

The Sociology of EU Politics

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A problematic absence characterizes sociology's relationship with EU studies. Although potentially one of the disciplines that might bring a much needed 'bottom up' view of the origins and sources of European integration – along with social history, anthropology, social psychology, human geography – its contributions have been scattered and marginal. Dominant understandings of European integration remain wedded to the resolutely 'top down' view of IR theory, law, diplomatic history, and public policy analysis. Sociological claims and argumentation were very much at the heart of the classic studies of Haas (1958) on elite socialization to the European project, or Deutsch et al. (1957) on increased interaction between nationals of the continent, as the two surest routes to regional integration. Yet today sociologists barely feature among the participants at mainstream EU conferences.

The short answer for why this is, is that sociologists are still wedded to 'society' as their principle unit of analysis. By this, they typically mean societies as historically formed, culturally distinct nation-states, and the EU is certainly *not* a nation-state-society in this sense. For all the theoretical talk among social theorists about transnational or global processes, very few of them have applied these ideas to European integration. Most empirical sociologists, on the other hand, study processes (of stratification, race relations, assimilation, education, etc.) *within* one society. For many American sociologists, the sociology of America is *still* the sociology of the modern world. Comparativists, meanwhile, typically use data that is identified and counted on a society-by-society basis, so that the variation they study is always cross-national (Breen and Rottman 1998). European scholars might be better attuned, but look for quantitative empirical data and you find even the EU's own statistical system – Eurostat, Eurobarometer, etc. – reproduce the mindset of 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer and

Glick Schiller 2002). It is, in fact, very difficult to systematically study pan- or trans-national social structures and phenomena, because of the way nation-states have carved up the world and its populations, statistically speaking.

The possible emergence of transcending models of economy and society in Asia, Europe, and North America, should suggest the development of a different, comparative macro-sociology on regional integration. Yet much of the pioneering work of this kind has in fact come from political economists or human geographers working in a 'regional studies' mode (i.e. Dunford 1998; Matthi 1999; Bagnasco and Le Galès 2000; Rodríguez-Pose 2002). A few exceptional works have sought to develop a pan-European sociological agenda, notably Kaelble (1990), Mendras (1997), Therborn (1995), and Crouch (1999). These look at the underlying economic and social structure of Europe on a regional scale, both historically and spatially (see also Klausen and Tilly 1997; Berezin and Schain 2003; Bettin Laties and Recchi 2005). Also of note is work inspired by Rokkan's approach to Europe (Bartolini 2005). Empiricists will find better, non-state-centric data sources for this, and better ways of measuring pan-national structures: whether of European public opinion, classes and occupations, elite social power, values, or (most straightforwardly) behavioural convergence across the continent (say, as tourists or consumers). This would be the agenda for a future sociology of Europe. Here, I will focus on the somewhat narrower question of what a sociology of EU politics might look like.

'SOCIOLOGICAL' IR: EUROPEANIZATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF 'EUROPEAN IDENTITY'

One group of scholars describing themselves as 'sociological' have made a big splash in the

handbook of EU studies: the social constructivists in IR theory. Inspired by Katzenstein's (1996) 'rummaging in the graveyard of sociological studies', Wendt's (1999) monumental 'social theory of international relations', and a wave of work emphasizing the impact of transnational human rights on global political change (Klotz 1995; Risse 1995; Keck and Sikkink 1997), a mainly younger generation of qualitatively inclined researchers have turned to norms, values, culture, and identity to explain policy-making and institutional change (see Christiansen et al. 2001; Checkel, this volume). A challenge has been laid down to the reductive, rationalist mainstream of political science. The EU is a fertile ground for these questions, given the massive efforts of the European institutions to influence European public opinion, and induce participation or cross-national behaviour, thereby encouraging the formation of 'European identity' as an antidote to national belonging and growing Euroscepticism. Numerous prominent IR theorists have thus sought to address the Europeanization question as a 'thick' cultural institutionalist one of constructing 'identity'. Archetypal studies in this vein have, for example, related variations in the stance of national elites on policies such as EMU or citizenship, to the residual impact beyond interests of national 'political cultures' (Risse 2001), the variable 'resonance' of international norms or ideas (Checkel, 2001), or the impact of ideas and norms on EU enlargement (Schimmelfennig 2003). A connected 'sociological' tendency has been the re-emergence of theorizing that emphasizes the emergent functional properties of the European political system: pointing to the impact of institutional 'isomorphism', whereby 'routinized behaviours' and 'governing concepts' set by the EU institutions shape national and regional practices in a multi-levelled system of governance (Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999; Jachtenfuchs 2001).

