Rationality, Institutions and Reflexivity in the EU: Some Ontological and Epistemological Considerations

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Abstract:
Sociological research on the European Union provides a much needed alternative to mainstream EU-studies dominated by economics, law, IR and political science. However, until now this sociological alternative has mostly involved the adaptation of sociological terminology such as "social construction" or "identity" and the introduction of new objects of research, such as the social conventions regulating national security or the discursive constructions of Europe. It is however the claim of this paper that sociological theory also provides the tools for a more fundamental re-evaluation of some of the ontological and epistemological presuppositions of EU research and a corresponding reconstruction of the object of study of European studies.

Keywords: sociological theory, rationality, political institutions, epistemology, ontology.

Résumé :
La recherche sociologique sur l'Union Européenne constitue une alternative bienvenue aux études européennes dominées par l'économie, le droit, les relations internationales et les sciences politiques. Pourtant, jusqu'ici, cette alternative sociologique a généralement consisté à adapter une terminologie sociologique de « construction sociale » ou « identité » à de nouveaux objets de recherche tels que les conventions sociales qui font la régulation de la sécurité nationale ou les constructions discursives de l'Europe. Cet article se propose de montrer que la théorie sociologique fournit aussi des outils pour une révision plus fondamentale de certains des a priori ontologiques et épistémologiques de la recherche sur l'Union Européenne et une reconstruction à l'avenant de l'objet d'étude des études européennes.

Mots-clés : théorie sociologique, rationalité, institutions politiques, épistémologie, ontologie.

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Introduction

Sociological research on the European Union provides a much-needed alternative to mainstream EU-studies dominated by economics, law, IR and political science. However, until now this sociological alternative has mostly involved the adaptation of sociological terminology such as "social construction" or "identity" and the introduction of new objects of research, such as the social conventions regulating national security or the discursive constructions of Europe (see for example Katzenstein 1996, Christiansen, Jorgensen, and Wiener 2001). These works have undoubtedly helped produce a more complex and sophisticated picture of the EU as a layered, polycentric political figuration and contributed to significant advances in European studies (for recent presentations see for example Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2006, Quaglia, De Fransesco and Radaelli 2008). It is however the claim of this paper that sociological theory also provides the tools for a more fundamental re-evaluation of some of the ontological and epistemological presuppositions of EU research and a corresponding reconstruction of the object of study of European studies. In the following, I will further develop a sociological framework by exploring key notions such as rationality and reflexivity. It is my claim that these are the tools necessary for explaining what remains one of the biggest issues of European studies, namely the interplay of European institutions and agents both within the Brussels game and across national frontiers.

In distinction to other recent sociological approaches to European regional integration such as systems analysis (Stichweh 2004, Albert 2005), world polity theory (Beckfield 2006), frame analysis (Medrano 2003) or strategic action analysis (Schimmelfennig 2002, 2003), the structural constructivist approach developed in this paper emphasises both the macro-level links between major social institutions and power and the micro-level actions of individuals and groups in more or less structured social spheres. In distinction to more structural approaches, institutions, practices and agents do not necessarily form enclosed, autonomous fields in the bourdieusian sense or organisational fields in the sense of neoinstitutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Rather, constrained by webs of social and institutional relationships, they evolve unevenly. In political science, this research perspective contributes to a more developed sociological institutionalism that concentrates on the interaction of agents and institutions, a dimension that has been neglected in institutionalist research on political institutions (Peters 1999, 70). Recent empirical studies that focus from a similar research perspective on the interaction between individuals and institutions in the EU include works on Members of the European Parliament (Beauvallet 2007), on European civil servants (Georgakakis and de Lassalle 2007), on regional elites (Kull 2008), and on lawyers (Cohen and Vauchez 2007, Madsen 2006, forthcoming).

