many European integration scholars have turned to comparative political analyses. In their view, the European Union (EU) has arrived at a stage where the shape and type of polity are less interesting than explaining variation in policy and politics (Caporaso 1998b: 335; Sandholtz 1998). This evolutionary approach to European integration builds on the observation that after intergovernmental beginnings ‘as the EC has developed, the relevance of comparative politics has increased, along with its offshoots in policy analysis, interest group analysis and liberal theories of preference formation’ (Caporaso 1998a: 7).

In proposing a constructivist approach to the study of European integration, we seek to go beyond explaining variation within a fixed setting. Instead, in this article we draw on recent international relations (IR) theorizing to stress the impact of ‘intersubjectivity’ and ‘social context’ on the continuing process of European inte-
gration. We argue that finding the tools to analyse the impact of intersubjectivity and social context enhances our capacity to answer why and how European integration arrived at its current stage. Undeniably, variation across policy areas is an important aspect of the integration process. However, neglecting the constructive force of the process itself, i.e. pushing intersubjective phenomena, and social context aside, lays the ground for missing out on a crucial part of the process. If the process is to be explained, it cannot be done within a research context that is closed towards interpretative tools.

How can a philosophical position like constructivism be useful for research on European integration? In contrast to other introductory accounts of constructivism, we do not begin with a presentation of what various IR scholars, comparativists or legal scholars conceive of as being a constructivist stance. In our view, such approaches are likely to reduce potential options to what is already present in the social science literature. We therefore approach constructivism at a philosophical level that in principle is independent of European integration, before turning to integration studies. This enables us to locate philosophically the theoretical origins of differing approaches. In subsequent sections we move down the ladder of abstraction towards constructivist theorizing of European integration.

What then makes constructivism particularly well suited for research on European integration? A significant amount of evidence suggests that, as a process, European integration has a transformative impact on the European state system and its constituent units. European integration itself has changed over the years, and it is reasonable to assume that in the process agents’ identity and subsequently their interests and behaviour have equally changed. While this aspect of change can be theorized within constructivist perspectives, it will remain largely invisible in approaches that neglect processes of identity formation and/or assume interests to be given exogenously.

Proceeding in three steps, the following charts a path towards a constructivist research programme for the study of European integration. The first step develops a general understanding of the nature of constructivism; the second step highlights the debate over constructivist approaches in IR and demonstrates how they have become central to a constructivist research programme; the third step highlights the potential of this programme for European integration. By way of conclusion, we argue that a constructivist research programme bears enormous potential for research on European integration and ought to be actively pursued to overcome limitations in the field.

FOUNDATIONAL CO-ORDINATES OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

While definitional exercises are seldom rewarding, they can nevertheless result in heuristically fruitful pointers for subsequent moves. Since this special issue constitutes a plea for applying constructivist approaches in research on European integration, this introduction needs to define constructivism. Ruggie, who has consistently explored processes of international institutionalization, provides a particularly succinct definition, stating that
At bottom, constructivism concerns the issue of human consciousness: the role it plays in international relations, and the implications for the logic and methods of social inquiry of taking it seriously. Constructivists hold the view that the building blocks of international reality are ideational as well as material; that ideational factors have normative as well as instrumental dimensions; that they express not only individual but also collective intentionality; and that the meaning and significance of ideational factors are not independent of time and place.

(Ruggie 1998: 33)

Ruggie thus specifies a social ontology (human consciousness and ideational factors) and argues that it has particular epistemological ramifications. It follows that at an abstract level of reasoning, constructivists merely claim that there is such a thing as socially constructed reality. To some, this may sound trivial or common-sensical, but it nevertheless runs counter to several research strategies, informed by positivism or materialist philosophies of the social sciences. In our view, the claim has five consequences.

First, constructivism, as a specific position in the philosophy of the social sciences, cannot serve as a substantive theory of European integration. It would be a mistake to compare theories of European integration such as neo-functionalism to constructivism. Furthermore, this is no attempt at developing a constructivist ‘grand theory’ of European integration. Even though there are connections between key aspects of neo-functionalist theorizing – e.g. processes of socialization, learning, transfers of loyalty, redefinitions of interest and, in general, the transformative perspective – and aspects of constructivism (Wendt 1992, 1994; Ruggie 1998: 11), such overlap should not lead to a conflation between one and the other.

Second, constructivism claims that in contrast to material reality social realities exist only by human agreement (Searle 1995: 1–29; Collin 1997). This makes social realities essentially ‘fragile’, ‘changeable’ and ‘contestable’. Furthermore, social realities tend to have a more ‘local’ than ‘global’ presence and are confined to a limited time-frame rather than to the discrete charm of timelessness. All this is most pertinent to the study of the European integration process that has as much, if not more, to do with socially constructed realities as it has with material reality.

Third, constructivism focuses on social ontologies including such diverse phenomena as, for example, intersubjective meanings, norms, rules, institutions, routinized practices, discourse, constitutive and/or deliberative processes, symbolic politics, imagined and/or epistemic communities, communicative action, collective identity formation, and cultures of national security. Even if these features merely constitute a point of departure, they indicate a whole range of social constructivist features that are ready to be employed in research on European integration. By emphasizing that social ontologies constitute a key dimension of constructivism, we distance ourselves from a view that reduces constructivism to primarily an issue of epistemology.

Fourth, at the philosophical level we can identify two basic currents of constructivism, something that complicates matters, but also multiplies our options for
developing substantive theories about European integration. The two currents are:

[i] constructive realism, according to which the agent has an epistemic but not an ontological influence, that is, knowledge is constructive in nature, but the existence of the world does not depend on the existence of an agent . . . [and ii] constructive idealism, according to which the agent has both an epistemic and an ontological influence on the known world.

(Ben Ze’ev 1995: 50)

Whichever option is selected evidently has immense consequences for the application of constructivism in European studies. Do Europeanists, by means of their research, effectively contribute to the ‘Europe’ they study? Indeed, can ‘Europe’ exist without the huge literature about it? In one of his early writings, Kaiser (1966) was in no doubt that scholars are deeply embedded in the environment in which they work and that, in turn, they somehow contribute to the creation of the object they aim at exploring.

Fifth, constructivism is a social theory that is ‘applicable’ across disciplines which therefore helps us to transcend recurring inter-disciplinary squabbles, be it IR vs. comparative politics or IR vs. European studies. Furthermore, social constructivism has the potential to counter tendencies towards excessive specialization in studies of European integration, tendencies to know more and more about less and less (cf. Kratochwil, forthcoming 1999).

Having thus characterized some of the key defining features of constructivism, we now proceed in a delineative fashion, pointing out where constructivism parts ways with different and, to a certain degree, competing perspectives.

**CO-ORDINATES OF CONSTRUCTIVISM IN THE META-THEORETICAL LANDSCAPE**

Constructivism can also be characterized *ex negativo*, that is, by reference to what it is not. A starting point is the current tendency to operate with the three meta-theoretical positions of constructivism, rationalism and postmodern approaches. While these positions are often presented on a spectrum, we consider situating them on corners of a triangle as more adequate since, in general, theorists tend to position their work in-between the corners. See Figure 1.

Like constructivism, both rationalism and reflectivism are far from coherent and fixed positions. Both include several currents of thinking and, even if they are useful labels, they tend to have little meaning when attempts at explicit definition are being made. Indeed, when Katzenstein *et al.* (1998: 671) promise a section on rationalism, they deliver merely ‘realism and liberalism after the Cold War’. Similarly, when Moravcsik (1998: 19) presents his ‘rationalist framework’ he avoids defining precisely the term ‘rationalism’. However, employing the deductive method on texts written by self-proclaimed rationalists, it seems as if the following key words can help to nail down some substance: the deductive-nomological model of causal explanation, materialism, more or less strong rationality assumptions.
Reflectivism presents an even less coherent position, as readily admitted by most reflectivists. Some attempt to turn this into a virtue: according to Smith ‘reflectivist accounts are united more by what they reject than by what they accept’ (1997: 172). He proceeds by listing postmodernism, feminist theory, normative theory, critical theory and historical sociology. However, with the exception of postmodernism, all remaining strands of theories appear to be compatible with constructivism. To give just one example: feminist theory comes in both postmodern and constructivist versions. Therefore, Smith’s negative definition appears to be the most succinct and appropriate as reflectivism has an identity as simply the mirror-image or antithesis of rationalism.

In our view, each position has certain advantages and disadvantages. For some the benefits of postmodern approaches are clearly associated with an awareness of the political. As Smith notes, reflectivism has ‘much wider notions of politics’, has much to say about the ‘deeper questions of identity and governance’, ‘questions of inclusion and exclusion’, the ‘nature of society–state relations’, the ‘nature of democracy’, ‘gendered aspects of the new Europe’, and inquiries into the construction of the ‘other’ (Smith, forthcoming 1999). Others argue that the prime merit of postmodern approaches is that they ‘change the perspective’ (Diez 1996, 1998c: 139), or ‘that the European Union can best be understood as a post-modern text, and perhaps as a post-modern polity’ and emphasize – in a characteristically postmodern fashion – that ‘trying to “identify” postmodernism is, of course, the ultimate absurd act’ (Ward 1995: 15). Nevertheless, Derrida’s contribution (1992) is heralded as an attempt to ‘uncover the semiotics of European studies’ (1995: 17). In response, constructivists would note that there is not very much reflectivist research on European integration. It therefore remains to be seen whether reflectivist approaches have as much to offer as Smith claims. We suggest that constructivism has much to contribute on precisely the issues raised by Smith. The subsequent section elaborates further on this point. Here it suffices to state that one of the major contributions of constructivist approaches is to include the impact of norms and ideas on the construction of identities and behaviour.
Based on a comparatively narrower conception of European integration, rationalists seek to normalize the politics of the EU (Hix 1998; Moravcsik 1998: 4–5). Their interest in phenomena that are conceivable within rationalist assumptions contributes to their theoretical strength as well as their weakness. It is a strength because a reduced number of features can be investigated in a more detailed and parsimonious fashion that is underpinned by a familiar positivist epistemology. It is a weakness because causal explanation is considered the only form of explanation, thus leaving conceptions of social ontologies, i.e. identity, community and collective intentionality, largely aside. This configuration of focal points and delineations has prompted Risse (1999) to claim that the rationalist position can easily be subsumed within a constructivist perspective which, however, can offer much more, since it is based on a deeper and broader ontology. This special issue seeks to provide evidence for this claim.

THE CONSTRUCTIVIST TURN IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

With a view to exploring the possible analytical capacity of constructivist thought for research in European integration, this section turns to the constructivist debate in IR. The argument builds on a problem that has been identified in a seminal article by Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986) as the contradiction between epistemology and ontology immanent in regime theory. They argued that, unless the constructed nature of norms were theoretically addressed, regime analysis would continuously face the problem of contradictions between (positivist) epistemology and a social ontology (norms). As they wrote:

[I]nternational regimes are commonly defined as social institutions around which expectations converge in international issue-areas. The emphasis on convergent expectations as the constitutive basis of regimes gives regimes an inescapable intersubjective quality. It follows that we know regimes by their principled and shared understandings of desirable and acceptable forms of social behaviour. Hence, the ontology of regimes rests upon a strong element of intersubjectivity. Now, consider the fact that the prevailing epistemological position in regime analysis is almost entirely positivistic in orientation. Before it does anything else, positivism posits a radical separation of subject and object. It then focuses on the ‘objective’ forces that move actors in their social interactions. Finally, intersubjective meaning, where it is considered at all, is inferred from behaviour. Here, then, we have the most debilitating problem of all: epistemology fundamentally contradicts ontology!

(Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986: 764; emphasis in original)

Three moves in IR theorizing have contributed to what has come to be dubbed ‘the constructivist turn’ (Checkel 1998) in the discipline. For our argument it is important to realize that these moves were by no means situated on a time axis. Instead, they occurred largely parallel to one another. The first move was epistemological. It highlighted the role of intersubjectivity in regime analysis. The problem arose on
the basis of a lacking match between the concept of ‘regime’ as entailing converging views on norms, principles, rules and decisions in a specific issue area, on the one hand, and an epistemological framework that assumed actors’ interests as given, on the other. As Kratochwil and Ruggie pointed out, the perception of shared norms was conditional on an analytical framework that allowed for an understanding of intersubjectivity. It followed that a conceptual framework that was not fit to conceptualize intersubjectivity could not properly understand how regimes work. Indeed, they found that

[I]n many . . . puzzling instances, actor behaviour has failed adequately to convey intersubjective meaning. And intersubjective meaning, in turn, seems to have had considerable influence on actor behaviour. It is precisely this factor that limits the practical utility of the otherwise fascinating insights into the collaborative potential of rational egoists which are derived from laboratory or game-theoretic situations. To put the problem in its simplest terms: in the simulated world, actors cannot communicate and engage in behaviour; they are condemned to communicate through behaviour. In the real world, the situation of course differs fundamentally.

(Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986: 764–5) (emphases in original)

They saw three possible solutions to the problem. The first imaginable solution was to deny it altogether. The second solution was to adopt an intersubjective ontology that would be compatible with a positivist epistemology, and the third solution was to open epistemology to more interpretative strains. While, at the time, the last option appeared most valid (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986: 765–6), the constructivist turn and the ensuing debate among IR theorists in the 1990s demonstrated that the other solutions were not entirely misplaced either. The tendency to combine a positivist position with an intersubjective ontology, which is common among sociological constructivists in particular, proves the point (Wendt 1992, 1994; Jepperson et al. 1996).

The second move was ontological. It suggested that, while structure was important for state actors in global politics, it was not established by the principle of anarchy (Waltz 1979), but resulted from social interaction among states (Wendt 1992). Subsequently, it stressed the impact of the social interaction of states on the structure of the international system. This approach has most prominently been promoted by Alexander Wendt’s suggestion to apply Giddens’ structuration theory as a second order or meta-theoretical approach to IR theorizing (Wendt 1991). More recently, others have contributed to refine sociological constructivism by elaborating on institutional aspects in particular. Setting out to design a research programme based on the importance of shared norms in international politics, they defined the third move. While some constructivists have shown the impact of national norms on international politics (Finnemore 1996a; Klotz 1995; Katzenstein 1996a), others stress the impact of international, as well as European, norms on changes in domestic politics (Forschungsgruppe Menschenrechte 1998; Risse forthcoming, a). The three moves have contributed differently to the debate
over norms and communication. Indeed, IR theorists developed different ways of approaching the impact of norms on IR, and it is possible to divide constructivists roughly into two camps.

The first group of scholars wove insights from the macro-sociological institutionalism of the Stanford School around John Meyer into Giddens’ structuration theory. The coupling of these two sociological approaches founded the *sociological constructivist* perspective in IR, which has promoted constructivism as a research programme (Katzenstein 1996a). The major goal of this programme is to study the impact of norms on actors’ identities, interests and behaviour. While symbolic interaction constructs meaning, it is assumed that social reality does exist beyond the theorists’ view. Following this logic, sociological constructivism stresses the importance of empirical work in order to approach the world out there. The constructive power of language plays a role in the context of processes of ‘arguing’ (Risse 1999) or ‘persuasion’ (Checkel in this issue).

The second group of scholars employs constructivism in a more radical way. It does not assume an objective world out there, but seeks to understand the ways in which the world is constructed. Following Wittgenstein’s concept of language games, it is assumed that construction involves more than symbolic action of speechless actors. Instead, *Wittgensteinian constructivists* propose to include language as action. The assumption is that, beyond mere utterances, language constitutes meaning within specific contexts. If successfully performed, speech acts cause a particular meaning that, in turn, leads to rule-following. This version of constructivism seeks to explore the constructive power of language interrelated with rules that are inherent to a specific social context (Hollis and Smith 1990; Onuf 1989; Kratochwil 1989; Fierke 1998; Buzan et al. 1998).

**ESTABLISHING THE MIDDLE GROUND**

The assumption of mutually constitutive social action as a significant factor towards the construction of identity, and therefore interest and behaviour in global politics, offers a theoretical perspective that challenges both neo-realist and neo-liberal IR theorizing. As such, it is paralleled by constructivist or constructive moves in various communities of IR scholars. Debates in Britain, Scandinavia, Germany and Canada on IR all centre around developments in constructivist thinking. The point of this brief detour into IR theorizing is to stress the intersubjective nature of constructivism itself. Theorizing does not develop out of context; instead, the respective political culture and the participants of a debate bear on the way theories, or for that matter research programmes, are shaped too. To situate constructivism in the field of IR theorizing, it is helpful to refer back to the theoretical debates which in the 1970s have come to shape a triangle with the three corners of liberalism, realism and radicalism. In the 1980s, that triangle has taken the shape of a kite stretching towards the extreme of rationalism beyond its head, and towards reflectivism at its tail, respectively (Wæver 1997a: 23). The difference between the two is epistemological. It is manifested in the assumption of endogenous and exogenous interest formation, a gap that offers little choice for synthesis. Yet, with the constructivist
turn in the 1990s, in-between these poles a constructivist-minded interface is emerging.

According to most observers working from the perspective of constructivism, it is located somewhere in the middle ground between the two poles of rationalist (e.g. neo-realism, neo-liberal institutionalism) vs. reflectivist (e.g. postmodernist, post-structuralist) approaches which are perceived as diametrically opposed in their fundamental assumptions (Keohane 1988). Constructivist thinking has subsequently acquired something akin to the role of mediator between incommensurable standpoints.

Most constructivists take great pains to point out aspects of commonality with and distinction from both extreme poles; they ‘juxtapose constructivism with rationalism and poststructuralism’ to then ‘justify its claim to the middle ground’ (Adler 1997b: 321; see also Risse 1999: 1). In a way, then, constructivists do not exactly seize the middle ground, but share a practice of distancing themselves from the rationalist and the reflectivist poles, respectively. To be sure, distance to the respective poles varies among different constructivists. Subsequently, analytical tools and theoretical conclusions do not overlap either. It follows that, instead of seizing the middle ground, constructivists actually contribute to establish a middle ground for those who do not agree with the two extreme poles. This process involves the process of distancing a position from the two extreme poles, and establishing relations among different constructivist approaches as well (see Figure 2). The space provided by constructivism involves any chosen point on a half-circle above this line, very much akin to the way you would draw a rectangular triangle according to Pythagoras. The different constructivist perspectives, and their respective relation to both rationalism, on the one hand, and reflectivism, on the other, are defined by their position on the half-circle. The image of this half-circle is important for constructivist theorizing because it provides a way of assessing the process of ‘situating’ which is crucial for the debates within the middle ground. In the 1990s, at centre stage of IR this action of theoretical positioning has mainly focused on juxtaposing ‘constructivist’ thinking with the former two corners on the ground line of the triangle, namely, rationalism and reflectivism, respectively. If positioning takes the two forms of placing the epistemological posi-

![Constructivist positions](image)

*Figure 2 Establishing the middle ground*
tion in relation to two extreme poles (i.e. on the ground line according to Figure 2), and situating the analytical approach among constructivists (i.e. on a circle above the ground line in Figure 2), Adler’s preference for placing constructivism in the middle ground cuts too short. Instead, constructivists contribute to establishing middle-ground positions. While these positions differ among themselves, they take on the task of dealing with contradictions between epistemology and ontology once identified as a major challenge for IR scholars.

INTEGRATION THEORY AND META-THEORY: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE EURO-POLITY

The previous section demonstrated the extent to which constructivist approaches have become integral to debates in IR over the past decades. So where is the corresponding turn in the study of European integration? It is our contention that a research programme similar to that of constructivism in IR has not been developed, even though both the rationale for, and the building blocks of, such a programme are clearly there. Building on a critique of developments in integration theory, this section substantiates our argument. We demonstrate that constructivist thinking about European integration is seriously underdeveloped, despite the great potential of a number of approaches which have been, or could be, utilized in the analysis of the process.

As we noted at the outset, it is in the 1990s that integration theory has diversified beyond the traditional debate between (liberal) intergovernmentalism and supranationalism/neo-functionalism. Approaches inspired by IR theory have been accompanied by comparative politics approaches, on the one hand, and by the treatment of European integration as ‘new governance’, on the other. These developments leave integration theory as a three-cornered race, with *sui generis*, IR-based and comparative politics approaches providing different models of analysis based on very different assumptions about the nature of the integration process. Where does this leave theoretical choices? This journal recently published renewed suggestions to continue the binary debate by drawing the line between rational and constructivist approaches. For example, in contrast to establishing a middle ground – the way ahead proposed here – Hix stresses the differences between theoretical approaches, thus suggesting positions not in relation to the poles but at the poles (Hix 1998).

This leaves out the arguably more important question of how the move from interstate bargaining to politics within an emerging polity actually happened and where it might lead. Studying integration as process would mean concentrating research efforts at the nature of this change, asking to what extent, and in which ways, a new polity is being constituted in Europe. In our view, it is the constructivist project of critically examining transformatory processes of integration rather than the rationalist debate between intergovernmentalists (implicitly assuming that there is no fundamental change) and comparativists (implicitly assuming that fundamental change has already occurred) which will be moving the study of European integration forward.
In order to move beyond binary divisions and instead establish a constructivist middle ground in European integration, we introduce a number of constructivist approaches. There are three ways in which constructivism can have an impact on studies of European integration:

- development of theories
- construction of frameworks of analysis
- meta-theorizing.

First, development of middle-range theories seems to us to be a fertile and imperative strategy for constructivists. Second, constructivist theories could be combined in different frameworks of analysis in order to develop an understanding of aspects of European integration. Our image of the constructivist turn in research on integration is therefore not a ‘grand’ constructivist theory of European integration, but rather bringing together various – currently disparate – constructivist approaches within frameworks of analysis. Third, meta-theorizing, e.g. structuration theory, may also be included as a research strategy. It simply opens avenues for inquiry where several other theories reduce features that can be investigated.

At the outset we argued that constructivist approaches are particularly well suited for the study of European integration. It will be clearer with a view to the study of polity formation as a major challenge for integration studies why we argue this case. Constructivism is of intrinsic value to the social sciences, but it ought to have a special place in the study of what is a process of long-term political and social change in Europe. Therefore, in studying a process in which the social ontologies are subject to change, research failing to problematize these ontologies has severe limitations. By contrast, the constructivist project explicitly raises questions about social ontologies, directing research at the origin and reconstruction of identities, the impact of rules and norms, the role of language and of political discourses. Moving from this recognition to developing frameworks of analysis requires the identification of the elements of the process of polity formation, and an indication of the way in which constructivist approaches will help us to understand these. In doing so, we need to return to the generic aspects of constructivism established in the first part of the article.

Above we referred to various social ontologies (norms, institutions, practices, etc.) that concern constructivist research because they offer a plethora of phenomena to be researched. We argue that while these phenomena have been investigated by some scholars, they certainly have not been comprehensively studied. What has been lacking is a coherent framework that would bring together existing approaches and indicate the way ahead for further research. In the following, elements of such a framework will be outlined. In particular, we will look at theories designed to study the juridification and institutionalization of politics through rules and norms; the formation of identities and the construction of political communities; the role of language and discourse. With respect to each of these we will discuss existing work and seek to demonstrate the potential of future applications. These approaches, as elements of a constructivist research programme,
facilitate the systematic study of European integration as polity formation. It is a strategy that promises to advance substantially our understanding of transformative processes in Europe, and thus to achieve the aims we set out at the beginning.

RULES AND NORMS IN EUROPEAN GOVERNANCE

If integration is understood as ‘integration through law’, as it has been by the substantial community of EU law scholars for decades, clearly rules and norms are of paramount significance. Without rules, and without compliance with these, the EU would not be what it is. Rules and norms in the EU are not just treaties, secondary legislation and the case law of the European Court of Justice (ECJ). Beyond these we also need to consider the often unwritten administrative procedures of the EU policy process, as well as a multitude of common understandings, inter-institutional agreements and informal modes of behaviour which are reproduced every day in the political and administrative practice of the EU.

The study of the formal rules and legal norms of the integration process has been the reserve of legal scholars for most of the post-war period. Despite Weiler’s pioneering work on the dynamic relationship between legal and political integration – what he termed the ‘dual character of supranationalism’ (Weiler 1986) – it has taken integration researchers some time to recognize the significance of rule-making in the EU. During the 1980s and 1990s there has been more interest in various aspects of legal regulation among political scientists, and there is now a growing body of literature on the ‘juridification’ of the EU (Bulmer 1997; Joerges and Neyer 1997a). Furthermore, studying the legal dynamics of integration has been the means of seeking to transcend the traditional divide between law and political science (Shaw and More 1995; Stone and Sandholtz 1997; Armstrong and Shaw 1998).

One way of bringing the study of rules and norms into a constructivist framework of analysis may be the application of Giddens’ structuration theory to European integration. Apart from the influence of this approach on IR theory, it has also been utilized in the study of European law (Snyder 1990). There is a need to come to grips with the nature of the European polity as an increasingly rule-bound arena for social interaction. The EU has developed institutional features beyond the original design and certainly beyond the purpose of managing economic interdependence – it is more than simply a ‘successful intergovernmental regime’ (Moravcsik 1993). As it stands, the EU is not exclusively based on the original set of political and legal organs, but has come to include shared norms, commonly accepted rules and decision-making procedures. As such, it is structured through a shared legal and institutional property – the acquiss communautes (Jorgensen 1999). The EU is more than a regime, it is an extraordinarily ‘saturated regime’ that is structured by its core institution, the ‘embedded acquiss communautes’ (Wiener 1998b).