It is odd to hear terminology and argumentation that is so reminiscent of the 'bad old days' of Parsonian political science – the paradigm laid down by the functionalist sociology of Talcott Parsons – when national politics was studied as if it expressed the logic of holistic, self-regulating 'systems', action was guided by

mysterious, faceless 'norms', and variation understood in terms of reified 'political cultures'. This was before economics, not sociology, became the master paradigm for modern political science, a moment captured in Brian Barry's famous and spectacularly bloody destruction of Parsons, and Parsonian political scientists such as Easton, or Almond and Verba (Barry 1971). It was Barry's book – which has long represented the last word for political scientists on the merits of sociology – that dug the graveyard of which Katzenstein speaks. Ironic, then, that the constructivists have returned so ingeniously to a Parsonian idiom, whether theorizing about processes of 'social learning', the 'reflexive' nature of 'norms', or the 'constitutive' role of 'social meanings' in the development of 'collective consciousness' – to take some archetypal formulations. Giddens' structurationist theory is often the preferred citation for notions in this lineage (Wendt 1999), as are structuralist and post-structuralist notions of discourse and culture (Diez 1999). Such grand theories, redolent of the 1970s and 1980s, are every bit as peripheral to mainstream empirical sociology today as structural functionalism, and look very clumsy in comparison to the disaggregative approaches to 'culture', 'social structure', and 'institutions' – the analysis of social mechanisms, networks, or social cognition – that are its leading theoretical edge. The constructivist emphasis on specifying the cultural or institutional impact of political identities has, however, at least put the long neglected, classically Parsonian, question of political socialization firmly back on the table.

In the light of this, the value of the constructivist turn should be judged empirically, not in terms of its contribution to social theory. Problematically, where these theories are operationalized, they have tended to be so in terms of 'discourses' and exclusively textual sources, rather than in terms of systematic attitudinal or behavioural data. In Risse's work on EMU, for example, the sources go no further than the *ad hoc* interpretative analysis of elite discourses, and heuristic 'cultural' descriptions of national politics (Risse et al. 1999). It is interesting that in more recent work, he has now joined forces with social psychologists

(Herrmann et al. 2004). This collection represents an important selection of work on the question of 'European identity', that links experimental studies with quantitative surveys of public opinion (Bruter 2004; Citrin and Sides 2004). It also showcases another form of 'sociologizing' political science: EU analysts who have interviewed elite European officials, to determine the social and political profile of these archetypal 'highly Europeanized' European citizens (Hooghe 2002; Laffan 2004; see also Checkel 2005). These studies have revealed an interesting interplay between the strongly socializing impact of work in the Commission or Permanent Representation, for example, and the nationally defined duties of organizational and political roles that bureaucrats otherwise have to fulfil. One emerging message from these identity studies, at least, is that strong national and European 'identities' need not be mutually incompatible or zero sum in nature (Risse 2004: 249).

Such work on European identity remains fixated on national variation, and on a normative notion of European identity (participatory citizenship) very remote from the everyday lives of European citizens. One quite unique study by a sociologist that goes further is Diez Medrano's (2003) historical, discursive, and ethnographic investigation on the variation of national opinions between and within Spain, Germany, and the UK. He puts into action a frames-based approach influenced by social movements research, that emphasizes the constitutive role of national repertoires and media representations, and which in effect backs up some of the constructivist claims. The strength here lies in its methodological closeness to the ground – the terrain of ordinary Europeans' lives seen through in-depth interviews – rather than imperiously observed elite discourses. A number of French political sociologists too have developed interesting work of this kind on European identity (Duchesne and Frogner 2002), and European citizenship (Strudel 2002). The borders of sociology here blend with numerous other kinds of work on 'identities' in cultural studies and anthropology (Borneman and Fowler 1997). Notable among these are ethnographic, phenomenological

studies of European identity as it is constructed through interaction at borders (Anderson and O'Dowd 1999; Meinhof 2004), or in institutional contexts (the work of Abélès (1996) or Shore (2000) on the Commission).