The background for attempting these significant sociological reorientations in the study of the European construction is informed by a number of empirical studies I have conducted in recent years on European political institutions. Generally, these works argue that the logic of change of essential European institutions like the European

Commission and the European Parliament is not only due to internal dynamics but is also linked to transnational interplays of differentiated agents operating simultaneously in multiple social spheres (Kauppi 2005). My studies suggest that institutions and particularly institutional change have to be explained in the light of both new policy challenges and the individual preferences and habits of the agents making up these institutions and their surroundings. Consequently, such an analysis challenges a number of firmly held epistemological and ontological assumptions of mainstream European research (cf. for instance Checkel 2005, for an overview Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2006, 27-49, Trondal 2007). Moreover, it defies the common view of rationality as exogenous. In this account, not all actors or agents are equally rational or irrational, but play different social roles and rely on differentiated knowledge. Ultimately, it is my claim that examining these interplays allows for a more accurate understanding of both agents and institutions in the EU.

Building on previous work, I will first, in contrast to an exogenous conception of rationality, develop a more complex version of rationality that fuses (neo)realist and constructivist elements in terms of social action in specific figurations. This is followed by a brief analysis of political institutions as layered and embodied structures of social action that are not just objectified and external to individuals as in most EU research but rather both objective and subjective. In a third section, contra the philosophical theory of reflexivity developed by Habermas, I present some elements for a sociological version of reflexivity as a key component of social competence, power and learning. These sections concretely suggest a number of research strategies and a reconstruction of the object of study, which aims at fusing research on the EU with the insights developed on bounded rationality, embodied institutions, and power and reflexivity.

Bounded rationality

In his "synthetic institutionalist approach", Frank Schimmelfennig (2003) seeks to bridge the gap between a rationalist and a constructivist account of preferences. Following rationalist institutionalism, he argues that agents in the EU act "strategically on the basis of exogenous specific policy preferences", but they do so within a community environment defined by its ethos and a high interaction density. However, "institutions constrain the choices and behavior of self-interested actors but do not constitute their identity and interests" (Schimmelfennig 2003, 161). Basing this novel approach on the sociological works of Erving Goffmann (see also Schimmelfennig 2002), Schimmelfennig argues for a sequencing of rationalist and constructivist propositions in an analysis of EU policy issues.

In his empirical analysis of the eastern enlargement of the EU, Schimmelfennig combines a "rationalist" account of preferences and logics of action that is followed by a constructivist explanation of interaction dynamics and outcome. In other words, the enlargement preferences of the EU member States can be explained by the preferences of these and not by the community ethos of the EU that, however, prevents those reticent to enlargement from sabotaging the process. In Schimmelfennig's analysis, the enlargement preferences of the EU member States and not the social conventions regulating social interaction in the community environment, which do not affect preferences, determined the larger process of enlargement. Schimmelfennig's approach might thus be described as a rationalist one topped with a thin layer of constructivism, and wrapped up in a second thick layer of rationalism.

While Schimmelfennig is sensitive to sociological argumentation and even considers that his approach represents a form of institutionalism, his analysis, in great part because of his initial epistemological and ontological presuppositions, reinforces a

dualistic conception of social reality, in which individual preference formation is independent of the social sphere in which these agents operate (for a similar epistemological and ontological position see Wendt 1999). This dualism prevents a deeper analysis of the interaction between agents and the EU environment, of social roles, of political institutions, and of the complicity between the individual and his/her habitat in terms of knowledge and action. The mutual constitution of society and individual dear to so many sociologists (Berger and Luckmann 1966, Elias 1983) is transformed into a rather basic schema according to which, in the end, individuals create institutions but institutions have little effect on individuals.