The dynamic interaction between institutional norms and political action is an aspect of the integration process that has made in-roads into both institutional and policy analysis of the EU. With regard to the former, there has been the introduction
of a constructivist or sociological variety of neo-institutionalism. The aim of these approaches has been to locate EU institutions at the interface between structural change and political agency rather than to study their formal role (Bulmer 1994; Pierson 1996). The discussion of the rules and norms of integration leads inevitably towards a wider debate about the ‘constitutionalization’ of Europe which has been of growing interest both to legal scholars and political scientists (Curtin 1993; Dehousse 1995; Weiler 1995, 1997; Nentwich and Weale 1998; Shapiro and Stone 1994; Stein 1981; Christiansen and Jørgensen 1999). This process is closely linked with ‘European’ citizenship practice (Wiener 1998a). The relationship between individuals and the emerging polity is an increasingly important focus of research, both in terms of the development of the institution of Union citizenship and in terms of re/constructing identities through the practices of, for example, socialization and symbolic politics.

POLITICAL COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE EUROPOLITY

This close association between the principles of ‘citizenship’ and ‘nationality’ in the domestic context leads us to interesting questions about identity, community and inclusion/exclusion that can be addressed through constructivist research. The concept of community played a key role in classic integration theory (Haas 1964; Deutsch et al. 1957). Contemporary constructivist research focuses on security communities (Adler and Barnett 1996) and on political identity in Europe (Neumann 1998; Neumann and Welsh 1991; Bakke 1995; Witte 1987; Smith 1993; Laffan 1996; Howe 1995). Despite these examples, it is difficult to claim that systematic efforts are under way to explore community-building processes in European integration. Constructivist research on identity formation exists in three categories. First, research into the nature of a potential ‘European identity’; second, research into the reconstruction of national identities under the influence of the integration process; and, third, informed by the results of both the above, there is the question of the plurality of national identities and cultures, and the extent to which a European political identity or political culture can be founded upon such difference. Theories of identity formation are imported to the study of European integration. These approaches – fairly close to the reflectivist end of the half-circle in Figure 2 – deliberate the likelihood of a non-ethnic, ‘postnational’ community of citizens, perhaps to stand alongside Shaw’s conception of postnational constitutionalism (Shaw, in this issue). The argument that a non-homogenous ‘community of Europeans’ will form despite the existing diversity of national identities – a claim contested by others (Howe 1997) – demonstrates both the need and the challenges for further research into questions about identity in Europe.

The construction of this ‘Europe’ has depended on the parallel construction of ‘others’ (variously located in the East, South, West or in Europe’s past) against which a separate European identity is seen as being constructed, created or invented (Neumann and Welsh 1991; Ward 1997; Schmitz and Geserick 1996). This kind of discussion leads to the question of inclusion and exclusion and to research about
diverse national and temporal interpretations of what ‘Europe’ actually constitutes (Wæver 1990; Holm 1993; Jachtenfuchs et al. 1998). Indeed, the success of the European project might well depend on the distinctive interpretation each nation can extract from the discourse on ‘Europe’.

**DISCOURSES, COMMUNICATIVE ACTION AND THE ROLE OF IDEAS**

If the study of identity formation is accepted as a crucial component of constructivist research, the role of language and of discourses becomes crucial. Treaties, directives and communications from and to the European institutions speak a specific and unique language which is normally only understood by a limited circle of insiders. However, with the growing importance of EU policies in the 1990s, a lobbying community has produced an entire professional class that shares the language.

Language is also important when considering *Euro-speak*: the purpose-built vocabulary of terms to describe (and shape) the reality of the EU. Asymmetrical integration, opt-outs, flexible integration, the pillar structure of the Treaty, plans for a multi-speed Europe, the ‘regatta approach’ to enlargement are terms and concepts which have dominated the debate about integration (Schmitter 1991). While actors clash over the meaning of specific issues, the expansion of a unique vocabulary into increasingly common knowledge contributes to bind them together and assists the construction of a European political class. Understood in this way, the development of a particular language of integration occurs both in a broad sense (the European project) and in a narrow sense (within particular policy areas). Discourse on subsidiarity is a prominent example of a discourse which gives meaning and direction to the integration process (Neunreither 1993; Hueglin 1994; Sinnott 1994; Armstrong 1993; Smith 1993; Somsen 1995; Wallace, forthcoming 1999). Discursive constructs such as the ‘democratic deficit’ or the ‘partnership principle’ in structural policy are other examples of the abundance of targets for future discourse analysis.

In general, language is operative in every aspect of the EU, and there are numerous starting points for studies of discourse. With their focus on the impact of language in processes of deliberation, bargaining and negotiation, Habermas’s theory of communicative action as well as Wittgensteinian speech-act theory offer great potential for integration studies. So far, Habermas’s theory has been brought into IR theory debates (Müller 1994; Risse 1999; Linklater 1998; 119–23) and its relevance for studies of diplomacy and negotiations in the EU has been suggested (Joerger and Neyer 1997a; Lose, forthcoming). Given the specific institutional and social context for elite communication in the EU, the significance of such approaches for a constructivist programme is evident. While rationalists often dismiss ‘merely symbolic’ discourse, the theory of communicative action enables analysis of these otherwise forgotten dimensions of policy-making. Discourse analysis also constitutes a fruitful avenue for constructivist research, and indeed there are already quite a few examples of this being employed in European integration studies (Diez 1998a, 1998b; Larsen 1997; Holm 1993; Rosamond, this issue).
Another arena for the constructivist analysis of European integration is the role of ideas (Jachtenfuchs 1995) and of epistemic communities (Haas 1992), which have been important areas for constructivist research elsewhere. In a broad sense, a starting point here is the study of the ‘European idea’ and the way in which this idea has contributed to the creation of novel forms of governance (Morgan 1980). Given the advanced state of European integration, there have also been applications in more specialized areas of research. The field of monetary integration, in particular, has attracted research into the role of ideas (Marcussen 1998b; Verdun 1996). Such work has emphasized the significance of a common belief in neo-liberal economic and monetary policy for the consensus among decision-makers and central bankers in bringing about the economic and monetary union (EMU) project. Recognizing the importance of common beliefs and values leads to the recognition of epistemic communities as a research agenda, resting on the importance of technical knowledge and scientific expertise for European governance (Joerges 1996), and demonstrating the way in which the role of ideas, knowledge and epistemic communities can be integrated in a constructivist EU policy analysis (Radaelli 1995).

POSITIONING CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACHES IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The contributions to this special issue are positioned on the half-circle above the imaginary line linking the two extreme poles of rationalism and reflectivism (see Figures 2 and 3). While the exact positions are arguable, to be sure, the positioning that most authors have more or less explicitly carried out in the process of writing their contributions includes two steps: (1) a differentiation from the poles, and (2) the distinction of the author’s own position among a larger field of constructivists. The location on the half-circle as presented in Figure 3 is none the less the product of what the editors have identified as crucial indicators for each contributor’s approach. We briefly explain the respective positioning ‘clockwise’.

Ben Rosamond argues for a recognition of discourse as an instrument of policy-making in the EU. He stresses the strategic application of a specific discourse, i.e. a purposeful action by agents who thus contribute to a specific direction of the integration process. Jeffrey Checkel proposes to include the notion of ‘learning’ in seeking to go beyond rationalist assumptions that interests are given. To that end, he aims to explain variation in domestic norm changes in response to changes of supranational norms. The variation depends on domestic institutional contexts, as well as actors’ capabilities for learning. Checkel thus endorses a combination of rational choice and sociological institutionalist approaches, arguing that sociological constructivists, in particular, lack a proper account for agency.

Rey Koslowski’s contribution recognizes the existing institutional and territorial framework of the EU. He argues, however, for a constructivist reinterpretation of federal theory. Martin Marcussen et al. argue that interests, identity and behaviour are dependent on norms. They seek to explain and predict behaviour based on the reconstruction of ‘identity options’. They thus agree with the structural approach of sociological constructivism. However, they add the importance of
language for the emergence and change of identity options in different national contexts. Kenneth Glarbo argues for a phenomenologically informed position which is sociological interactionism. His contribution thus has a strong leaning towards interpretative frameworks of analysis including, for example, the element of intersubjective understanding. However, he also shares with the rationalists the ambition for first-order theorizing and parsimonious explanations that have been described by Jepperson et al. (1996) as ‘normal science’ procedures.

The one contribution from a lawyer’s perspective provides no clear positioning. While Jo Shaw’s contribution avoids explicit theorizing, the theme of the article nevertheless suggests a normative position which is probably best characterized as constructive idealism. We therefore locate the contribution not on the circle, but ‘floating by’ (possibly in search of constructivist tools on offer on the circle). Finally, Thomas Diez’s contribution clearly endorses an interpretative epistemology. He begins with the assumption that discourse lies at the centre of constructing the world. Thus, actors are important in so far as they contribute to the discourse by the act of ‘speaking’; discourse structures subsequent action. Diez’s approach is epistemologically different from sociological constructivist positions since he emphasizes understanding (as opposed to explaining).

CONCLUSION

In this introduction we have put forward an argument for enlarging the theoretical toolbox of European integration studies. We envisage a ‘constructivist turn’ in the study of European integration. While meta-theoretical thinking has an impact on theorizing, it has been absent from the study of European integration. Constructivism, which has an important place in the social sciences, and which has demonstrated its value in IR, has, so far, made little impact on European integration
theorizing – a state of affairs all the more surprising in view of the traditionally strong link between IR debates and integration theory.

However, this introduction has also shown that many assumptions derived from constructivism are already contained in a number of important contributions to European integration research, and that many more could follow, if a constructivist research programme were established. Beyond the examples provided here, first and foremost, the contributions to the special issue point in a number of promising directions. There is, in our view, tremendous potential for research based on constructivist assumptions. This special issue seeks to make a contribution to establishing a constructivist research programme in the middle ground between rationalist and reflectivist approaches to European integration.

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NOTES

1 For an example of literature on la construction européenne, see Fernando M. Dehousse, La construction européenne (Paris: Fernando Nathan, 1979).
2 Among eminent books and articles that introduce constructivism, we recommend Searle (1995), Taylor (1978) and Collin (1997).
5 With the exception of the Shaw article.
Social construction and integration

Jeffrey T. Checkel

ABSTRACT
Social construction, which has made key contributions to contemporary international relations (IR) and institutional theorizing, has yet to make significant in-roads among scholars of integration. This is unfortunate, for it has privileged methodological individualism in the study of European institutions – either in its strict (rational choice institutionalism) or more loose (historical institutionalist) versions. As a result, too much debate has focused on which institutions matter in the integration process, and not on how they have effects. This article examines the latter, arguing that a sociological and social constructivist understanding of institutions as constitutive can significantly broaden the methodological tools we bring to the study of integration; it will also help us to explore how, or, indeed, whether, integration is affecting fundamental actor identities, and not simply constraining strategy or behaviour.

KEY WORDS
Constructivism; integration; learning; norms; persuasion; social mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

Over forty years after the European project began, it is striking how little we know about its socialization and identity-shaping effects on national agents. Indeed, prominent Europeanists are themselves deeply divided on this question, with some arguing that integration has led to a fundamental shift in actor loyalty and identity, while others claim the opposite. The basic premiss of this article is that both schools are right: constructing European institutions is a multi-faceted process, with both rationalist and sociological toolkits needed to unpack and understand it.

Put differently, much of European integration can be modelled as strategic exchange between autonomous political agents with fixed interests; at the same time, much of it cannot. Constitutive dynamics of social learning, socialization, routinization and normative diffusion, all of which address fundamental issues of agent identity and interests, are not adequately captured by strategic exchange or other models adhering to strict forms of methodological individualism. For these constitutive processes, the dominant institutionalisms in studies of integration – rational choice and historical – need to be supplemented by a more sociological understanding of institutions that stresses their interest- and identity-forming roles.
After briefly addressing definitional issues and the literature on integration, I argue that social construction, a growing literature in contemporary international relations (IR), can help students of integration to theorize and explore empirically these neglected questions of interest and identity. Specifically, the article shows how a social constructivist cut at institution building explains key aspects of Europeanization – social learning and normative diffusion – better than its rationalist competitors, with the practical goal being to elaborate the specific methods and data requirements for such work.

Before proceeding, three comments are in order. First, my analytic starting point is that research on integration should be problem- and not method- driven; the goal is to encourage dialogue and bridge building between rationalists and social constructivists. By itself, each school explains important elements of the integration process; working together, or at least side-by-side, they will more fully capture the range of institutional dynamics at work in contemporary Europe. Indeed, too many constructivists are themselves method-driven, ignoring the obvious empirical fact that much of everyday social interaction is about strategic exchange and self-interested behaviour.

Second, and following on the above, the constructivism favoured in this article belongs to what has been called its modernist branch. These scholars, who combine an ontological stance critical of methodological individualism with a loosely causal epistemology, are thus well placed, within the integration literature, ‘to seize the middle ground’ – staking out a position between positivist and agent-centred rational choice, on the one hand, and interpretative and structure-centred approaches on the other.