THE ECONOMIC SOCIOLOGY OF INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Much of the interest in European identity is driven by a quite frankly normative view of European integration that feels compelled to answer concerns about democratic legitimacy. These political and philosophical debates are strikingly disconnected from the underlying market-driven process of European integration, whereas by far and away the bulk of legislative and legal activities of the European institutions is concerned with the political construction of the single market. A very different doorway into EU studies for sociologists, then, would be to apply the theories and tools of economic sociology – in dialogue with political economy – and look at the EU as a distinctive type of economic system, a distinctive form of capitalism among others, with its own market institutions. Extraordinarily, this has been a challenge only really picked by one economic sociologist, Neil Fligstein, who, in a series of single (Fligstein 2003) and jointly authored pieces (Fligstein and Mara-Drita 1996; Fligstein and McNichol 1998; Fligstein and Stone Sweet 2002), has mapped out a comprehensive economic institutionalist reading of European integration.

Fligstein's touchstone is the historical creation of the market in the US: the epoch when the progressive movement established the model of the federal free trade area and rules of corporate governance that laid the foundations for America's extraordinary economic success in the 20th century. This model indeed remains an inspiration for the EU's own regional trade integration – particularly the core idea of breaking down barriers to the four freedoms of movement (of goods, capital, services, and persons) – but the EU today in fact dwarfs the American model as a natural experiment in the political construction of a single market.

The EU presents the most highly evolved example of an international governance structure in the global economy today, with an extraordinarily high degree of regional economic interdependence, and intra-member state trade (Fligstein and Mérand 2002). Fligstein portrays the European Union in terms of classic Weberian economic sociology, looking at how markets emerge, stabilize, and are transformed as a sociological process. Against neo-liberal accounts of the market, he emphasizes the deliberate political construction and structuring of this 'free' market: in terms of property rights, governance structures, rules of exchange, and conceptions of corporate control (Fligstein 2001). The EU in fact goes far beyond the removal of trade barriers and tariffs, and the promotion of competition across national borders over products and services. It is developing rules of exchange about common standards, insurance, liability, and ownership across borders; health and safety standards; standards of employment practices and workers' rights; and environmental norms. His view echoes Majone's analysis of the EU as 'regulatory state', shifting politics away from institutions and party politics into new technical arenas (Majone 1996a). One scholar in the sociology of science, Barry (2001), has given this standardization process a strikingly original reading, influenced by French philosophers Foucault, Callon, and Latour, detailing the way the EU has created new forms of political power and conflict through its creation of a knowledge-driven space of mobility and trade.

Barry sees the EU's obsession with technological 'harmonization' as a hallmark of neo-liberalism. Fligstein indeed substantiates the corporate influence on the EU, charting how the Commission has been able to successfully mobilize state and business actors in specific sectors (especially export-oriented industries, such as food, transportation, pharmaceuticals, and more open markets were desirable (Fligstein and Mara Drita 1996). Much of the building of a European market has been about the opening of Europe for global firms, enabling the implantation of American and Japanese firms. Yet this self-evident facet of globalization is

complicated by the fact that many of the EU's stated positions on corporate takeovers, social rights, the environment, privacy, and so on, differ sharply from the norms promoted by successive US administrations (see also Zeitlin and Herrigel 2000). The EU thus may well prove a crucial case in refuting the inevitability of neo-liberal theories of economic development that predict only an all-American future under globalization.

PUBLIC SPHERE ANALYSIS

Another greatly overlooked area in the study of the EU, particularly amenable to sociological analysis, is the media: public debate and communication in 'civil society', as the place in which opinions (and perhaps identities) are formed (see de Swann 1993; Schlesinger 1999). Certainly, the still heavily nationalized media in Europe is a crucial barrier to the emergence of any European voice – let alone a 'European identity' – and it remains an absent channel of democratic legitimation. Habermas's (1969) historical analysis of the public sphere is the master paradigm here, along with his later reflections on Europe as a postnational or cosmopolitan project (Habermas 2001; see for example, Delanty 1998; Delanty and Rumford 2005; Eriksen 2005). Habermas's account of modern liberal democracy sees the progressive enlarging of the circle of democratic inclusion, as driven by the necessity of inner elites couching arguments and justifications in the ever more universal terms of a 'public' audience. Trentz and Eder (2004) put this dynamic to work on the problem of the democratic deficit, arguing that the very deficiencies of 'closed' elite policy making in the EU are provoking the emergence of a contestatory public sphere across Europe. Although often hostile and sceptical to the European project, these reactions will in fact induce the further successful democratization of the EU's institutional forms.

