

**Does European integration theory need sociology?
Towards a research agenda**

Workshop
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Abstract

The purpose of this workshop is to convene political sociologists working on the European Union and other European Union theorists to discuss sociological approaches to European integration. In recent years, sociological studies have been published that seek to bring in a “bottom-up” perspective to the study of the EU and thus complement the “top-down”, institution-focused approach that has dominated the field of EU studies until now. These sociological studies have adopted critical theoretical stances that reject both the interest/idea dichotomy and the stato-centricism that often characterize mainstream approaches, whether neofunctionalist, intergovernmentalist, multilevel governance, institutionalist, principal-agent, or constructivist. Methodologically, they have been characterized by their strong empirical dimension, using both quantitative and qualitative methods and often ethnographic fieldwork, with a specific focus on “actors,” “practices,” “social structures,” and “social representations.”

Unfortunately, there has been little debate between sociologically-inclined scholars and other theorists of European integration. In order to elaborate a rich and coherent research agenda, but also to identify the specific contribution that a “political sociology of the EU” can make, we think it is necessary to discuss the epistemological foundations as well as research methods that make sociological approaches distinct from other theoretical perspectives and potentially useful to EU scholarship in general.

Intellectual rationale of the workshop

Debates on theoretical approaches to European integration are increasingly diversified, ranging from the classical neofunctionalist-intergovernmentalist divide to a rationalist-constructivist one. This reflects, according to a number of scholars (Pollack 2005, Schimmelfennig and Rittberger 2006), broader developments in international relations theory,

but also the return of comparative politics approaches that reject international relations theory, using instead models of legislative, executive, and judicial politics associated to the analysis of domestic political systems.

In the last five years or so, a new approach has emerged, led by a small group of sociologists and political scientists (Adrian Favell, Neil Fligstein, George Ross, Didier Georgakakis, Niilo Kauppi, Chris Rumford, Juan Diez Medrano, Ettore Recchi, Virginie Guiraudon, and Andy Smith, amongst others), calling for a sociological approach to European integration. These scholars borrow from the French school of sociology, notably that of Pierre Bourdieu, but also from British social theory and the political sociology of the state developed by Stein Rokkan, Charles Tilly, Michael Mann and Norbert Elias. They argue that it is time for EU studies to move beyond institutional venues and dynamics taking place in Brussels or member state governments, and look instead at the myriad social spaces and new social practices opened up by the process of Europeanization (Favell 2006). Asking fresh research questions but also shedding new light on old debates, sociological approaches seek to bring in a “bottom-up” perspective to the study of the EU and thus complement the “top-down” approach that has dominated the field of EU studies until now.

Sociological studies have been conducted on the “professionals” of EU policy, in and around the European Commission (Smith 2004, Guiraudon 2000); social mobility within and between European cities (Favell 2007, Le Galès 2002); European public opinion and identity formation in Germany, Spain and the UK (Medrano 2003); the practice and struggles of parliamentary politics and political participation in the European Parliament (Kauppi 2005); trans-European collective mobilization and contentious politics (Imig and Tarrow 2001); the making of the single market and the creation of Europe-wide corporate fields (Fligstein 2007); local adaptations to European policies in various sectors (Pasquier and Weisbein 2005); social representations in the European defence policy (Mérand 2006); the transformation of school textbooks and curricula as a result of European dynamics (Soysal and Schissler 2004); and even the formation of a “European ritual” through football (King 2003). These studies have adopted theoretical stances that reject both the interest/idea dichotomy and the state-centricism that often characterize mainstream approaches, whether neofunctionalist, intergovernmentalist, multilevel governance, institutionalist, principal-agent, or constructivist. Instead, they have relied on a toolkit of concepts that are common in sociology but seldom used in EU studies, such as “actors,” “practices,” “social structures,” “domination,” and

“social representations.” Methodologically, they have been characterized by their strong empirical dimension, using both quantitative and qualitative methods and often ethnographic fieldwork.

While opening a very innovative and under-researched field, proponents of this approach are the first to admit that they are only beginning to develop their own EU-specific methods, definitions and concepts. The singularity and potential contribution of sociological approaches is not yet clearly defined in relation to the broader field of EU studies. As a first approximation, Guiraudon (2006) underlined recently that sociological approaches, informed by classical and contemporary debates in sociology, have the potential to “bridge the gap” between stylized dichotomies in EU studies, such as rationalist vs constructivist approaches, or ideas vs interest based explanations. Furthermore these approaches seem particularly well designed to study the practices of different actors, and thus understand power struggles and institutional dynamics in a more concrete, theoretically-sound manner.

While these are important insights, the main question remains: of what are these observations an instance? Is it possible to draw general insights for understanding European integration processes from micro- and macro-sociological studies that downplay the role of institutions? Are sociological perspectives an alternative to mainstream, institution-based approaches or merely a complement to them?

There has been little debate taking place so far between sociologically-inclined scholars and other theorists of European integration, be they convinced of the usefulness of international relations, comparative politics, constructivist or rationalist approaches. In order to elaborate a rich and coherent research agenda, but also to identify the specific contribution that a “political sociology of the EU” can make, we think it is necessary to discuss the epistemological foundations as well as research methods that make sociological approaches distinct from other theoretical perspectives. In so doing, we will also explore what common grounds, if any, exist between sociological approaches and mainstream approaches that claim some heritage from the sociological tradition, notably constructivism and institutionalism.

Our aim in this workshop is to try to find a way for scholars in these related theoretical subfields of political science to speak to each other. We think that sustained scholarly

dialogue with a view to establishing research agendas and clear conceptual frameworks is a vital first step. We invite theoretical and conceptual papers specifying more clearly:

1. Why are sociological approaches particularly useful to understand European integration? Is the difference only one of the research object – that is, the concentration on actors and social structures rather than institutional processes?
2. How can these approaches be conceptualised as well as operationalised?
3. What are the epistemological foundations of these approaches? Where do they stand in the postivist-postpositivist debate?
4. Do sociological approaches form a coherent perspective or should we talk of different “sociologies” of the EU?

Our second aim is to invite papers that discuss in more detail the advantages and limits of sociological approaches compared to other theoretical approaches “on the European integration market”:

1. Are International Relations approaches such as critical theory, constructivism and institutionalism adaptable to sociology?
2. Are constructivist research agendas the same as sociological ones in the field of European integration studies?

Type of paper

We thus invite essentially theoretical, conceptual and programmatic papers which might marginally draw upon a number of empirical case studies. The aim of our workshop is to help establish a constructive dialogue between sociologists working on European integration and theorists of European integration more generally. Participants need not be proponents of a sociological approach but they must be willing to engage in constructive dialogue.

Proposed Outputs of the Workshop

1. A volume to be edited by the workshop convenors on the subject.
2. A network of researchers devoted to different aspects of European integration theory.

Workshop funding

Participants will be asked to cover their expenses.

Workshop directors

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Frédéric Mérand, PhD (Berkeley) is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Université de Montréal and Research Fellow at McGill University. His book, *Dying for the European Union? State Transformation and Military Integration in Europe*, is forthcoming at Oxford University Press. He has recently co-authored a paper, with Vincent Pouliot from McGill University, on "Pierre Bourdieu and International Relations." He has published in *Cooperation and Conflict*, *Acta Sociologica*, *Canadian Foreign Policy*, *Studia Diplomatica*, *European Societies*, and *Politique européenne*.

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