

Note de recherche

European Integration: Scientific Object or Political Agenda?

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If we trust the dominant social scientific theorization of European integration, the political reality of the European Union is Janus-faced. On the one hand, it is a networked, emergent system of governance. On the other hand, it is a new power center that more traditional powers have to reckon with. Until the 1990s, two corresponding models have generally dominated scientific discourse on the European Union. First a *state-centric model* which emphasized the role of nation-states to strengthen their power through the European construction. From this starting point, a controversial but influential thesis was developed by Alan S. Milward, who argued that the nation-state was in fact being saved by European integration.¹ Further building on such ideas, several very prominent works have been devised. Andrew Moravcsick's *The Choice for Europe: Social purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht*² has made the case that what really matters in the European Union are the high level negotiations between key players, the heads of the larger states and the European Commission. From the viewpoint of this intergovernmentalist high politics scenario, it is a fundamental mistake to downplay the role and strength of the nation-state, the only really democratic instance in

Europe. This approach gained popularity early on among scholars such as Stanley Hoffman when, after the Luxembourg compromise of 1966, it became very clear that the nation-states were crucial in any kind of supranational experiment in Europe. Reminiscent of the neorealist model in international relations, in this approach states have power interests that they pursue despite transformations in the larger political and economical landscape.

A second and more recent model, propagated by a growing number of scholars, can be named the *multi-governance model*. In this scenario, nations are losing ground in the face of increased supra- and transnationalisation of decision-making. This process is complemented by a regionalization of political decision-making. Liesbet Hooghe's and Gary Marks' "Multi-level governance and European integration"³ has become the standard reference in this respect. The authors explored how, since the 1980s, EU countries have gone towards a greater decentralization. Further, this process has been influenced by the emergence of a great number of transnational regimes. Conceptually, these empirical developments are challenging a number of basic dichotomies of international relations studies: between the international and the national, and the public and the private. Transnational and networked, authority is being diffused in new ways in contemporary Europe

¹ Alan S. Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation-State* (Routledge 1994)

² Andrew Moravcsick, *The Choice for Europe: Social purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht* (Cornell University Press, 1998).

³ Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, *Multi-Level Governance and European Integration* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

according to these authors. Underlining the trans-disciplinary success of this approach, a terminological race on how to best capture this phenomenon is currently taking place: “multi-level governance, multi-tiered governance, polycentric governance, multiperspectival, governance, FOCJ (functional, overlapping, competing jurisdictions), frammegration (or spheres of authority), and consortio and condominio”.⁴

Following the idea of multi-level governance, but also a part of the critique of giving importance to the State and intergovernmental relations in European affairs, a number of works have recently emphasized how the European institutions have become key political and economic players. In the 1990s, a variety of alternative approaches to European regional integration have developed along this path. Neoinstitutionalist approaches have been transplanted from political science to the study of Europe. In their path-breaking article “The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life”⁵, James March and Johan Olsen develop an institutionalist account to politics arguing that institutions are the missing link that unites individual and society. In their view, political science had until then assumed that the relationship between individual and political system was more or less direct. Institutionalism was also introduced into the study of organizations by sociologists Woody Powell and Paul DiMaggio in their edited volume *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*.⁶ A variety of different types of institutionalist approaches have since surfaced, labeled rationalist, historical and sociological, and have found their way into the study of European integration.

One very influential current in this regard has been the analysis of the judicialization and constitutionalization of European politics. Authors such as Alec Stone Sweet, Wayne Sandholtz and Neil Fligstein have effectively combined the governance model with an institutionalist perspective in the analysis of European integration through law. The titles of their works are in themselves telling of this approach: “The Judicial Construction of Europe”, “European Integration and Supranational Governance” and “The Institutionalization of Europe”.⁷ A related research agenda has concerned what

can be described as the rise of a European constitutionalism without a Constitution. This new semi-constitutionalism has also been analyzed by a number of other leading US scholars such as Joseph Weiler and Anne-Marie Slaughter.⁸ The approach of Slaughter like that of Karen Alter has generally taken a neo-functional turn, making the European Court of Justice (ECJ) a key engine for pushing forward the political agenda of European integration.⁹ The overall argument is that Inter-State European integration can be assessed through the inter-Court integration between national courts and the ECJ. In other words, legal institutional integration provides data on the overall social, economic and political integration of Europe.

European Studies – Sociology of Europe?