Third, the article’s central focus is theoretical and methodological, and not empirical. My concern is how one could develop and apply, in a systematic manner, constructivist insights to key puzzles in the study of integration. Empirically, I seek only to establish the plausibility of such propositions, and do so in two ways: (1) by drawing upon arguments and evidence from a wide range of existing studies on European integration; and (2) by reference to my own work in progress.

INSTITUTIONS AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Of the many institutionalisms floating around these days in economics, political science and sociology, I need briefly to discuss three: rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism, and sociological institutionalism. For rational choice scholars, institutions are thin: at most, they are a constraint on the behaviour of self-interested actors – be they interest groups or unitary states in IR. They are a strategic context that provides incentives or information, thus influencing the strategies that agents employ to attain given ends. In this thin conception, institutions are a structure that actors run into, go ‘ouch’, and then recalculate how, in the presence of the structure, to achieve their interests; they are an intervening variable.

For historical institutionalists, institutions get thicker, but only in a long-term historical perspective. In the near-term here and now, they are thin – structuring the
game of politics and providing incentives for instrumentally motivated actors to rethink their strategies; they are a constraint on behaviour. Over the longer term, however, institutions can have deeper effects on actors as strategies, initially adopted for self-interested reasons, get locked into and institutionalized in politics. Institutions thus can be both intervening and independent variables.\(^5\)

Sociological institutionalists are unabashedly thick institutionalists. Not only in the distant future, but in the near-term, institutions constitute actors and their interests. What exactly does it mean for institutions to constitute? It is to suggest that they can provide agents with understandings of their interests and identities. This occurs through interaction between agents and structures – mutual constitution, to IR scholars. The effects of institutions thus reach much deeper; they do not simply constrain behaviour. As variables, institutions become independent – and strongly so.\(^6\)

In our research and theorizing about Europe, should one of these institutionalisms be favoured, serving as the baseline? The answer here is ‘no’, for ultimately this is an empirical question. No doubt, there are many situations and aspects of integration where agents operate under the means-end logic of consequences favoured by rationalist choice and some historical institutionalists (meetings of the European Council or the hard-headed interstate bargaining that features prominently in intergovernmentalist accounts). At the same time, the less static perspective favoured by sociologists reminds us that much social interaction involves dynamics of learning and socialization, where the behaviour of individuals and states comes to be governed by certain logics of appropriateness (informal communication in working groups of the Council of Ministers, European-level policy networks centred on the Commission). Unfortunately, these latter logics, while equally compelling and plausible, have received little systematic theoretical attention in studies of Europeanization.

Indeed, to students of international politics well versed in the never-ending neo-realist–neo-liberal controversy, the debates over Europeanization and European integration produce an eerie feeling of *déjà vu*. On the one hand, the discussion has helped advocates of opposing approaches to sharpen their central arguments and claims; similar intellectual clarifications have occurred over the past decade in the debate between neo-realists and neo-liberals in IR.

At the same time and in a more negative sense, the debate over Europeanization, like any academic discourse, has emphasized certain methods and actors at the expense of others. To my reading, much of the discussion has been about institutions – be they encompassing governance or federal structures, historically constructed organizational and policy legacies, or, more narrowly, bodies of the European Union (EU) such as the Commission or European Council. Moreover, in most cases, the analysis is about how such institutions structure the game of politics, provide information, facilitate side payments or create incentives for agents to choose certain strategies.

Such an emphasis, however, comes at a cost. It short-changes the role that institutions can play in politics, or, more to the point, in European integration. In particular, their constitutive role, typically stressed by sociologists, is neglected. If
the neo-debate in contemporary IR can be accused of neglecting fundamental issues of identity formation, much of the current discussion about European integration can be accused of bracketing this constitutive dimension of institutions. Put differently, the great majority of contemporary work on European integration views institutions, at best, as intervening variables. Missing is a thick institutional argument, derived from sociology, that demonstrates how European institutions can construct, through a process of interaction, the identities and interests of member states and groups within them.⁷

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND INTEGRATION

In this section, I develop an approach that addresses the above-noted gaps, and do so by drawing upon a growing and vibrant body of IR scholarship: social constructivism. As presently elaborated, constructivism – at least the modernist branch of concern here – is an argument about institutions, one which builds upon the insights of sociological institutionalism. It is thus well suited, in a conceptual sense, for expanding our repertoire of institutional frameworks for explaining European integration. Moreover, modernist social constructivists remind us that the study of politics – or integration – is not just about agents with fixed preferences who interact via strategic exchange. Rather, they seek to explain theoretically both the content of actor identities/preferences and the modes of social interaction – so evident in everyday life – where something else aside from strategic exchange is taking place.⁸

So defined, constructivism has the potential to contribute to the study of integration in various areas. Below, I consider two: learning and socialization processes at the European level; and the soft or normative side of Europeanization at the national level. In each case, I explore what a constructivist approach entails, how it could be carried out empirically and its value added compared to existing work on integration. I also address and counter the argument that my results cannot be generalized. The section concludes by noting how a constructivist approach to integration can build upon and systematize theoretical arguments and descriptive insights advanced by a growing number of Europeanists; I also argue that the whole exercise is not one of reinventing the wheel.

Learning and socialization

What does it mean for an agent to learn? Social learning involves a process whereby actors, through interaction with broader institutional contexts (norms or discursive structures), acquire new interests and preferences – in the absence of obvious material incentives. Put differently, agent interests and identities are shaped through interaction. Social learning thus involves a break with strict forms of methodological individualism. This type of learning needs to be distinguished, analytically, from the simple sort, where agents acquire new information, alter strategies, but then pursue given, fixed interests; simple learning, of course, can be captured by methodological-individualist/rationalist accounts.⁹

Consider small group settings: it is intuitively obvious that there are times when
agents acquire new preferences through interaction in such contexts. This is not to deny periods of strategic exchange, where self-interested actors seek to maximize utility; yet, to emphasize the latter dynamic to the near exclusion of the former is an odd distortion of social reality. Now, the perhaps appropriate response is ‘so what?’ In an abstract sense, it readily can be appreciated that social learning takes place at certain times, but how can one conceptualize and empirically explore whether and when it occurs? Luckily, there is a growing literature in contemporary IR – by constructivists, students of epistemic communities and empirically oriented learning theorists – that performs precisely this theoretical/empirical combination. More specifically, this research suggests four hypotheses on when social learning occurs; these could be translated to empirical work conducted at the European level.

1 Social learning is more likely in groups where individuals share common professional backgrounds – for example, where all/most group members are lawyers or, say, European central bankers.
2 Social learning is more likely where the group feels itself in a crisis or is faced with clear and incontrovertible evidence of policy failure.
3 Social learning is more likely where a group meets repeatedly and there is high density of interaction among participants.
4 Social learning is more likely when a group is insulated from direct political pressure and exposure.\(^{10}\)

Clearly, these hypotheses require further elaboration. For example, can a crisis situation be specified a priori and not in a post-hoc fashion as is typically done? When is the density of interaction among group participants sufficiently high for a switch to occur from strategic exchange to interactive learning? These are difficult issues, but they are only being raised because a first round of theoretical/empirical literature exists. Europeanists could build upon and contribute to this work – for example, by exploring and theorizing the impact, if any, of different EU voting rules (unanimity, qualified majority voting) on these group dynamics.

The deductions also point to a powerful role for communication. However, in keeping with this article’s attempted bridging function, it is a role between that of the rationalists’ cheap talk, where agents (typically) possess complete information and are (always) instrumentally motivated, and the postmodernists’ discourse analyses, where agents seem oddly powerless and without motivation. Yet, this role itself requires further unpackaging: underlying my communication/learning arguments are implicit theories of persuasion and argumentation.\(^{11}\)

On the latter, students of integration can and should exploit a rich literature in social psychology, political socialization and communications research on persuasion/argumentation. At core, persuasion is a cognitive process that involves changing attitudes about cause and effect in the absence of overt coercion; put differently, it is a mechanism through which social learning may occur, thus leading to interest redefinition and identity change. The literature suggests three hypotheses about the settings where agents should be especially conducive to persuasion:
when they are in a novel and uncertain environment and thus cognitively motivated to analyse new information;
when the persuader is an authoritative member of the in-group to which the persuadee belongs or wants to belong; and
when the agent has few prior, ingrained beliefs that are inconsistent with the persuader’s message.¹²

While these deductions partly overlap with the first set, further work is still needed – for example, how to operationalize ‘uncertain environments’ and integrate political context. On the latter, my strong hunch is that persuasion will be more likely in less politicized and more insulated settings. All the same, both sets of hypotheses do elaborate scope conditions (when, under what conditions persuasion and learning/socialization are likely), which is precisely the promising middle-range theoretical ground that still awaits exploitation by both constructivists and students of European integration.¹³

What are the data requirements for research based on the above hypotheses? Essentially, you need to read things and talk with people. The latter requires structured interviews with group participants; the interviews should all employ a similar protocol, asking questions that tap both individual preferences and motivations, as well as group dynamics. The former, ideally, requires access to informal minutes of meetings or, second best, the diaries or memoirs of participants. As a check on these first two data streams, one can search for local media/TV interviews with group participants. This method of triangulation is fairly standard in qualitative research; it both reduces reliance on any one data source (interviewees, after all, may often dissimulate) and increases confidence in the overall validity of your inferences.¹⁴

For students of integration, is this a feasible undertaking? Drawing upon my own work in progress, I suggest that the answer is ‘yes’. In a larger project, I am studying the appearance and consolidation of new European citizenship norms; an important concern is to explain, at the European level, whether and how new understandings of citizenship are emerging. To date, my focus has been on Strasbourg and the Council of Europe (CE), for this has been where the more serious, substantive work has occurred. When the CE is trying to develop new policy, it often sets up committees of experts under the Committee of Ministers, the intergovernmental body that sits atop the Council’s decision-making hierarchy. In a sense, then, these committees are the functional equivalent of the working groups of the EU’s Council of Ministers.

I have been examining the Committee of Experts on Nationality, the group that was charged with revising earlier European understandings of citizenship that dated from the 1960s. My particular interest was to describe and explain what occurred in this group as it met over a four-year period: for example, why did it revise existing understandings on dual citizenship to remove the strict prohibition that had previously existed at the European level? To address such issues, I did the following. First, three rounds of field work were conducted in Strasbourg; during these trips, I interviewed various individuals who served on the Committee – members of the
Council Secretariat and experts. Second, I conducted interviews in several member state capitals, meeting with national representatives to the committee of experts. Third, as a cross-check on interview data, more recently I was granted partial access to the confidential meeting summaries of the Committee.\textsuperscript{15}

This was a considerable amount of work, but the pay-off was high. Over time, particular individuals clearly shifted from what they viewed as a strategic bargaining game (for example, seeking side payments to advance given interests) to a process where basic preferences were rethought. This shift was particularly evident on the question of dual citizenship, where a growing number of committee members came to view the existing prohibition as simply wrong. Processes of persuasion and learning were key, and such dynamics were greatly facilitated by a growing sense of policy failure – the number of dual nationals was climbing rapidly despite the existing prohibition – and the committee’s insulation from publicity and overt political pressure. Indeed, the committee benefited from the public perception of Strasbourg as a quiet backwater of Europeanization – with the real action occurring in Brussels. This allowed it to meet and work out revised understandings on citizenship prior to any overt politicization of its work.

At the same time, it should be stressed that not all committee members learned new interests. Indeed, the national representative of one large European state held deeply ingrained beliefs that were opposed to arguments favouring a relaxation of prohibitions on dual citizenship. Consistent with the above deductions, there is no evidence that this individual was persuaded to alter his/her basic preferences.

The point of this example is not to dismiss rationalist accounts of strategic bargaining. Rather, it is to note the value added of a middle-range constructivist supplement to these more standard portrayals: it led me to ask new questions and employ a different set of research techniques. The result was to broaden our understanding of how and under what conditions new European institutions – norms – are constructed through processes of non-strategic exchange.