Trentz and Eder's 'democratic functionalism' notably challenges the self-contained 'bureaucratic' arguments about the potential rational legitimacy of elite institutions, popular in

discussions on comitology and regulatory efficiency (Cram 1997; Neyer 2000). The notion of institutional reflexivity may indeed point to some of the virtuous dynamics induced by the incomplete and inadequately democratic nature of the EU, but the 'democratic spillover' they speak of must surely underestimate the destructive potential of growing anti-EU sentiment, nowadays unlikely to be satisfied with co-option in the integration project. Effective links are drawn, however, with parallel social movements research, such as Tarrow's (1995) studies of the Europeanization of conflict (see also Marks and McAdam 1996; Roates 1999; Imig and Tarrow 2001; Balme and Chabannet 2002). Such work has focused on the variable effectiveness with which unions, NGOs, environmental campaigners, and others have been able to articulate their interests (or not) at the European level, via opportunity structures that open up when elites within the Commission need expert external third party validation.

Another notable empirical operationalization of public sphere theories is the huge EUROPUB project (Koopmans and Statham 2002). Setting up a cross-national quantitative analysis of public claims making related to various areas of European policy, via a longitudinal analysis of carefully selected newspaper articles reflecting European campaigns and debates, the project very effectively pinpoints which policies are more Europeanized in the public sphere, and the degree to which the framing of debates varies across key member states. Their findings document the disadvantaged access many weaker actors have to inner EU circles (Koopmans and Erbe 2004) – at least in so far as national media coverage reflects accurately actual EU politics, which is debatable. They also show how and when national medias might be prepared to frame debates in more international or universal terms, changes which in turn induce actors to pitch their claims in these terms (Statham and Gray 2005), and the degree to which 'new media', such as the internet, might be facilitating new forms of Europeanized communication.

Discourse analysis foreground communication as a form of political action in its own

right, relying on a methodology that rates newspaper articles quantitatively as a mirror of political mobilization or claims making. Epistemological doubts here have to be traded off against the need for an effective operational empirical strategy. Similar doubts might be pointed to in other similar work, such as Soysal's pathbreaking and already much discussed study on the historical Europeanization of school textbooks (Schissler and Soysal 2004). But it is encouraging that evidence for a European social learning process – a notion at the core of the constructivist argument – is now being looked for in 'everyday' texts and discourses, rather than just selectively focusing on top-down EU directives or information drives. Other fertile areas for thinking about the sociological impact of harmonization include the impact of the Bologna process on the standardization of European education, and the Erasmus/Socrates schemes on the social trajectories and identities of European students (King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003). Recchi and the PIONEUR project (Recchi et al. 2003) survey the mobile intra-EU migrant population as prototypical 'pioneers' of sociological integration; linked to this, Favell (2006) homes in on the experiences of free moving urban professionals in the EU. Nearly all such work when conducted has stressed the continued impact of national cognitive schemes within a tentative Europeanization of practices. For all the talk of Europeanizing norms, ideas and values, in the end it still seems that Europeanized behaviour amongst ordinary people is best predicted by material and spatial aspects of integration project – such as residence close to the border (Gabel 1998), engagement in cross-border commerce and transactions (Therborn 1995: 194–206), or involvement in 'parapublic' European cross-national associations and activities, such as town twinning and sports clubs (Kretz 2002).

ANALYSIS OF THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL FIELD

A final much overlooked contribution to the 'sociological' analysis of EU politics hails from

France. French political science, as practiced for example in the corridors of the various *Instituts d'Etudes Politiques* in France, exists in an almost parallel universe to hegemonic Anglo-American forms. One of its distinct strengths lies in the way it practices a routinely 'sociological' approach to understanding politics. Political sociology, in fact, is a subfield that has almost dropped entirely, out of mainstream Anglo-American political science, largely because contemporary mainstream political science after Downs is an edifice erected on the theoretical fiction that voting preferences are always revealed, not socially formed. *En revanche*, French political science centres on the empirical analysis of the socio-economic and spatial determinants of voting choices of the electorate, often using a sophisticated combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

France, then, has been a creative place for rethinking EU politics, particularly under the influence of a Bourdieusian style analysis of the European 'political field' (*champ politique*) (Bourdieu 1981). This combines a materialist concern with the underlying reasons why actors do things, with a socio-spatial notion of political conflict and competition. Political actions are thus 'moves' within a protean 'field', in which actors seek to monopolize resources, reproduce insider advantages, control gate keeper access to the Commission or Parliament, or discursively dominate weaker players through the strategic deployment of ideas and values. Brussels is a particularly fertile terrain for this kind of study, in which the success of certain NGOs or lobbying organizations can be directly linked to the specific organizational contours of insider politics in the city: a *modus operandi* dictated by the specific socially determined 'culture' of Europeanized actors in the city, developing a 'habitus' of successful political behaviours, quite in distinction from their national counterparts (see Favell 1998, on the immigration politics field). The great advantage of this approach lies in the way it eliminates the normative, overly pro-European inflections of the democracy and citizenship literature, and offers an unsentimental analysis of the careers and organizational strategies of key European players, stressing the interplay of structure and agency in a much

more empirically specifiable form than structurationist theory.

