Original Article

Sociology, institutionalism and the European Union

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Abstract European Union (EU) studies are dominated by a narrow form of institutionalism. The focus on formal organizations and asocial norms begs for a more sociological approach to the EU that would encompass the informal practices, symbolic representations and power relations of social actors involved in European society as well as the broad polity. This article argues for a return to the sociological roots of neo-institutionalism, which we find in Marx's theory of power, Weber's sociology of conflict and Durkheim's attention to symbolic representations and social practices. The neo-institutionalist project was originally an offspring of classical sociology. After having described how institutionalism diverged from sociology in EU studies, we review several points of contact between sociological approaches to the EU and neo-institutionalism, including the treatment of social relations and analysis of norms and ideas. While we applaud the development of sociological approaches in EU studies, we argue that paying attention to such meeting points will prove more fruitful than maintaining walls that confine institutionalism and sociology to splendid isolation.
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Introduction

Sociological approaches to the European Union (EU) do not need to reinvent the wheel; many of them can find a natural home within neo-institutionalism. At the same time, institutional approaches to the EU would greatly benefit from a dose of sociological thinking. This call for dialogue is based on the following observations. First, while a large number of institutionalists studying the EU focus on the formal rules and norms produced in European institutions

and the member states or have a truncated understanding of actors, nothing in institutionalism *a priori* makes this necessary. Second, the 'new institutionalism' that has been applied to a wide variety of empirical cases in the past 25 years is an offspring of the sociological tradition, and many of its practitioners still share sociologists' concern for social action, systems of meaning and patterns of conflict. The task before us, then, is not to pit sociology against institutionalism in an artificial disciplinary battle, but to suggest ways in which both EU institutionalism and sociological approaches to the EU can rediscover their common roots, to the benefit of each.

These roots are both theoretical and methodological. Our starting point for this article is that neo-institutionalism has a sociological history, grounded in the legacies of Karl Marx, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. From Marx comes a focus on power structures and the macro-historical processes in which institutions are embedded while the Weberian roots emphasize conflict in and among institutions. Durkheim's work directs our attention to the links between social practices, symbolic representations and institutional forms, and the methods for analysing them that his students developed through ethnography. Marx, Durkheim and Weber also all believed that informal as well as formal rules are resilient and shape a predictable institutionalized social order. Today, historical institutionalism as well as political and organizational sociology share this heritage.

Meanwhile, the 'institutionalist turn' in European integration studies is sometimes dated to Fritz Scharpf's assertion in the mid-1980s that joint-decision traps exist in EU institutions, whereby decision-making rules hinder the integration predicted by neo-functionalists (Aspinwall and Schneider, 2000, p. 2). Thus, it is the design and rules of formal institutions of the EU (and not, for example, broader political or social forces) that limit the Union's political development. This perspective is quite different from that of the founders of European integration studies, such as Ernst Haas, Karl Deutsch or Amitai Etzioni, who in their approach to European integration paid attention to the role of elites and interest groups in the production of a supranational political order.

Contemplating the off-shoots of this institutional turn, it is not surprising that sociologists have suspected EU studies (often produced by political scientists) of being too distant from the actors 'making Europe' and the conflicts among them as well as the social representations that organize their actions. In the next roll of the constantly turning academic cycle, a new generation of scholars now calls for more attention to individual and collective actors rather than formal organizations, to perspectives 'from below' rather than a Brussels-eye view, to qualitative methods and empirical analysis rather than modelling or institutional cataloguing, and so on (Favell, 2007; Saurugger, 2008; Favell and Guiraudon, 2010). Too forceful a rejection of

institutional analysis could, however, place sociologists at risk of losing sight of the structuring effects of formal organizations, an insight which is also part of the core of the sociological tradition (Mérand, 2008a). Avoiding this risk while arguing that EU studies could become more sociological is our goal.