Whether or not one accepts my particular arguments, the basic point remains. In making claims about socialization, learning, persuasion or deliberation promoted by, or conducted within, European institutions, students of integration must theorize these dynamics. In recent years, it has become almost a cottage industry to cite such processes as central, while simultaneously failing to elaborate their theoretical underpinnings. The result has been a near total disconnect between analytic claims and empirical documentation that such dynamics are at work. As one scholar has correctly noted in reference to the EU, ‘what is needed is a decision-making theory which includes in its analysis the ways in which preferences, beliefs and desires are shaped by participation in the decision-making process itself.’\textsuperscript{16}

**Socialization/Diffusion pathways**

Constructivists view norms as shared, collective understandings that make behavioural claims on actors. When thinking about norms in the EU context, two issues must be addressed: (1) through what process are they constructed at the European level; and (2) how do such norms, once they reach the national level, interact with
and socialize agents? Now, the distinction between European and national levels is false, as multiple feedback loops cut across them; at the same time, the dichotomy can be justified analytically as it helps one to unpack and think through different stages in the process of European norm construction. In what follows, I am less interested in formal legal norms developed and promulgated, for example, by the European Court of Justice; a growing body of literature in both law and political science already addresses such understandings and their impact. Rather, the constructivist value added comes from its focus on the less formalized, but pervasive social norms that are always a part of social interaction.\textsuperscript{17}

On the first issue – the process of norm development – constructivists have theorized and provided empirical evidence for the importance of three dynamics. First, individual agency is central: well-placed individuals with entrepreneurial skills can often turn their individual beliefs into broader, shared understandings. The importance of this particular factor has been documented in case studies covering nearly a one-hundred year period and a multitude of international organizations and other transnational movements. In the literature, these individuals are typically referred to as moral entrepreneurs; in the language of my earlier discussion, they are the agents actively seeking to persuade others.\textsuperscript{18}

Second, such entrepreneurs are especially successful in turning individually held ideas into broader normative beliefs when so-called policy windows are open. This means that the larger group, in which the entrepreneur operates, faces a puzzle/problem that has no clear answer, or is new and unknown. In this situation, fixed preferences often break down as agents engage in cognitive information searches. While the policy-window concept was first elaborated by public policy (agenda-setting) and organizational theorists (garbage-can models), it was only more recently that constructivists applied its insights in the international realm to explain norm formation.\textsuperscript{19}

Third, processes of social learning and socialization (see the previous section) are crucial for furthering the norm creation process first begun by individual agents exploiting open policy windows. The basic point is that individual agency is insufficient to create durable social norms. A brief example clarifies the point. In the mid-1980s, several close advisers to Soviet leader Gorbachov played the part of entrepreneurs seeking to advance new ideas about international politics. In the near-term, such individually held beliefs, which were influential in shaping Gorbachov’s own preferences, were decisive in bringing the Cold War to a dramatic, peaceful and unexpected end. Yet, once the USSR collapsed and Gorbachov was swept from power, these ideas largely vanished, as many analysts of Russian foreign behaviour have noted. Put differently, absent social learning among a larger group of actors – that is, the development of norms – the particular ideas held by specific agents had no real staying power.\textsuperscript{20}

When and if new European norms emerge, one must still theorize about the mechanisms through which they diffuse to particular national settings and (perhaps) socialize agents. Here, constructivists have identified two dominant diffusion pathways: societal mobilization and social learning. In the first case, non-state actors and policy networks are united in their support for norms; they
then mobilize and coerce decision-makers to change state policy. Norms are not necessarily internalized by the élites. The activities of Greenpeace or any number of European non-governmental organizations (NGOs) exemplify this political pressure mechanism.\textsuperscript{21}

The second diffusion mechanism identified by constructivists is social learning, where agents – typically élite decision-makers – adopt prescriptions embodied in norms; they then become internalized and constitute a set of shared intersubjective understandings that make behavioural claims. This process is based on notions of complex learning drawn from cognitive and social psychology, where individuals, when exposed to the prescriptions embodied in norms, adopt new interests.\textsuperscript{22}

A key challenge is to develop predictions for when one or the other of these mechanisms is likely to be at work. To date, constructivists have been silent on this issue; however, my work on European citizenship norms suggests a possibility. I hypothesize that the structure of state–society relations – domestic structure – predicts likely diffusion pathways, with four categories of such structures identified: liberal, corporatist, statist and state-above society. From these, I deduce and predict cross-national variation in the mechanisms – social mobilization and social learning – through which norms are empowered.\textsuperscript{23}

A brief example highlights the utility of the approach as well as the attendant data requirements. In the project on European citizenship norms, I have explored whether and in what way they diffused to several European states, including the Federal Republic of Germany. Consider this German case. I first did research on the basic structure of state–society relations in the country; like many others, I concluded that the polity is corporatist. That is, it possesses a decentralized state and centralized society, with a dense policy network connecting the two parts; both state and society are participants in policy-making, which is consensual and incremental.

Given this coding of the German structure, I next advanced predictions on the expected process whereby norms would have constitutive effects, arguing that societal pressure would be the primary and (élite) social learning the secondary mechanism empowering European norms in Germany. The logic is as follows. In a corporatist domestic structure, state decision-makers play a greater role in bringing about normative change than in the liberal case, where policy-makers are constantly pressured by social actors; however, this does not mean that they impose their preferences on a pliant populace. A hallmark of corporatism is the policy networks connecting state and society, with the latter still accorded an important role in decision-making. In this setting, I thus hypothesize that it is both societal pressure (primary) and social learning (secondary) that lead to norm empowerment.

With these predictions in hand, I then conducted extensive field work in the Federal Republic. To date, this research has confirmed my working hypotheses: emerging European norms on citizenship are diffusing and being empowered in Germany primarily via the mobilization of societal pressure; social learning at the élite level has been secondary. More specifically, these norms are connecting to a wide variety of social groups and individuals: NGOs favouring the integration of Germany’s large resident foreigner population; activists in the churches and trade
unions; and immigrant groups. At the decision-making level, one finds isolated evidence of élites learning new preferences from the norms (for example, a small group of Christian Democratic Bundestag deputies).24

Two streams of evidence are important for establishing the presence of these diffusion mechanisms, as well as their relative weighting. Most important were structured interviews with a wide range of actors – both societal and state. As at the European level, these discussions were designed to probe the degree to which agent preferences were changing and the motivations for such change. However, as the rationalists remind us, talk is cheap. Therefore, as a cross-check on the interview data, I consulted a wide range of primary documentation – official summaries of Bundestag debates, media analyses, and interviews given in newspapers or on TV.

What is the value-added of all this work? It convincingly demonstrates that a rational choice institutionalist understanding of the role that norms play in social life (norms as constraint) missed an important part of the story in the Federal Republic. I indeed found instances where domestic agents simply felt constrained by the European norms (for example, a number of officials in the Federal Interior Ministry); yet, in many other cases, I uncovered evidence of non-strategic social learning where agents, in the norm’s presence, acquired new understandings of interests. Clearly, much theoretical work remains to be done – in particular, elaborating scope conditions for when norms have constraining as opposed to constitutive effects. Addressing this latter point is crucial for, again, the obvious empirical fact is that norms do not always constitute.

Extending the argument

Perhaps, though, my constitutive analysis of European institutions only works because of the particular organization and policy area from which I drew empirical examples: the Council of Europe and human rights. Such arguments are largely irrelevant for the EU – a special type of institution with very different policy domains. Two responses counter such a critique.

First, there are well-established theoretical reasons for suspecting that Europe, especially Western Europe, is a most likely case for international institutions to have constitutive effects. Most important, it is an institutionally dense environment, one where theorists predict high levels of transnational and international normative activity. This logic, precisely because it is a particular way of viewing the social world, is in principle equally applicable to a variety of European institutions – whether their focus is human rights (CE) or political and economic affairs (EU).25

Second, assume, despite the foregoing, that differences in policy domains matter. That is, arguments about social learning or the constitutive effects of European norms just do not work when applied to the EU. After all, the process of European integration has largely been about market integration, where national and transnational business interests have played key roles. Such groups are quite different in structure and goals from the actors of civil society – domestic NGOs, churches – highlighted in several of my examples. However, if the institutional (enhanced role of the European Parliament) and substantive (third pillar of justice
and home affairs) innovations of Maastricht and Amsterdam continue to evolve, new actors and policy issues are increasingly likely to make themselves felt. Moreover, the current interest in Brussels, London and elsewhere in moving the EU away from a strict regulatory role to one emphasizing standard-setting and so-called ‘soft law’ plays to the strength of social actors like NGOs: it is precisely the promotion of such informal practices and norms where they are most influential.26

In fact, human rights pressure groups have begun utilizing the European Parliament as a means of generating precisely the sort of normative pressure from-below documented in my CE example. Moreover, immigration, which is now on the third pillar agenda, is an issue where previous studies have documented the extensive degree to which European state interests are constituted by broader international norms. On the related issues of citizenship and racism, recent work establishes that the 1996–7 Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) saw extensive mobilization by NGOs and other transnational movements, and their qualitatively different, when compared to the past, interaction with EU institutions, as well as the IGC itself. Thus, even if differences in policy domains are important, these are at present being blurred if not erased.27

Summary

My purpose in the foregoing was constructive. The goal was not to dismiss rational choice or historical institutionalist work on integration; those literatures are rich and offer many insights. Yet, because of their adherence to variants of methodological individualism, certain analytic/empirical issues – interest and identity formation, most importantly – are bracketed. A more sociological and constructivist understanding of institutions as constitutive allows one to address such questions. Constructivism, however, need not and, indeed, should not be viewed as terra incognita to Europeanists. In fact, a constructivist cut at integration is already evident, albeit implicitly, in both theoretical and empirical studies.

Theoretically, one has the recent work of Olsen, Kohler-Koch and Fleggstein. Olsen’s writing, including that on the EU, has been concerned with broader institutional environments – how they provide the very basis of action for political agents, how they lead to rule-governed behaviour, which may supplant instrumental, strategic calculation, and how they promote learning. Yet, he has failed to explicate, in a theoretical sense, the processes through which such institutional dynamics occur. The constructivist work reviewed above suggests a number of ways in which these micro–macro linkages could be developed in a specifically European context.28

Much of the analysis in recent work by Kohler-Koch and Knodt is also premised on sociological assumptions – in particular, their exploration of the domestic normative impact of EU institutions, where they do not simply constrain, but constitute agents and their preferences. Unfortunately, this argument is much less clear about the process through which, and the conditions under which, EU norms have such effects. Here, constructivist hypotheses on the mechanisms through which national level socialization and social learning occur might be relevant.29
Fligstein is also interested in constitutive dynamics but, in contrast to Kohler-Koch and Knodt, the focus is on Brussels. In his work on the Commission, he argues that, under certain conditions marked by crisis and uncertainty, it can play an entrepreneurial role in helping to culturally construct political action. Less clear, however, are the specific processes through which such construction takes place, as well as his theoretical understanding of an agency’s role. All the same, this analytic move hints at rich possibilities for a dialogue with those social constructivists who theorize the role of individual agency, entrepreneurs and policy windows in their work on normative change.\(^\text{30}\)

Empirically, the last decade has seen an explosion of work on institutional fusion, policy networks, comitology and informal communication patterns centred upon and generated by EU institutions. While this research is extraordinarily rich in a descriptive sense, it is often under-theorized. To be fair, solid empirical work is often a prerequisite for theory building. All the same, more attention to theory would help these scholars to systematize their implicitly sociological view of institutions – and constructivism has much to offer here.

Consider three examples. Wessels, Rometsch and their collaborators have made a powerful and well-documented case for institutional fusion within the EU context, where the density of interaction between European and national institutions is such that old distinctions between the two levels no longer hold. These analysts ascribe an important symbolic and identity-shaping role to institutions – to constructivists, a constitutive role. Yet, they are silent, theoretically, on when, how and why such identity formation occurs, which leads them to advance an under-specified convergence thesis, where ‘the constitutional and institutional set-up of [EU] member states will converge towards one common model.’ Given that constructivists have already begun to specify scope conditions regarding institutions and identity change, the potential for theoretical cross-fertilization seems significant.\(^\text{31}\)

In a second example, recent work by Beyers and Dierickx on the EU Council and its working groups suggests that informal communication is key for understanding their operation. Yet, this research, despite its empirical richness, neglects a crucial theoretical question: under what conditions – if at all – does this communication lead political agents away from situations of strategic exchange and into those marked by social learning, socialization and communicative action? For both theoretical (debates over the consequences of integration) and policy reasons (explaining when and why member state interests change), this issue is fundamental. However, because of their reliance on a methodologically individualist ontology, Beyers and Dierickx seem simply unaware that they are in fact well placed to address it. The point is not that they get the story wrong; rather, it is incomplete. And constructivism, with its concern for modelling modes of social interaction beyond strategic exchange, could provide analytic tools for filling out the picture.\(^\text{32}\)

Research on so-called comitology represents a third example where constructivist theorizing and empirical integration studies could profitably interact. Comitology refers to the complex set of committee rules that have evolved to implement EU policy and procedures; the system stems from a 1987 European
Council decision in which member states made clear their unwillingness to lose control of the implementation process – in particular, by ceding too much power to the Commission. These committees, by member state dictate, are composed of government representatives and, occasionally, additional experts; yet, the growing empirical literature on them notes how these representatives must often turn elsewhere for information and, more important, interpretation. Indeed, two analysts argue that ‘scientific evidence’ is accepted as the most valid currency for ‘effecting convincing arguments’ in comitology.33