A volume in French by Guiraudon (2000) has done much to bring together disparate but high quality work of French political scientists, and put them in dialogue with the most congenial authors writing in English, such as Fligstein, Tarrow and Favell. Georgakakis (2000) on Commission scandals, Dorandeu and a research team in Strasbourg on the careers of European lawyers (Dorandeu and Georgakakis 2001), Joana and Smith's (2002) work on the Commission, Baisnée and Marchetti (2000) on European journalists, all offer good examples. Other related studies include Bigo's (1996, 1998) work on cross-national policing and security, Mérand's (2003) work on military officers and EU defence cooperation, Schabel (1998) on the *Collège de l'Europe* at Bruges, and Scheepel and Wessering's (1997) caustic socio-analysis of EC judges, all works that offer insider anatomies of specific professional groups and practices at the core of the European project. Two other works in English, by Kauppi (2005) and Rufford (2002), also bring an unfashionable political sociology to the study of the EU, stressing the operation of power and ideology in the workings of European institutions. All these authors reject the naive analysis (and self-representation) of the worlds of media, law, or NGOs, as a 'mirror' of society, the embodiment of 'universal' norms, or the selfless advocates of 'civil society', respectively. Rather, each is read as political sites of contestation, in which actors are strategically constructing bounded fields of social power in their own right, at the same time as building successful, remunerative careers in these emergent professions. On a critical note, one can point to the usual weaknesses associated with Bourdieu and company. It offers a path towards an airless, rather cynical analysis, that stresses conflict and domination, and which takes an aggressively disaffected view of actors who themselves might see their own actions in terms of the purest benevolent or professional motives.

It is exactly in this respect, however, that the EU has been such a novel political environment. It has empowered lobbyists and

campaigners of all kinds, and inspired new organizational forms in its own image. Corporations, regions, even classic agents of the state, such as senior police officials, have been induced by the EU to pursue goals and new professional networks in ways quite distinctive from the settled patterns and hierarchies of power concentrated around national government. It is the unformed, protean nature of Brussels that enables this, the way the intense heat and light of European politics enables new and ambitious actors to emerge on a brand new political stage. Much of this takes place well beyond the eye of national medias, and is a politics not detected by the Habermasian programme. This is all true of EU politics inside its institutional settings, but even then politicians often crave the narcissistic theatre and drama of national politics, because that is what national media portray as important.

Indeed, this media-led distortion of where power lies and what democracy is has itself become a significant sociological influence on the obsession with democratizing the EU. The European media (as well as populist intellectuals, such as Stedenop 2001) increasingly equate democracy with plebiscitary referenda, or presidential style elections, castigating the EU's political 'deficit' in these terms. This should come as no surprise, from a Bourdieusian point of view (Bourdieu 1996). For a knowledge-based politics that takes place between experts behind closed doors, or a justice-based politics that relies on courts to enforce individual rights against states or nationalist public opinion, is also one in which the social power of journalists is substantially reduced.

CONCLUSION

Outside of the IR constructivist debate, awareness of these sociological contributions is low, indeed marginal to the main thrust of EU studies. The issue is less that EU studies needs to become sociological, more that practicing sociologists need to get involved and be present in EU studies debates. They will bring new methods and empirical research

questions, and not only the abstract social theory for which the discipline is unjustly renowned. Sociologists in fact have European journals and associations of their own (European Societies, Innovations, European Consortium for Sociological Research), but they do not attend mainstream EU studies events. With the current interest in varieties of institutionalism, networks analysis, and complexity theory, social structural and/or social psychological approaches are clearly ascendant trends, and the critique of individualism and rationalism in mainstream economics and political science is only likely to rediscover sociological argumentation as it moves away from these dogmas. The time is thus ripe for a sociological analysis of EU politics. The scattered examples presented here from economic sociology, public sphere and 'political field' style work look particularly fertile, empirically speaking. It is to be hoped, at least, that that such 'sociological' analysis will not only be pursued by IR theorists reinventing the Parsonian wheel.

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