Sociologists' mistrust of the kind of institutionalism deployed in EU studies is not completely misplaced. The first part of this article documents the neglect of key contributions of sociology by self-identified institutionalists studying the EU, especially those who have succumbed to the temptation of economics or normative theory. This neglect has generated a widespread and we believe misplaced sentiment that sociological approaches and institutionalism can have little in common. The second step in the article is to examine the roots of this neglect by tracing the story of neo-institutionalism over the last decades. Here we describe a two-stage process. First was the return to macro-sociological traditions, quickly followed by diverging theoretical trajectories. EU studies have been particularly affected by this bifurcation. We briefly describe how the literature on the rational design of institutions, institutional reproduction through path dependence and the institutional diffusion of norms became increasingly a-sociological. Thirdly, we consider the work of those few disciplinary sociologists who study the EU, illustrating that they have actually done so in ways that are close to the spirit of neo-institutionalism and suggesting that bridges between contemporary sociology and EU institutionalism are already in place. To make these bridges more usable, we review two existing points of contact between neo-institutionalism and a number of sociological projects on the EU. These are, first, the treatment of social relations and, second, analysis of norms and ideas. We argue that paying attention to such meeting points will prove more fruitful than maintaining walls that confine institutionalism and sociology to splendid isolation.

Three Sociological Critiques of Existing EU Institutionalisms

Scholars who identify broadly with sociology claim that EU institutionalism owes little to the sociological tradition or its contemporary debates. While not a universal characteristic of neo-institutionalism, we believe that this criticism is apt with respect to three currently predominant strands in EU institutionalism: (1) *formal institutionalism*, which focuses on the workings and impact of legal and political organizations; (2) *rational-choice institutionalism*, which focuses on the rational design of formal EU institutions and (3) *constructivist institutionalism*, which looks at the influence of norms and discourse in the institutionalization of Europe.[1] As will become evident in this article, we think there is potentially more room for dialogue between political and organizational sociology on the one hand and historical institutionalism on the other.

But first it is useful to explore the sociological case against existing EU institutionalism in more detail. Our objective in this section is not to provide a fully elaborated critique of these three approaches, but simply to pinpoint where EU institutionalism and a sociology of the EU are likely to differ.

The first strand, formal institutionalism, deploys an analytic perspective that focuses almost exclusively on rules within formal organizations, analysing them in isolation from society. In this view, institutional configurations become the primary causal factors. Analyses focused on whether the EU is a quasi-federation, an international organization or a multilevel governance structure often fit in this category. Despite an early concern for societal actors, the governance literature, for example, looks mostly at the administrative or legal interaction of formal organizations (Commission, government departments or regional governments) to demonstrate that institutional rules have direct consequences on the capacities of each government to act (Marks and Hooghe (2001) for example). Similarly, the literature on compliance with EU directives and administrative adjustment on the part of member states suggests that there exist more or less optimal ways to 'get the incentives right' in the EU's institutional architecture (Falkner *et al*, 2005; Hafner-Burton and Pollack, 2008). Other studies point to the direct effect of institutional design on policy outcomes, examining for instance the rotating presidency system (Tallberg, 2006) or the co-decision procedure (Farrell and Héritier, 2007). An excellent example of this position is found in the work of Geoffrey Garrett and George Tsebelis (2001), who propose a 'unified model of EU politics' solely by looking at institutionalized relations between the Commission, the Council, the Parliament and the Court.

In this perspective, the causal argument usually runs from a narrow set of formal rules straight to policy outcomes. Although detailed studies of institutional design are relevant, most sociologists feel uncomfortable with the idea of treating political institutions *in abstracto* (Favell, 2007). Their theoretical persuasion rests on neither removing institutions from a societal context nor actors from their social circumstances: one cannot understand European dynamics without factoring in the Europeanization of social interaction writ large. That is why a group of sociologists has developed a research agenda on how the expansion of social interaction at the European level intersects with class, social mobility, ethnicity or space (Favell and Guiraudon, 2010). In doing so they redefine the notion of Europeanization to encompass formal and informal practices beyond Brussels.[2]

Sociologists also propose a critique of rational-choice institutionalism, our second strand. Actors are present in this perspective, but only as forward-looking and consistent in their preferences. Promoters of this approach to the EU consider institutions the creation of individuals or groups seeking to maximize their utility by establishing formal and durable rules (the so-called

'rational design of institutions'). A great deal of rational-choice institutionalism applied to the EU engages in formal modelling, but not all. Andrew Moravcsik (1998), for example, uses Robert Putnam's two-level game metaphor to demonstrate the impact of trade preferences on institutional design; governments push for rigid and constraining institutions when both parties require credible commitments. Geoffrey Garrett (1995) argues that member states have purposively created self-constraining EU legal institutions to promote trade. Although they make a substantively different argument, Anne-Marie Burley and Walter Mattli (1993) also assume a high degree of rationality and foresightedness when they highlight the self-interested strategies of judges in making the European Court of Justice more autonomous from member states.