The last point suggests a link to my earlier hypotheses on small groups, communication and social learning. Indeed, constructivist deductions on the role of common backgrounds, crisis, density of interaction, etc., could readily be exploited by these Europeanists to explore more systematically the conditions under which European committees, through learning and argumentation, socialize their participants.34

A final issue is not so much one of new theoretical directions for analyses of integration, but, instead, a look back. Simply put, is my call for bringing constructivist insights to bear on the study of the EU a short-sighted reinventing of the neo-functionalist wheel? After all, over thirty years ago, Haas and others were writing about the identity-shaping effects of the European project. Indeed, collective identity was to emerge via a ‘process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities towards a new centre, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing nation-states.’35

While references to social learning and socialization are evident in the work of many early neo-functionalists and regional integration theorists, the differences with constructivism are significant. Most important, the latter is not a general substantive theory that predicts constant learning or a growing sense of collective identity; rather, its aspirations are more modest. As currently being developed, it is a middle-range theoretical approach seeking to elaborate scope conditions for better understanding precisely when collective identity formation occurs. Constructivism is thus agnostic as to whether the endpoint of social interaction is greater common interests and identity. Neo-functionalists, at least implicitly, were not neutral on this question; there was a clear normative element to their scholarship.36

In addition, despite the strong allusions to identity formation and change, neo-functionalists failed to develop explicit micro-foundations that moved them beyond an agent-centred view of social interaction. In fact, there is a strong element of rational choice in their research. While considerable work remains, constructivists are attempting to elaborate such alternative foundations – their stress on logics of appropriateness and communicative action, for example.37

CONCLUSIONS

My arguments throughout this article were based on an obvious but too often neglected truism about our social world: the most interesting puzzles lie at the nexus where structure and agency intersect. The real action, theoretically and empirically,
is where norms, discourses, language and material capabilities interact with motivation, social learning and preferences – be it in international or European regional politics. Research traditions such as rational choice, postmodernism and, more recently, large parts of constructivism, which occupy endpoints in the agent–structure debate, have life easy: they can ignore this messy middle ground. Yet, the true challenge for both rationalists and their opponents is to model and explore this complex interface; this article has suggested several ways in which this could be done.  

As one scholar recently put it, ‘regional integration studies could uncharitably be criticized for providing a refuge to homeless ideas.’ While constructivism is certainly not homeless, Europeanists should resist the temptation simply to pull it off the shelf, giving it a comfortable European home in yet another N = 1, non-cumulative case study. Rather, these scholars have the opportunity – given their immensely rich data set – to push forward one of the most exciting debates in contemporary international and political theory.  

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NOTES

1 For the diverging views among Europeanists, compare Wessels 1998 and Laffan 1998. Thanks to Johan P. Olsen for alerting me to this latest round in a long-running and seriously under-theorized debate.
2 For example, Christiansen 1997.
3 On the different schools within constructivism, see Adler 1997b: 335–7. Checkel 1998 provides a critical overview of the modernist branch. The phrase ‘seizing the middle ground’ comes from Adler.
4 My analysis here and in the following paragraphs draws upon DiMaggio and Powell 1991: ch. 1; Longstreth et al. 1992: ch. 1; Koelble 1995; Kato 1996; Katzenstein 1996a: ch. 2; Finnenmore 1996b; Hall and Taylor 1996.
5 For historical institutionalists employing a thin conception of institutions, see Immergut 1992 and Pierson 1994. Thicker conceptualizations are found in Hattam 1993 and Goldstein 1993. Consistent with my near/long-term distinction, the analysis in Immergut and Pierson is contemporary, while that in Hattam and Goldstein spans decades.
6 Students of organization theory should recognize these arguments: they have roots in sociological work on organizations. See DiMaggio and Powell 1991 passim; Dobbin 1994; March and Olsen 1998.
7 Elsewhere, these claims are documented in some detail. See Checkel 2000, where I review work on integration by proponents of multi-level governance, historical institutionalists, supranational institutionalists, neo-functionalists, intergovernmentalists, rational choice theorists and neo-realists.
8 For detailed overviews of the epistemological, ontological and methodological emphases in the work of modernist constructivists, see Adler 1997b; Checkel 1998; Ruggie 1998: 35–6.
9 Levy 1994 is an excellent introduction to the learning literature.
These hypotheses derive from a number of sources. See DiMaggio and Powell 1991 *passim*; Haas 1990, 1992; Hall 1993; Risse-Kappen 1996b; Checkel 1997a: chs 1, 5.

Johnson 1993 provides an excellent and balanced discussion of the theoretically incomplete role accorded communication in rational choice analyses.


Also see the excellent discussion in Zürn 1997: 300–2.

Checkel 1999b: 94–6 provides full documentation for the claims advanced in this and the following paragraphs.


Mattli and Slaughter 1998 provide a detailed review and critique of the literature on the Court of Justice. On constructivist definitions of norms, see Katzenstein 1996a: ch. 2.

On entrepreneurs and the role, more generally, of individual agency in processes of norm development, see Nadelmann 1990; Finnemore 1996a; Florini 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998.

The epistemic and ideational branches of constructivism are especially helpful here. See Haas 1992; Checkel 1997a: ch. 1.

Checkel 1997a: chs 5, 6.

Keck and Sikkink 1998: ch. 1 *passim*; Risse and Sikkink 1999, for example. See Checkel 1999a: 3–8, for a full discussion of these two diffusion pathways.

Stein 1994; Risse-Kappen 1995b; Robert Herman, ‘Identity, norms and national security: the Soviet foreign policy revolution and the end of the Cold War’, in Katzenstein 1996a: ch. 8, for example.

For details, see Checkel 1999b: 87–91.

For extensive documentation of these points, see Checkel 1999b: 96–107, where I also consider alternative explanations for the results presented here.

See Weber 1994; Risse-Kappen 1995a: ch. 1; Adler and Barnett 1996: 97 *passim*.

The issue and actor expansion noted here has already begun. See Hooghe and Marks 1996, and, more generally, the entire literature on multi-level governance. Indeed, the June 1997 Amsterdam Treaty, by incorporating the social policy articles of Maastricht directly into the Treaty on European Union, codified the access of various non-state actors to EU decision-making in that area (Obradovic 1997). On the growing interest in seeing the EU move to a soft law, standard-setting role, see Lionel Barber, ‘A punctured image’, *Financial Times*, 15 June 1998; and George Parker, ‘Foreign Secretary urges curb on Brussels’, *Financial Times*, 14 August 1998.


Kohler-Koch and Knodt 1997. Similarly, Conzelmann 1998: part IV *passim*, while making a convincing empirical case for national-level policy learning in the EU, fails to explicate testable scope conditions for when such dynamics are more or less probable.

Fligstein 1998 *passim*. See also Öhrgaard 1997; Cram 1997, where the authors, like Fligstein, stress constitutive processes at the European level, but fail to specify the conditions and mechanisms through which they occur.

Rometsch and Wessels 1996: preface, chs 1–2, 14 – quote at p. 36.

See Beyers and Dierickx 1997, 1998. More recently, Beyers has addressed the possibility
of socialization in Council working groups; unfortunately, his operational measure of it – the number of years an individual participated in such a setting – continues to bracket the interaction context in the group itself. See Beyers 1998. Hooghe 1998: 5–6, 8–9 offers a similar measure of socialization – in this case, for individuals working in the Commission. Not surprisingly, her important study thus suffers from the same bracketing problem as noted for Beyers.

33 Joerges and Neyer 1997b: 617. Useful introductions to the comitology system are Pedler and Schaefer 1996; Dogan 1997.

34 While several students of comitology have hinted at the importance of such factors for generating learning dynamics, to my knowledge they have not been operationalized and empirically tested. See Pedler and Schaefer 1996: 47; and, especially, Joerges and Neyer 1997a: 291–2, 1997b: 618.

35 Haas 1958: 16.


37 On the rational choice foundations of neo-functionalism, see Burley and Mattli 1993: 54–5. An excellent review and comparison of the neo-functionalist, integration and constructivist literatures, one which reinforces the points made in the preceding paragraphs, is Pollack 1998 passim.

38 On the need to explore this interface in the context of debates over European integration, see Hix 1998: 55–6. More generally, see Checkel 1997b.

39 For the quote, see Caporaso 1998a: 7.
It has been twelve years since Alexander Wendt’s article on the agent-structure problem signaled the advent of a self-conscious ‘constructivist’ theoretical approach to the study of world politics (Wendt 1987). Wendt, to be sure, has consistently presented constructivism not as an international relations theory, but as an ontology—a social theory. Yet he and other constructivists have nonetheless long claimed that their ontology facilitates the development of novel mid-range theoretical propositions.

This is a felicitous claim, for it promises to expand the debate among fundamental theories of world politics. Currently there are three. Realism highlights the distribution of resources. Institutionalism highlights the institutionalized distribution of information. Liberalism highlights the distribution of underlying societal interests and ideals as represented by domestic political institutions. The advent of constructivism promises to add a wider and perhaps more sophisticated range of theories concerning the causal role of ideational socialization.

For such theories, the European Union (EU) is as promising a substantive domain as we are likely to find. In few areas of interstate politics are ideals so often invoked, identities so clearly at stake, and interests so complex, challenging, and uncertain. In few areas is so much detailed primary data, historical scholarship, and social scientific theory available to assist analysts in tracing the role of ideas and the process of socialization. It is thus no surprise that there has been for some years an emerging constructivist analysis of European integration in security studies. This approach is often referred to as the ‘Copenhagen school.’ It is so named because the force of continental constructivist theories appears to radiate outward from the Danish capital, where it is the hegemonic discourse.

Thomas Christiansen, Knud Erik Jørgensen, and Antje Wiener, the editors of this special issue, do us an important service by posing an intriguing and timely question: What has constructivist theory contributed to our social scientific understanding of the EU? In doing so, they have commissioned a fascinating set of articles most notable for their intriguing conjectures about the possible role of collective ideas and socialization in European integration. Ben Rosamond, for example, openly questions whether a compelling economic justification for internal
market liberalization ever existed. Martin Marcussen, Thomas Risse, et al., seek to rewrite the history of integration in terms of ideational shifts, rather than the succession of economic opportunities most analysts invoke. Thomas Diez reinterprets the first British bid for membership in the EEC as the action of a country caught in its own evolving discursive net. These are bold claims, and there are many more in this volume.

Despite high hopes for constructivism – hopes that any open-minded social scientist in the field must share – and the intriguing nature of some of the empirical claims above, however, my conclusion in this comment is a sobering one. Constructivists, to judge from the volume, have contributed far less to our empirical and theoretical understanding of European integration than their meta-theoretical assertions might suggest – certainly far less than existing alternatives. This disappointing finding may simply reflect the modest role of ideas in the process of European integration, but I doubt it. My analysis of this volume suggests that the true reason lies instead in a characteristic unwillingness of constructivists to place their claims at any real risk of empirical disconfirmation. *Hardly a single claim in this volume is formulated or tested in such a way that it could, even in principle, be declared empirically invalid.*

This failure to test stems fundamentally from the near absence of two critical elements of social science, each designed to put conjectures at risk: (1) distinctive testable hypotheses, (2) methods to test such hypotheses against alternative theories or a null hypothesis of random state behavior. Today most leading constructivists are committed to the proposition that their claims must be, in one way or another, subject to empirical confirmation – and, more important, disconfirmation. Most, including authors in this volume, accept that claims derived from constructivist-inspired theories compete with and should be tested against other mid-range hypotheses. This development is to be warmly welcomed, for it creates a common conceptual, methodological, and theoretical discourse among proponents and critics of constructivist theories alike. It is in this spirit of internal, constructive criticism – that is, criticism of constructivism for failing to live up to its own publicly acknowledged standards – that I write.²

**CONSTRUCTIVISM AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: ARE THE PROPOSITIONS TESTABLE?**

The constructivist approaches to European integration represented in this volume, in my reformulation, share two core propositions. The first is that governmental elites choose specific policies, policy ideas, strategies, and concrete interests because they (or their justifications) are consistent with more general, deeper, collectively held ideas or discourses.³ What is distinctive about this claim, it is essential to note, is not that interests are ‘constructed’ in ‘historically specific circumstances.’ Nearly all international relations (IR) theories, indeed nearly all social science theories, rest on the premise that actor policies, strategies, and even preferences emerge out of interaction with the external environment and, moreover, such interaction varies across time and space in response to complex social interaction. What is distinctive here is
instead the claim that governmental élites calculate on the basis of consistency with collective ideas or discourses irreducible to material interests.

Whence do these ideas and discourses come? The second core proposition shared by nearly all participants in this volume states that *underlying ideas and discourses change only at rare ‘critical junctures,’ which arise in response to political crises.* In the interaction with the political world, policies may be perceived to fail, meaning that they may be perceived as inappropriate to the social circumstances. This inappropriateness may be perceived for instrumental reasons (the policies do not generate appropriate outcomes) or more sociological reasons (independent of substantive consequences, the policies are not those which other actors expect or appreciate).