An alternative sociological approach, inspired by works in social theory (Berger and Luckmann 1966) and social movement research (see for instance Tarrow 1997), tries to solve the dualism between rationalism and constructivism in EU-studies in a different way. Following Schimmelfennig, this approach combines these two elements, rationalism and constructivism, but not sequentially. Instead of arguing, like Schimmelfenning and a great majority of rationalist institutionalists do, that preference formation is exogenous to social and political institutions, or of maintaining the opposite extreme constructivist stance according to which the logic of social action is always endogenously formed (cf. for instance Douglas 1986), this approach argues that the formal aim or logic of social action is the same in all social spheres and is therefore exogenous to institutions, but that the substantive logic of social action is endogenous to institutions. The formal logic consists, for social agents, of acquiring the resources that are, in their eyes, the most valued. These can be political power for politicians, financial profits for businessmen or intellectual recognition for academics, for instance. These agents are all then engaged in a semi-controlled competition for values that are prized in their spheres of social action (Weber 1968, Waltzer 1983), values that motivate their action and gives it meaning.

But this formal and teleological logic of accumulation does not explain what kinds of actions and values these agents engage in or even what are the goals of their actions. The formal level of analysis (see Meyer et al. 1997, Beckfield 2006) has to be linked to the actual practices of the agents involved. The substantive logic of their actions, the type of actions they engage in, where and when, with whom, is dependent on the chronotopic (Bakhtin 1981) or figurational (Elias 1983), that is, the temporal and structural characteristics of the spheres in which they operate. Their preferences are endogenously formed in the sense that what they aim at depends on various historical and structural factors that structure their sphere of social action. Social and cultural conventions and norms exist in terms not only of the means through which certain resources can be acquired, but also in terms of exactly what will the most valued resource that most in a sphere of social action will struggle to attain at a specific point in time and space. In a nutshell, in this alternative sociological approach the formal logic of social action is exogenous but the substantive logic of social action is endogenous.

An additional problem is that some constructivists theoretically separate interest from value, the strategic calculation of the agents from socialization, which would not involve calculation. In reality, however, individuals have an interest in some value more than in others. For instance, academics might systematically pursue symbolic recognition by peers instead of monetary awards. Individuals socialized in certain actions and preferences like engaging in scholarly activities calculate ("It might be better to publish here") and intuitively play out their role, without even separating socialization from calculation. A competent social agent switches from one to the other. The "end point" of socialization is not internalization, as Checkel argues (Checkel 2005, 806) but rather the sociologically more interesting externalization that is social action in the world (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Social action is both endogenous and

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exogenous, involving bounded rationality and calculation of costs and benefits.

In order to be specific about what the goals of different agents are, what will be crucial will be the delimitation of the sphere of social action in which individuals operate, of exactly what kind of social, joint action we are talking about. This delimitation is crucial because, to a certain extent, this will determine the limits of the playing field. To evaluate this, equating like Schimmelfennig does "the community environment" with "social structure" is too vague. We need to specify what are the collective ends of the actions in question and what kinds of institutional figurations, as complex layered structures of joint actions (Searle 1983) mould these actions. If we talk about European energy policy, we will have national governments, European institutions, private and public agents and so on. Certain technological constraints will frame the actions of these individuals. All these agents will be involved in a political struggle the goal of which is the determination of the EU's energy policy. The controlled competition in this policy sphere will be regulated and constituted by various social conventions and norms of various strength. These institutions and the social roles that are constitutive of these institutions have specific characteristics that mainstream approaches, because of their emphasis on institutions as objectified entities, tend to minimize.

The advantage of such a more complex theoretical understanding of rationality is that it enables us to see the similarities between rationality and social action in different social spheres while at the same time being sensitive to their historical and structural variations. This central critique can be illustrated by a return to one of the most cherished objects of EU-studies, namely institutions. In the following section, I further elaborate this argument by looking into the interplay of agents and institutions.