This impressionistic map of the dominant theories of European Studies generally suggests that the boundaries of the discipline are delineated by two core currents: State-centrism and multigovernance. It moreover highlights how social scientific studies of European integration have long been practically the preserve of political scientists. For the same reason, the definition of the object of study has been greatly influenced by political scientific models. Needless to say, yet paradoxical in many ways, the orientation of this scholarship has been greatly Anglo-Saxon – European studies have unquestionably offered US academics a way of accelerating their careers in US academia in a number of cases. Yet, the same is also true in the case of European academics who have managed to impose themselves as “natural born experts” within a field of study that, in the end of the day, is only one “area study” among many in the US. Another conclusion one might draw from this rough outline is that the discipline of European studies has many parallels with the developments of the field of international relations theory. In fact, it is also from the background of Anglo-Saxon international relations theory that a sociological version of institutio-

(Oxford University Press, 1998); Alec Stone Sweet, Wayne Sandholtz and Neil Fligstein *The Institutionalization of Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁸ Walter Mattli and Anne-Marie Slaughter, ‘Role of National Courts in European Integration’ in Slaughter, Stone Sweet and Weiler, *The European Court and National Courts – Doctrine and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); J.H.H. Weiler, “A Quiet Revolution, the European Court of Justice and its Interlocutors” in *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 26 (1994), No. 4).

⁹ Karen Alter, *Establishing the Supremacy of European Law: The Making of an International Rule of Law in Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2001). In this regard, see also the pioneer work, Hjalte Rasmussen, *On Law and Policy in the European Court of Justice* (Dordrecht: Nijhoff Publishers, 1986).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ James March and Johan Olsen, “The new institutionalism: organizational factors in political life”, *American Political Science Review*, 78/1984, pp. 734-749.

⁶ Woody Powell and Paul DiMaggio (eds.), *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis* (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁷ Alec Stone Sweet, *The Judicial Construction of Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2004); Wayne Sandholtz and Alec Stone Sweet, *European Integration and Supranational Governance*

nalism started developing in the mid-1990s, perceiving European institutions as producers of the pre-conditions for European social interaction: rules and shared meanings.

In his seminal work, *Social Theory of International Politics*,¹⁰ Alexander Wendt challenged the classic neo-realist work of Kenneth Waltz¹¹ by introducing a sociological perspective to international relations. In addition to the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens¹², Wendt also draws inspiration from a plethora of sociological works, such as those of George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman. Identities and interests are now conceptualized as learning processes that take place through social interaction. Social roles are embedded in collective representations that have a life of their own. In this way, sociological institutionalism opened new paths of research on topics such as socialization and more broadly the processes of social construction of reality, following Berger and Luckmann.

The purpose is to take a resolutely low politics point of view to European integration. According to some developers of this social constructivist European approach¹³, the objective is to examine relatively neglected, but crucial aspects of integration, rules and norms, identities, ideas and language. Since the end of the 1990s, sociological institutionalists have also published numerous studies on the role of intersubjective meanings, cultures of national security and symbolic politics. By emphasizing the role of social interaction in the process of European integration, they have been able to reproblematicize the structure of the European and international order, as well as the crucial interaction of nation-states and the international system. In this way sociological institutionalists have contributed to research not just on European integration but also on global politics. The social constructivist approach to Europe is however not the only constructivist current in contemporary "European studies". A number of works on particularly the rise of European elites have in recent years suggested yet another perspective on European integration.¹⁴ Overall, this emergent sociology of

Europe¹⁵ is part of a broader movement of introducing sociology in the understanding of global affairs, not to say globalization: from transnational issue networks to questions of rethinking geopolitics in light of contemporary social-political issues.

Understanding Europe – Between Science and Politics

Opposing – even if it is a relative opposition – European Studies in the tradition of (American) political science and an emerging sociology of Europe helps underline the schism that considerable different viewpoints produce. Like any other object of study, Europe is obviously produced by the way in which it is looked at, leading inevitably also to the production of particularly ideas of how it should look like. It is probably not entirely unfounded to claim that the great overseas influence on the discipline has enforced a more distant view-point, emphasizing mainly the large pieces of the European puzzle in the tradition of international relations theory: the interests of the larger countries, the construction of the most powerful institutions, etc. Besides, attempts to theorize Europe have also been strikingly marked by the historical evolution of the political agendas of European integration: Inter-State cooperation, networks, multigovernance, even constitutionalism. In methodological terms, the question of *distance* in European studies is thus not only a question of geography but also the very social scientific engagement with the moving target of European integration. Ensuring a critical distance to the political project of European integration, a prescriptive discourse, is far from a *fait accompli* in these research traditions.

The current of European social constructivism provides an interesting counter-point to the risks of these ways of conceptualizing and approaching the European construction. It certainly reposes the essential question of what is Europe: a series of institutions, a site of negotiating state interests, or, on the contrary, the outcome of a specific and semi-structured social interaction producing European integration? Multigovernance, the

¹⁰ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹¹ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (1979).

¹² Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Polity, 1984).