The basic rationalist position is that actors create and modify institutions when they see a benefit. Once established, institutions become payoff matrices; they specify the costs and benefits of choosing a course of action and thus, *mutatis mutandis*, it can be said that they explain social behaviour. For example, the principal-agent approach to EU studies (modelled on rational-choice approaches to analysing US Congressional politics) describes member states creating European institutions so as to reduce transaction costs. This approach also adds control mechanisms that limit the discretion of their agents, thereby binding the behaviour of European actors as they seek to realize their own preferences. In this perspective, institutions such as the Commission can be either conceptualized as self-conscious actors or as tools designed to address collective action problems, and often as both (Jupille and Caporaso, 1999; Scully, 2006; Pollack, 2003 for example).

Most sociologists do not embrace this rational-actor model because they believe, rightly in our view, that social action and even strategic choices are underpinned by social factors that give choice and action more varied foundations than a simple calculation of optimality. In a context of bounded rationality, cognitive frameworks both constrain action and generate the preferences of actors. Sociologists Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell (1991, p. 11) expressed this clearly when they wrote in their seminal volume, *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*: 'institutions do not simply limit options: they establish the criteria by which people discover their preferences'. This position, which was shared by classical institutionalists such as Philip Selznick (1949) but also by Ernst Haas (1958) and the neofunctionalists, is fundamentally at odds with rationalist theories which consciously bracket out preference formation.

Of course not all EU institutionalists have ignored social factors. A third strand, called 'constructivist' (sometimes 'sociological') in EU studies, substitutes norms and identities for the interests dear to rational-choice approaches (Risse, 2004, 162ff). The constructivist school has produced a long list of thought-provoking studies (for example, Christiansen *et al*, 2001). Yet

something was lost along the way as 'sociology' came to be reduced to the analysis of norms and identity. While constructivists often derived the importance of studying norms from the sociology of Émile Durkheim, they have not always retained his insistence on studying mental structures *in conjunction* with the social structures that produce them. As a result, there has been a tendency to anthropomorphize norms, identities or ideas, and allow them to operate in direct relation to each other, without the intervention of actors or the mediation of social structures.

In the constructivist literature, norms are often conceptualized either as constitutive systems of meaning to be deciphered through discourse analysis or as causal variables to be tested in a deductive framework. An example of the constitutive approach to norms can be found in analyses of European legitimacy where constructivism joins political theory, turning to Habermas' theory of communicative action (see Eriksen and Fossum, 2000; Føllesdal, 2006) or to poststructuralist discourse analysis (as in Diez, 1999). The 'norms as causal variable' approach, by contrast, underpins much of the conventional literature on Europeanization, which tells us that 'European policies, norms, and the collective understandings attached to them exert adaptational pressures on domestic-level processes, because they do not resonate well with domestic norms and collective understandings' (Börzel and Risse, 2003, p. 59). A major proponent of this approach is Jeffrey Checkel (2001, p. 574) who, studying the Council of Europe's role in diffusing human rights norms in Eastern Europe, 'establish[es] a *causal role* for Council norms' (our emphasis).

Constructivism is somewhat closer to political and organizational sociology in its ontology and epistemology than the other strands of EU institutionalism (Wiener, 2006). However, its focus on the autonomous influence of norms fits uneasily with some contemporary developments in sociology because it downplays the social dimensions of strategy and the often conflict-ridden nature of relations among actors engaged in the construction of norms (Kauppi, 2003, p. 777; Jenson, 2007, pp. 55–56). The distinction between *homo economicus* and *homo sociologicus* is not, as some constructivism seems to suggest, that the former is strategic and the latter is normative; rather, it is that the strategies of *homo sociologicus* are always socially embedded. As such, constructivism often reads to disciplinary sociologists as if there were too many norms and not enough strategies. We will return to this point, also addressing the closely related issue of ideas.

When Sociologists Look at the EU what do they See?

Much of the scepticism sociologists display towards EU institutionalism derives from a simple observation, summarized by Juan Diez Medrano (2006)

who muses that sociologists have neglected the EU because they do not see a 'society' at the European level. A second factor we would add is that sociologists analysing the EU have tended towards methods rarely used by institutionalists, such as unstructured interviews (Medrano, 2003), participant observation (Abélès, 1992; Ross, 1995) or claims analysis (Koopmans and Statham, 2010).