Embodied institutions

Most of political reality is symbolic, immaterial and virtual, but it requires physical supports, individuals, social actions, stationery, buildings, and the like to really exist. Even in one of the most sophisticated sociological theories of European integration, Schimmelfennig's synthetic institutionalist approach, political institutions are systematically presented in an objectified and disembodied form. Institutions are not only exterior to individual agents, but they also are quasi-material in terms of modes of social existence. Further, they are reified and anthropomorphized, presented as having wills of their own. They are the central dramatis personae of European integration and European politics. In this political ontology of European integration, agents are States or the Commission for instance (cf. for instance Moravcsik 1999). This projection from the individual to the institution is a major problem in Schimmelfennig's adaptation of Goffman's sociological framework, in which agents are individuals, not institutions. In fact, an analogous process took place in Wendt's social constructivist analysis of IR (Wendt 1999), where Wendt projected individual-level analysis and presuppositions based on a reading of Erving Goffman and George Herbert Mead onto a "higher" plane to analyze social and political institutions.

The same habit of mixing the individual agent and States or institutions is visible in more recent constructivist works (for instance Checkel 2005). But in this operation, institutions are transformed into objectified entities that have a rational mind of their own following an asocial "economist" interpretation of the human mind. Curiously, in Schimmelfennig's framework, the preferences of the actors, the States, are "not informed by collective identities, norms and other ideas" (Schimmelfennig 2003, 161). An asocial individual finds its theoretical equivalent in an asocial institution. Institutions are examined without analysis of social roles and the social characteristics of those occupying, and partly making them.

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After all, institutions do not do anything by themselves.

An alternative sociological framework makes possible a more complex analysis of preference formation and institutionalization. A first point has to be made about the social force of institutions. Society, or any structured sphere of social action to be a bit more specific, is composed of institutions of varying social effect. Some, like the legal system, are strongly codified and ritualized, with coercive social norms and social roles. In the case of institutions of this type, individuals are significantly shaped by institutional conventions and norms. Other institutions are weaker: their coercive force is lesser (see Olsen 2007 for analysis). But even then exogenous factors are not necessarily exterior to the institutions. They might have to do with the individual "baggage" of occupiers of social roles in these institutions, a "baggage" that is tied to previous social roles in other institutional spheres (for an empirical illustration see Erkkilä and Kauppi 2008).

In the case of strong institutions, those individuals who represent the institutions in question will have to internalize institutional norms in order to be competent representatives of the institution. A "flow" has to develop between individual and institution. The same "flow" (Czikenmikhaly 2000) can be observed among prime ministers representing their country in the EU, for instance. When these individuals move from an institutional context that is strongly codified like a national political sphere into a figuration like the "EU negotiating environment" where they do not have to abandon their social role but are in fact encouraged to behave according to it, they will obviously do so. Their preferences will be relatively stable, like Schimmelfennig shows very well in his empirical study. But these preferences can change because the individuals representing the institution in question change as a result of an electoral defeat.

For instance, the relationships between France and Germany have been mediated by the relationships between their respective leaders. The personal relations between Francois Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl have significantly shaped not only the relations between France and Germany but also the EU (Ross 1995). Consequently, the definition of national interest cannot be a fixed preference, as Schimmelfennig argues. In other words certain individuals represent the State and speak in its name. This ventriloquism is institutionalized and socially regulated. Only certain individuals have access to this collective resource. It is difficult to see how a sociological approach that does not differentiate between institutions and those representing these institutions could possibly analyze variations in policies and, thus, understand the social forces that shape institutionalization, the temporal and synchronic variations in political institutions. In his endeavour to keep preferences fixed and exogenous, Schimmelfennig is led to formulate questionable statements, such as "these preferences [of EU actors] are not informed by collective identities, norms, and other ideas" (Schimmelfennig 2003, 161). If one abandons the duality individual-institution, one does not need to separate interest from norm and social role. A similar kind of distinction has to be made when analyzing social norms. Social norms are institution-specific, and they vary depending on social positions and roles in institutional spheres. The effect of norms is never uniform, contrary to what Schimmelfennig seems to assume. And if norms, such as those relative to the promotion of common European values, are relatively weak in a specific institutional figuration, it does not mean they do not exist.