The social scientific challenges facing those who seek to move from these two meta-theoretical claims to testable mid-range theory are clear. With regard to the first proposition, constructivists must specify concrete causal mechanisms through which the process of choosing policies and defining interests takes place, with the ultimate goal of saying something about which ideas and discourses influence (or do not influence) which policies under which circumstances. With regard to the second proposition, constructivists must seek to specify concrete causal mechanisms that help to explain which political crises lead to a change in which ideas and discourses under which circumstances. Propositions of this kind are testable.

How do the participants in this volume seek to meet these two theoretical challenges? What testable hypotheses result? In this section I seek to demonstrate that many articles in this volume (despite their stated intent) advance no testable propositions at all, while many others advance testable propositions that are in no way distinct to constructivist theory.

Let us begin with those authors who advance theories that are *in principle* indeterminate and, therefore, untestable. These claims are not merely under-specified; they predict behavior that is *contradictory or in principle indeterminate* behavior and tell us nothing about how the contradiction and indeterminacy should be resolved. They are therefore in principle untestable. Space permits only two examples: the work of Rosamond, and Marcussen, Risse *et al.*

Rosamond addresses the first theoretical challenge listed above, namely to specify the relationship between ideas and policy. In an explicit challenge to theories that explain European integration as a response to rising economic interdependence, Rosamond advances two central hypotheses. First, (see p. 656) ‘the deployment of ideas about globalization has been central to the development of a particular notion of European identity among élite policy actors.’ Second, “globalization” remains contested within EU policy circles.’ These two claims provide, at first glance, an intriguing speculation about where we might begin to look for the sources of state policy.

Taken together, however, Rosamond’s two claims remain *in principle* indeterminate and therefore cannot be tested in any way, because between them they subsume the entire range of possible state behavior. Anyone, including Rosamond, seeking to assess the validity of these claims necessarily must resolve one fundamental theoretical issue. Should we expect any given situation to be a
case of ‘the development of a particular notion’ (i.e. convergent views), a case of ‘contestation’ (i.e. divergent views), or some combination of the two? Absent a more precise specification, any observed outcome – except, perhaps, a policy debate with no reference to globalization or no contestation at all, which we would know to be false simply by glancing at the Financial Times – is ‘explained’ by this theory. It is inevitable, if a tribute to the author’s honesty, that Rosamond’s concluding summary is fundamentally indeterminate.

[Globalization] is used to signify external realities which define the EU’s environment [but] is understood as having multiple and often contradictory consequences . . . this pattern is not uniform and the evidence suggests that different clusters of actors can deploy the idea of globalization with quite distinct effects.

(pp. 666–7)

This in turn leads Rosamond to paper over perhaps the most intriguing and important question in modern studies of globalization. ‘The evidence,’ he concludes, ‘suggests that there is widespread adherence to neo-liberal conceptions and that globalization appears as either/both (a) a structural fact associated with the development of circuits of capital, production, trade and technology or/and (b) a set of policy preferences for economic openness and market-driven policies of budgetary restraint’ (p. 666). The relative weight of these two factors has been the subject of articles and books. Rosamond restates rather than resolves this fundamental theoretical issue.

The second example is the article of Marcussen, Risse et al., who address both theoretical challenges. On the first major challenge, the relation between deep ideas (‘identities’) and policy (or policy ideas), they remain vague:

We do not promote an ‘interest vs. identity’ account, but try to figure out the precise way in which both interact. On the one hand, embedded identity constructions, mentioned above, define the boundaries of what élites consider to be legitimate ideas – thereby constituting their perceived interests. On the other hand, perceived interests define which ideas political élites select in their struggle for power among those available to actors. The precise relationship remains a matter of empirical study.

(p. 617)

To be sure, it is always prudent to remember that the world contains more complexity than any single theory can encompass – a point to which I shall return below. Marcussen, Risse, et al. are also quite correct to insist on the need for empirical analysis. Yet theoretical innovation and empirical testing requires that we focus on specific causal mechanisms. In this context, the ‘precise relationship’ between ideas and interests or policies is not simply a matter for ‘empirical study.’ Instead, as Marcussen, Risse et al. concede elsewhere, it is (or ought to be) one of two central theoretical issues in the constructivist research program. Without a theory of the
interaction between ideas and interests, it is not possible to generate hypotheses that
distinguish views based on interests or institutions, and thus it remains impossible
to confirm or disconfirm any one or combination of them. ‘Empirical study’ on this
basis is of questionable utility, since any observation would confirm the underlying
theory.

Marcussen, Risse et al. also address the second theoretical challenge, namely to
explain why ideas and discourses change or remain stable in particular circum-
stances – with equally indeterminate results. The only attempt at a theoretical
answer I can discern is buried in the final note, where they observe:

When old visions about political order remain unchallenged, they tend to
become increasingly embedded in national institutions and political cultures, as a
result of which they become difficult to deconstruct and to replace... We will
not be able to expand on this point in this article, but we have a broad range of
institutions in mind, such as the media, the educational system, the electoral
system, the legal system, political decision-making procedures, etc. What they
have in common is that they tend to consolidate and reify existing and
consensually shared ideas about just political order.

(pp. 630, 633)

This construct evades theoretical analysis. Surely it is prima facie untrue as a general
proposition that education, elections, law, and the media invariably have a con-
servative effect on existing social practices. (This is almost precisely the opposite of
what conservative thinkers and professional sociologists alike have traditionally
believed about liberal democratic societies, where their dynamics are often highly
destructive of underlying social norms.) The only way we could know when the
effect of these institutions is conservative and when it is dynamic would be to
specify a theory of such socializing institutions. One would expect – and the
authors appear to agree above – that this is the proper direction for constructivist
theory. Yet their note tells us next to nothing about what such a theory or theories
would look like. They neither set forth testable hypotheses, nor lay the theoretical
foundation for the development of such hypotheses. Instead, they restate – albeit in
an impressively sophisticated way – the basic theoretical problem.

Why so few testable propositions? Though some of the meta-theoretical
speculations in this volume imply the opposite, there is no reason why claims about
the ‘constitutive’ effect of ideas should be difficult to test. One piece of evidence for
the ease with which hypotheses can be derived is the existence of promising
propositions scattered throughout this volume. Two examples come from Jeffrey
Checkel’s analysis – in many respects a refreshing exception in its willingness to
directly engage theoretical, as opposed to meta-theoretical, questions. Checkel
advances at least two such distinctive and potentially testable propositions.

The first is that an individual’s specific policy ideas are most likely to change when
other ideas are held by ‘authoritative’ members of an ‘in-group’ to which the
persuadee belongs or wants to belong. Institutional hierarchy imposes ideational
conformity as a quid pro quo, implicit or explicit, for membership. Obviously this
notion would require more elaboration, yet it points us in a clearly focused direction. We can easily imagine measuring the membership in in-groups (or the desire to do so) independently of ideas and tracing through the political consequences.5

A second causal proposition advanced by Checkel and others, most notably Marcussen, Risse et al., is that influential ideas about political order remain stable unless ‘challenged’ by a ‘crisis.’ This is, in fact, the most common proposition found in the volume; hence I have treated it above as a core assumption. To be sure, at this level of abstraction, the claim is underspecified to the point of near-tautology. We can always find some sense of dissatisfaction, something that could be called a ‘crisis,’ motivating a change in ideas. And surely not all things that could be termed ‘crises’ lead to changes in relevant ideas. More precise specification is required for this insight to be useful. Still, the notion that crises are connected with change is not, in contrast to some of the claims we considered above, internally contradictory. We can imagine a more precise definition of crisis and a more precise specification of causal mechanisms that might generate testable causal propositions. Such work should be encouraged.

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND ITS CRITICS: WHERE ARE THE THEORETICAL ALTERNATIVES?

The assertion of a causal connection between crisis and ideational change has a second and more fundamentally troubling characteristic, however, in addition to its abstract character. It is in no way distinct to constructivism. Indeed, it is somewhat hard to see why it should be considered constructivist at all. To understand this criticism, it is instructive first to consider briefly the alternatives to a constructivist analysis of ideas.

Rationalist theories of integration, like rationalist theories of IR (realism, liberalism, and institutionalism, etc.), do not maintain that actors in international affairs have no ideas at all, as some authors in this volume would seem to imply. Collective ideas are like air; it is essentially impossible for humans to function as social beings without them. They are ubiquitous and necessary. In this (trivial) sense there is little point in debating whether ‘ideas matter.’ Existing rationalist theories claim only something far more modest, namely that ideas are causally epiphenomenal to more fundamental underlying influences on state behavior.6

To see precisely what this implies, consider, for example, a liberal inter-governmentalist (LI) analysis of European integration. Such an account seeks to explain decisions for and against deeper European integration in terms of three factors. These are: (1) underlying economic interests, with geopolitical ideas playing a distinctly secondary role; (2) relative power, understood in terms of asymmetrical interdependence; and (3) the need for credible commitments to certain policies, with ideology playing a distinctly secondary role (Moravcsik 1998). This explanation does not deny that individuals and governments have ideas in their heads or that we should observe them espousing ideas consistent with rational interests and strategies. It denies only that exogenous variation in other sources of those ideas decisively affects ideas and therefore policy. In sum, in the LI account of
integration, ideas are present but not causally central. They may be irrelevant and random, or, more likely, they are important transmission belts for interests. In the latter case, they are endogenous to other underlying factors.\(^7\)

One important implication is that *both an LI theory and constructivist-inspired theory* predict some correlation between collective ideas and policy outcomes.\(^8\) What distinguishes rationalist and constructivist accounts of this correlation is *not*, therefore, the simple fact that state and societal actors hold ideas consistent with their actions, but the causal independence of those ideas – their source, variation, and the nature of their link to policy. *Hence the minimum we should expect of any effort to test constructivist claims is not just the derivation of fine-grained empirical predictions, examined above, but also the utilization of methods capable of distinguishing between spurious and valid attributions of ideational causality.* In short, studies that seek to show the impact of exogenous variation in ideas must be controlled for the causally epiphenomenal or ‘transmission belt’ role of ideas. In a social scientific debate, this is the minimum that proponents of a new theory owe those who have already derived and tested mid-range theories.

The articles in this volume, I submit, do little to meet this minimum methodological standard. Returning to the argument above, one example is the proposed link between political crisis (or policy failure) and changes in ideas – a link central to almost every article in the volume. This relationship is *precisely* what an LI account would predict. Indeed, one might argue that *only* an LI account generates such a prediction. Why should real world events undermine the confidence of decision-makers in their ideas if those ideas are not meant to be serving underlying instrumental purposes? And if they are so intended, why is this causal argument presented as an alternative to, rather than a confirmation of, traditional theories of integration and international political economy? In this regard, it is striking that the number of *purely* sociological (or even clearly ideational) claims about variation in fundamental discourses and state behavior in this volume is surprisingly low. Instead, we tend to see extensive, if somewhat *ad hoc*, recourse to rationalist and materialist (or formal institutionalist) causes – a tendency I shall document in a moment.

This dependence on (or, at the very least, ambiguity with respect to) the predictions of existing rationalist and materialist theories is disguised in part by the tendency of authors in this volume to misspecify alternative theories in a way that renders them little more than straw men. Such obfuscation is surely not deliberate, but the result is nonetheless to make it almost impossible to disconfirm constructivist claims, since the stated alternatives are absurd or, in some cases, not theories at all. This undermines our confidence in the resulting empirical analysis. The editors of the volume go even further, seeking to make a virtue of this by seeking to demonstrate – unconvincingly, in my estimation – that *only* constructivist theory can explain many aspects of integration.\(^9\) This tendency to reject alternative arguments without testing them takes a number of different forms.

The simplest way to reject alternative theories without testing them is to restate them as ideal types, rather than theories – that is, as constructs that do not explain variation in state behavior. Any variation – of course there is always variation – can
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thus only be explained by constructivist theory, which carries the day by default. We see this methodological move in the articles of Kenneth Glarbo and Marcussen, Risse et al. Glarbo asserts that:

When subjected to theoretical analysis, European political co-operation has traditionally been the prerogative of realists . . . however diverse in appearance, [the realist narrative] can be reduced to one ‘hard core’ hypothesis, from which all the realist theoretical statements of EPC/CFSP are derived . . . the interests of single European nation states will eternally block integration within the ‘high politics’ realms of foreign, security and defence policy.

(p. 634)

This is manifestly incorrect as a statement about realism, which has in fact generated a number of highly refined theories of alliances. The most charitable thing that could be said is that it selects out of that extensive and sophisticated literature the least interesting and least plausible alternative hypothesis – namely a static ideal-type of non-cooperation. With this as the only alternative – for Glarbo ignores entirely institutionalist, liberal, and more sophisticated realist theories of alliances and collective security, as well as synthetic approaches like that of Stephen Walt – a constructivist theory need only explain some variation from ‘eternal’ non-cooperation to be ‘proven’ correct. If a fact already known to all – namely that the EU has taken some modest steps toward common foreign and security policy (CFSP) – settles the issue, why bother with empirical analysis?