¹³ Thomas Christiansen, Knud Erik Jørgensen and Antje Wiener, "The social construction of Europe", *Journal of European public policy* 6(4)/1999, pp. 528-544.

¹⁴ A number of works have been published by researchers associated with the Groupe de Sociologie Politique Européenne of the Schuman University of Strasbourg, as well as by political sociologists working on the emergence of European

legal and political orders. See, for example, Didier Georgakakis (ed.), *Le métiers de l'Europe politique: Acteurs et professionnalisations de l'Union européenne* (Strasbourg: PUS, 2002) and Hélène Michel (ed.) *Lobbyistes et lobbying de l'Union Européenne. Trajectoires, formations et pratiques des représentants d'intérêts* (Strasbourg: PUS, 2005). See also the dossier, "Les juristes et l'ordre politique européen", *Critique Internationale*, n°26, march 2005. See also the dossier in *Law & Social Inquiry*, Vol. 32, Issue 1, 75-82, Winter 2007, published by the same group of scholars.

¹⁵ In this regard, see, for example, the article by Virginie Guiraudon on political sociology of Europe in *European Union Studies Association Review*, Vol. 19, No.1, Winter 2006.

approach currently most en vogue, in different ways also seeks to provide an alternative in this regard. Due to its broad success, academically as well politically and institutionally, it is of course a very mixed bag. The main problem of the approach is its neutralizing effect on the political discourse on European integration. Governance, a notion with considerable roots in the internationalist plans developing around the World Bank in the mid-1990s, is obviously far less value-neutral than its protagonists tend to suggest.¹⁶ On the contrary, it contains a normative core. In its alleged empiricism, the approach effectively mutes the democratic problem the described situation actually poses. Ironically, the political elites of Europe have rarely sought to solve their democratic problem by recourse to network governance or multigovernance; so far their solution – unsuccessful however – has been to evoke legalism of the highest order: a European Constitution.

The academic engagement and theorizing in this regard, the analysis of so-called European constitutionalism or European constitutionalization processes, provides yet another indication of the ambiguity of the science and politics of Europe. Certainly, the long series of works which have highlighted the role of the legal institutions of the community operate on the basis of abstract theories of institutional interests, producing what is commonly known as constitutionalization among scholars of European studies. Yet, it is a constitutionalization without a constitution – in fact the phenomenon is strictly speaking mainly a judiciarization process involving the judicial activism of the European Court of Justice. Then why evoke the idea of a constitution in this regard when the empirical material seem to suggest that what is being produced is mainly more specific and coherent legal frameworks, which in the end of the day is maybe the least surprising outcome of legal processes? And, more importantly perhaps, what came first, the political idea of drafting a European Constitution or the scholarly work making such a move inevitably by claiming the *de facto* existence of a constitutionalization process?

This critique evokes a central problem in respect to European studies, namely that such studies in many cases are marked by a blurred distinction between the scholarly research object and the political agenda of European integration. Unquestionably, this closeness has indirectly contributed to the objectivisation and naturalisation of political strategies of furthering European integration. In this regard, it appears that the sub-

ject-area could gain significantly both theoretically and methodologically from the introduction of a number of problématiques informed by a more reflexive way of constructing the object of study. Particularly as concerns the methodological preliminaries, reproblematising European integration as a scientific object would be a beneficial enterprise in the long run and help its differentiation in respect to the politics of European integration.

Regardless of their theoretical sophistication and interesting conclusions, the fact of matter is that the majority of the approaches outlined above are actually unable of defining – methodologically and theoretically – the object of Study: *Europe*.¹⁷ To give one example, a critical yet unsolved problem is how to fully capture the way in which *Europe* is constructed in between national and international social levels: As a social construct it can hardly be seen only as a continuation of existing (national) ways of producing law and politics, yet it has very strong homologies to these historical and structural starting points. The challenge remains to develop a research methodology which somehow captures this double construction of Europe as both continuity and something relatively new: an approach which breaks with the everyday politics of progressing European integration and integrates these successive political moves in a larger structure of an increasingly independent set of social universes which somehow can be classified as mainly European. A thorough sociological exploration of the production of the various European agendas and issues would indeed require detailed observation of the many and different processes which make up what with a catch-phrase is typically presented as “European integration”, a political agenda which discretely has been turned into social scientific research paradigm.

¹⁶ See Yves Dezalay and Bryant Garth, *The Internationalisation of Palace Wars: Lawyers, Economists and the Contest to Transform the Latin American States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

¹⁷ See further in Mikael Rask Madsen, “Rethinking the International as a Social Field: Bourdieuan Research Strategies for the Study of the ‘International’ in the Era of Globalization.” Paper presented at London School of Economics, MILLENIUM, 35th Anniversary Conference, 21 and 22 October 2006.