Schimmelfennig makes a big case out of his finding that States do not change preferences when deciding about EU enlargement. Preferences are thus fixed. Lets assume for discussion's sake that institutions such as the "community environment" do not change their identity and interests. But this might have to do more with the characteristics of the "community environment" as conceptualized by Schimmelfennig. Because

when we switch our focus to individual agents and their socialization, a distinction has to be made between socialization tout court and professional socialization. For instance, to a French anti-European MEP (member of the European parliament) professional integration into the European Parliament is necessary, but it might not involve socialization into European values. Competent institutional behavior does not necessarily require ideological commitment on the part of individuals occupying certain social roles (Beauvallet 2007). In fact, what can be observed in institutions such as the European Parliament is an inversed Weberian process of socialization, in which individuals integrate the institutions, acquire certain professional skills and practices, and only later some of them commit themselves to the values the institution is supposed to represent and defend (European values, European democracy, etc.). Preferences can thus be fixed and variable at the same time. Part of the problem has to do with the separation of national and supranational modes of behavior. For instance, in his analysis of the Commission, Trondal separates from one another supranational and national social roles, as if they were mutually exclusive (Trondal 2007). It could be argued that all EU Member States are Europeanized and have developed a host of social and professional roles that are both supranational and national (for analysis at the regional level see for instance Kull 2008).

The possible advantage of the alternative sociological approach developed here is that it brings to the fore of the analysis institutions as embodied entities involving individual and collective social action. Yet to fully exhibit the heuristic advantages of such an approach, I will examine a further dimension central to European studies, power and reflexivity.

Reflexivity and power

A key dimension absent in for example Schimmelfennig's sociological approach is that of reflexivity. This dimension has

however been developed by other EU-scholars like Erik Eriksen. Basing himself on a Habermasian interpretation of reflexivity as democratic deliberation, Eriksen defines reflexivity in terms of the procedural self-reference and reflexivity of institutions and in terms of self-reflection in the sense of the agents' self-observation and operation upon themselves (Eriksen 2005). This version of philosophical reflexivity considers social and political action in a vacuum, involving rational, universal individuals that share a code of behavior. Reflexivity is intellectualized, detached from action in a specific institutional figuration and cultural setting. The link between reflexivity, conflict, power and action is undertheorized. What is more, the relationship between subject, the individual observing or acting, and the object, the object of study, observation or of an action, is almost completely absent. However, from a sociological point of view, it is clear that the relationship between subject and object is not constant but rather interactive. Just like the presence of the anthropologist transforms the behaviour of the objects of study (see for instance Adam et al. 1990), it would seem logical to think that transformations would also take place in the behaviour of the subject of study, the individual conducting the research. This dynamic between subject and object, central to any social science research, should be taken into account as an integral part of the research process and help avoid the natural scientific bias of social science research.

The picture created by a sociological conception of reflexivity is considerably different (cf. Mills 1959, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Individuals are embedded in social structures, and are engaged in actions in the world. Reflexivity is not just an intellectual exercise but also social action and learning. But even more, it is also, especially in our modern, complex societies, a symbolic instrument in political competition. Those agents who have knowledge, who are capable of self-objectification, that is of an objective evaluation of their position and their realistic possibilities in a certain political figuration,

are able to anticipate the actions of others and perhaps turn hopeless situations into, perhaps not always victories but at least acceptable outcomes by minimizing the damage. Reflexivity is a central component of social competence and political power. In order to survive, individuals have to interiorize the formal and substantive logic of their spheres of social activity.