Consider next Marcussen, Risse et al.’s article. These authors also do not take neo-functionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism seriously enough even to test them. They ‘reject [both] out of hand’ in the space of exactly seven sentences. This they do, moreover, by misspecifying each as an ideal-type assuming static, constant behavior, rather than as a theory – just as did Glarbo. LI gains the following treatment, quoted in its entirety:

[O]ne could deduce from intergovernmentalism – either its realist (Hoffmann 1966) or liberal versions (Moravcsik 1993, 1997) – that European integration should not affect nation state identities, since the European polity consists of intergovernmental bodies which do not require much loyalty transfer to the European level. The French and the German cases appear to contradict this argument.

(p. 627)

No effort is made to consider a more (if still minimally) sophisticated formulation of LI in which shared identities and symbols are correlated with policy but are epiphenomenal – as I have suggested above. Nor is any effort made to provide evidence of the causal importance of loyalty changes, beyond a conventional history of changing ideas about Europe over the past half century. Neo-functionalism gains the same cursory treatment – it purportedly predicts constant change and is therefore rejected. Constructivism prevails by default rather than by surmounting the challenge of honest empirical validation.
A more direct way to reject plausible alternatives without an objective empirical test is simply to ignore them entirely. We see this in the work of Diez, who maintains that new policies are more likely to occur if they are consistent with the underlying assumptions of prior ones – their language, symbolism, and images. An example is Diez’s bold, parsimonious causal account of why the British applied to join the EC in 1961: ‘[T]he language of a free trade area in the British case facilitated the move towards the articulation of an economic community that would otherwise have been much harder, if not impossible’ (p. 608). This is a refreshingly concise claim, yet Diez makes no effort whatsoever to substantiate it.

In particular, the unsuspecting reader would have no inkling that the existing literature contains at least two rationalist explanations far more strongly supported by the archival record. One is that Harold Macmillan was influenced by further relative economic decline and the rejection of his efforts to mediate between the superpowers, visible by 1960 (Kaiser 1996). The other is that Britain, skeptical of supranationalism and wary of any preferential trading area in agriculture, first attempted to negotiate its preferred policy, the free trade area (FTA), and, when it failed, sought the more onerous European Community (EC) in order to avoid economic and geopolitical isolation (Moravcsik 1998). Either renders linguistic and symbolic influences epiphenomenal. If language and symbolism also shifted, traditional accounts presume, it was because the government, business, and political parties were justifying self-interested policies that grew more pro-European over time. Perhaps they even manipulated the debate. British policy change was a strategic adaptation to new circumstances, rather than a shift in the deep structure of British values and preferences.

A simple empirical test can help to determine whether Diez’s account or one of the traditional accounts is more accurate.¹⁰ If the rationalists are correct that British policy was a strategic adaptation, not a fundamental transformation, British politicians and officials should have been able to foresee and plan for the future scenario. They should have understood even before the FTA was proposed that the failure of some commercial accommodation with the Continent would force a membership bid. If the alternative was linguistically and symbolically unthinkable, we should observe no such foresightfulness. Unfortunately for Diez’s claim, we observe the former. British officials argue as early as 1956 that if the EC negotiations succeed and any British alternative fails, Britain will soon be forced to join the EC. There is, moreover, considerable evidence that Macmillan, like subsequent leaders, considered élite and public opinion a constraint to be manipulated. One former top British adviser once told me that 10 Downing Street’s working assumption was that public opinion could be moved to support any European initiative in eighteen months. Certainly Macmillan took this view.¹¹

One could cite many other examples, but the central point is clear. Constructivists in this volume do not test their claims against plausible alternatives.

CONCLUSION: ‘TO WHAT ISSUE WILL THIS COME?’

Given the multitude of citations to the likes of John Searle, Anthony Giddens,
Alexander Wendt, and other social theorists, it would seem perverse to criticize constructivists for being insufficiently theoretical. Yet this volume reveals just that. We see a striking unwillingness to set forth distinctive mid-range hypotheses and test them against the most plausible alternatives in a rigorous and objective way. There is not a point in this article – with the single exception, perhaps, of Fierke and Wiener’s claim about NATO and the EU, now to appear in issue 6:5 – where one sensed that a claim by the author is in any danger (even in the abstract) of empirical disconfirmation.

This reticence to place empirical claims at risk cannot be explained as a function of the empirical material itself. Surely few domains are more promising than the study of ideas in the process of European integration. Even the most materialist explanations of European integration – such as those advanced by Alan Milward and myself – concede an important secondary role for ideas (Milward 1993). Nor can this unwillingness to test clear hypotheses be a function of the novelty of the claims being advanced. Surely few topics have been as extensively researched and subtly illuminated as the role of ideas in European integration – whether by historians like Walter Lipgens, political scientists like Stanley Hoffmann (1974), or practitioner-scholars like François Duchêne (1995). Nor can this unwillingness be a function, as the editors imply in their introduction, of fundamental philosophical (ontological or epistemological) rejection of hypothesis testing. In fact when the authors in this volume turn to empirical analysis, they prove philosophically conventional, aspiring to test theories by presenting decisive evidence and so on. Nor, finally, can this unwillingness to test theories rigorously result, as authors in this volume repeatedly claim, from the inherent difficulty of testing ideational or sociological claims. Surely, as we have just seen in the case of Diez’s analysis of Macmillan, the empirical material often lends itself to straightforward and decisive empirical tests easily within the grasp of anyone minimally acquainted with the archival and secondary sources. If this volume contains few such tests of competing theories, it is not because they are inherently difficult, but because authors chose not to conduct them.

Why? The editors of this volume have an answer: Not enough meta-theory. They write in their introduction that the discovery of ‘promising avenue(s) for future integration research’ has been hampered by the lack of ‘suitable meta-theoretical perspectives.’ We need, they argue, ‘heightened awareness of the implications of meta-theoretical positions.’ Get the meta-theory right, they promise, and empirical theorizing will be ‘important and fruitful.’ This special issue provides a useful test of this claim. By my estimation, fully 50 percent or more of this volume is given over to meta-theoretical analysis, rather than theory or empirics – just as the editors recommend. A panoply of arguments drawn from ontology, social theory, epistemology, and philosophy of science are deployed. Yet the resulting empirical propositions are few, relatively conventional, and barely tested.

Perhaps, then, an opposite view is worth considering, namely that meta-theory is not the solution but the problem. Philosophical speculation is being employed not to refine and sharpen concrete concepts, hypotheses, and methods, but to shield empirical conjectures from empirical testing. Meta-theoretical musing does not
establish but evades points of direct empirical conflict between sophisticated rationalist and constructivist theories. Abstract discussions of competing modes of positivism, ideational causality, rationalist explanation, the relationship between agents and structures, often serve as principled excuses for not engaging in competitive theory testing. At the very least, such speculation expends a great deal of time, effort, and space that might have been devoted to the elaboration of concrete concepts, theories, hypotheses, and methods.

All this distracts constructivists from the only element truly essential to social science: the vulnerability of conjectures to some sort of empirical disconfirmation. Only if one’s own claim can be proven wrong are we able to conclude that it has been proven right. In this personal modesty and relentless skepticism toward the conjectures of any single scholar lies the real power of social science as a collective enterprise. Yet very few, if any, empirical propositions in this volume, I have sought to show, are advanced in this spirit or meet this standard. When constructivists ‘wax desperate with imagination,’ is it therefore not the responsibility of outside observers – most especially those, like myself, who wish the enterprise well – to ask, like Horatio and Marcellus watching Hamlet follow the ghost: ‘To what issue will this come?’

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NOTES

1 Five or ten years ago, even this minimal implicit commitment to theory testing – theories should be distinctive and tested against other theories – might have elicited spirited rejection. Yet leading constructivists have since broken with postmodernism and its rejection of any objective standards for empirical theory testing. Such attacks, generally based on the notion that ideational causation cannot be studied causally or objectively, were never very convincing anyway, given the extensive and refined empirical literatures in political science on public opinion, élite values, transaction costs, structure-induced equilibria, political culture, analogical reasoning, entrepreneurship, social capital, strategic culture, cognitive biases, symbolic politics, and other such topics.

2 In doing so, I have restricted my analysis to those in the volume that raise relevant issues. Other authors, in particular those engaged in purely normative analysis, I have unfortunately left aside. Jo Shaw’s analysis is particularly interesting, not least because, in seeking a social theoretical grounding for a normative theory of European constitutionalism, she ultimately rejects a more ‘constructivist’ or ‘top-down’ sociological analysis. Instead she opts on normative grounds for a more liberal, ‘bottom-up’ view that privileges the pre-existing interests and identities of individuals and groups in civil society.

3 Some, such as Glarbo, flirt with the idea that constructivism does not explain state behavior at all, but just ‘shifts in diplomatic agency identity caused by intersubjective social structure.’ This view, not consistently pursued by any of the authors – and therefore – need not detain us.

4 Another example are Karin Fierke and Antje Wiener (Fierke and Wiener, forthcoming)
addressing the link between the normative principles in the Helsinki Agreement and European willingness to enlarge to the East. This is a bold and intriguing interpretation of a particular historical circumstance, but it does not appear to contain a testable general theoretical proposition.

5 This intriguing idea, also explicable in rational choice terms as an inter-temporal contract, has potentially wide applicability. See Bates 1996.

6 Note that other IR theories also specify a distinct role for ideas. For realists, broadly speaking, the distribution of ideas and information is a function of the underlying distribution of material power resources. For liberals, the distribution of ideas and information is a function of underlying social preferences and institutions, such as economic interests, structures of political representative, and fundamental ethnic and political identities. For institutionalists, the distribution of ideas and information is a function of international institutional commitments contracted by national governments.

7 There is, of course, at least one important exception. Liberal theories examine the exogenous impact of collective ideas concerning public goods provision, which help to define national preferences. These ‘ideational liberal’ (or ‘liberal constructivist’) factors include collective preferences concerning national, political, and socioeconomic identity. These ideas can be thought of as reflective of underlying societal demands and values – collectively determined, perhaps, but intelligible as individual political preferences.

8 Consider, by analogy, the telephone. Telephones have many characteristics generally applied to deep ideas and discourses. Telephones constitute an ubiquitous, absolutely essential network for collective decision-making in the EU. Their existence is a necessary condition for – indeed, it is constitutive of – social interaction as practiced in this particular historical context. The network of telephones collectively empowers individuals to speak and act; without them, social interaction would grind to a halt. Yet it would be absurd to argue that telephones ‘caused’ European integration.

9 The tendency of the editors of this volume, as well as some authors in it, to assume that no other theory could possibly explain the phenomena they observe or that no non-theoretical writing could offer the same conjectures amounts to a level of confidence in social science in general, and their own theory in particular, that can only strike an outside observer as astonishing.

10 There is, in addition, a materialist account of preference change. The direction of British exports was shifting, despite discrimination by the EEC, from the Commonwealth to the Continent. In 1955, around 25 percent of British exports went to Europe and twice as many to the Commonwealth. By 1965, these figures had reversed. See Moravcsik 1998: chs 2–3.

11 For detailed evidence, see Moravcsik 1998: chs 2, 3, also on later decisions, chs 6, 7.

12 The editors of this volume assert at one point in the introduction that constructivist theory is necessary to free us to think of explanations otherwise inaccessible to us. Yet few if any of the hypotheses in the volume hardly seem out of the ordinary in light of traditional history, daily journalism, or political criticism of the EEC in post-war Europe. This seems to place rather too much emphasis on the public influence and personal creativity of social scientists, as compared to others in society.

13 This is, of course, self-defeating behavior. The more generous the analyst is to opposing theories, the more confidence we should have in any positive empirical finding she reports. In The Choice for Europe, for example, I specify an alternative ideational explanation of national preferences and test it across the five most significant decisions in EU history, employing a method that, I maintain, is biased in favor of ideational and geopolitical explanations and against my economic account. The preponderance of evidence confirms three empirical conclusions: (1) Ideational factors played only a secondary or insignificant role in nearly all cases. (2) There is nonetheless interesting cross-national and cross-issue variation in how much ideational factors mattered, and I go on to suggest some hypotheses about the conditions under which ideas matter most.
One cannot trust the public rhetoric or interview statements of government officials and politicians. Politicians are professional experts at manipulating rhetoric opportunistically; only confidential sources tell the real story. In that work, however, my primary concern was not to specify a detailed ideational theory. Hence there remains much room to improve such theories and engage in a far more intensive and focused empirical debate grounded in the rich archival sources available on European integration. On ideas, see also Moravcsik (forthcoming).