When discussing the issue of reflexivity in the context of the EU from a sociological point of view, two dimensions should be taken into consideration: the reflexivity of the agents of European integration, individuals and groups mostly, but also to a certain extent the institutions involved in this process, and the reflexivity of the individuals observing this process, that is for instance analysts, academics, journalists, and so on. The latter also participate in the social construction of the European Union. For instance, scientific knowledge is used by a variety of political agents and institutions such as the European Commission to mould their policies following principles of social engineering. This is very clear in the Commission's new communication policy (see Kauppi 2007 for analysis). Experts in communication were needed to elaborate a more sophisticated approach to communication, which is now decoupled from institutional efficiency and coupled with democracy and participation. The line between information that legitimizes certain political interests and information that provides a critical point of view to these policies is a very fine line indeed (cf. Kauppi and Madsen 2007). The complicity between scientific observation and political engagement is nowhere clearer than in the double careers of a multitude of scholars and academics who have combined the scholarly study of the EU and direct political participation in the construction of the EU. Take Romano Prodi, a noted economist and Italian prime minister, becoming president of the European Commission. In this, and many other cases, scholarly merits are easily turned into political resources that can be used to further build a double career, scholarly and

political. From the point of view of these agents, political and intellectual "vassalage" (Mulkay 1981) of social science to political decision makers is not seen as a danger to but rather as an opportunity for scholarly work.

Developing a sociological version of reflexivity requires abandoning the epistemological and ontological standpoint according to which reality is "out there", that it constitutes an objectified, nature-like, reality exterior to individuals and groups that is strongly objectified, and that atomized individuals, following conventions of deliberative democracy, would somehow intuitively follow the same universal rules of conversation and rational argumentation. Taking a somewhat different view, we can explore the symbolic aspects of this reality and of the socialized individuals and groups that construct it. We introduce variation at every level of analysis, that of individual perceptions of situations, of self-definitions of groups, of the political impact of norms and conventions, of the stability of preferences and of the cohesion of institutional agents. If for institutions reflexivity can be conceptualized in terms of institutional adaptation, collective learning and so on (Flockhart 2006, Olsen 2007), for individual politicians and social groups, reflexivity is a question of political survival. Reflexivity understood as sociological reflexivity, not philosophical reflexivity, thus underscores a crucial aspect of EU-research: the power of knowledge to create, not just reflect, political reality through social action and political struggle. A sociological conception of reflexivity, which still needs to be further developed, makes possible the combined analysis of reflexivity as self-knowledge, learning and social power. It also sheds new light on European studies as an academic and professional practice.

Conclusions

The epistemological and ontological presuppositions and the dualisms they produce (individual-institution, socialization-

calculation, supranational-national, etc.) outlined briefly here prevent a great deal of research from developing a more complex, "thick" description, of EU integration. If, from the outset, individuals would be considered social beings, they would never pursue just their self-interest. The problem with the "as if" theorizing (Checkel 2005) of much EU research is that in practice institutions do not do anything by themselves. They do not act by themselves, they do not have free wills, they do not reason. Individuals do things in their place and in their name. By creating a parallel world in which institutions and States act like asocial, economically rational individuals and where socialized individuals are separated from the institutional spheres in which they act, these "as if" theorists evacuate from the realm of social inquiry a host of fundamental issues of social action and political power.

It seems to be a characteristic of mainstream research on European integration to project presuppositions concerning individual human beings to the level of political institutions such as Member States and supranational institutions (see for recent examples Eriksen 2005, Bicchi 2006). One consequence of this projection is the blurring of the lines of public and political responsibility. As institutions are not analyzed in relation with individuals and groups who at a specific point in time have the right or obligation to speak in the name of the institutions they represent, the social and politics mechanisms conditioning public policies are left untouched and even mystified. In terms of the analysis of institutions, they are considered as being equally institutionalized or non-institutionalized, thus preventing analysis of level of institutionalization of European institutions, of the strength of the social roles they inhabit, of institutions as embodied structures of social rules and norms, etc. Great deals of this research moreover seem to consider that all agents are equally reflexive, or which comes to the same non-reflexive. Agents are not analyzed in terms of differential power resources, of which reflexivity (self-objectification and -knowledge, learning, adaptation, etc.) would constitute one source. Finally, social science research is not conceived as a symbolic world-constructing activity that involves subjects and objects that are in an interactive relationship, but as a merely descriptive objectivising exercise that reinforces a functionalist, apolitical image of the European Union, a democracy without politics.

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