This lack of dialogue between EU sociologists and institutionalists is ironic, of course, because much of neo-institutionalism was the invention of sociologists. One of its recognized founding texts was promoted and edited by three political sociologists, who campaigned for a historically informed sociological approach. In *Bringing the State Back In*,[3] Evans *et al* (1985) called for a move away from political science's pluralist approach and structural-functionalism via a return to the historical sociology of Max Weber and Otto Hintze, in order to theorize social relations and state-society relations without assuming interests as given or loading norms with overwhelming strength.[4] The publication project was cross-disciplinary, with chapters by political scientists as well as sociologists, and was clearly intended to cast its intellectual net broadly.[5] If this pioneering book had to make the case for studying one institution – the state – later work could build on what had become an accepted premise, that institutions 'matter', but so too do social relations.

Historical institutionalism is one branch of this first generation of neo-institutionalism, formalized in a 1992 volume, *Structuring Politics. Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Perspective*, that also included a number of sociologists among its contributors. The historical institutionalist project soon bifurcated, however, branching onto two separate tracks: (1) the study of change within institutional settings; and (2) the role of norms and processes of ideational innovation (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992, pp. 13–14). These tracks have not always been in synch with classical and contemporary sociology, and therefore it is useful to identify ways in which bridges can be rebuilt.

Social relations and institutional development

Before we turn to norms and ideas in the next section, we will argue with regards to the first track that the study of change gave rise to an analysis of institutional mechanics for which social relations are almost irrelevant. Attention focused instead on path dependence, lock-in and unanticipated consequences as the underpinnings of institutional development (Hall and Taylor, 1996, p. 941; for an overview see Streeck and Thelen, 2005). In EU studies, these concepts were deployed to redefine the classic Haasian concept of spillover, which predicts that European integration is a self-reinforcing dynamic akin to state formation (Sandholtz and Stone Sweet, 1998). Here

the analytic focus is on institutions as systems of rules and on institutionalization as the processes by which they are created, implemented and interpreted. While taking the notion of 'transaction costs' from rational-choice theory, institutionalization is described as an endogenous process characterized by feedback loops that shape the preferences of actors and redirect their strategies towards a European level of governance (Sandholtz and Stone Sweet, 1998, pp. 4–5 and passim). In a similar way, Paul Pierson's (1996) analysis of European social policy development, relying on the concept of path dependence, challenges the premise that institutional workings result from the 'rational design' of their creators or from the preference structure of member states, as intergovernmentalists would have it.

The research questions in these studies emphasize sources of institutional constraint and path dependence, with action becoming the product of institutional context and form. Despite its improvements on rational-choice institutionalism and intergovernmentalism, this approach has tended to neglect social relations because they are not important to the mechanics of institutional reproduction (Aspinwall and Schneider, 2000, p. 17). In an effort to correct this silence, Stone Sweet *et al* (2001, pp. 13–14) explicitly returned in *The Institutionalization of Europe* to the notion that institutions are more than just payoff matrices. Not only do they condition the behaviour of actors; they also provide them with opportunities to shape the behaviour of others. With this corrective, there was an immediate injection of attention to actors, their participation in the process of institutionalization, and to the social relations structuring that participation. Agency as well as structure was again present.

In order to characterize institutional environments, sociologists have called on relational sociology and its concepts, such as field, arena, domain or sector, all of which stress the importance of actors and their interaction in the production and reproduction of rules. Neil Fligstein (2008), for example, uses the concept of field in his macro-sociological perspective on European integration, describing the emerging European political space as made up of social fields wherein actors look to each other and struggle around specific stakes. Fields, he argues, are consolidating in domains as varied as high-tech industry or football because EU institutions have, often unintentionally, created opportunities for enhanced social interaction.[6] This approach remains institutionalist, because the 'central argument is that the use of EU power to open opportunities of economic and social interactions across Europe changes the preferences of Europe's citizens' (Fligstein, 2008, p. 28). But this is an institutionalism that encompasses both informal institutions and actors. For Fligstein, actors enmeshed in 'European' social relations are 'making Europe'. Being involved in a pan-European social field, and therefore interacting with others across national boundaries, alters identities and practices (2008, chapter 1).

That said, this research agenda has not yet paid much heed to the fundamental observation of Marx and Weber that power relations are institutionalized in the state, public policy and symbolic representations. Are European integration processes shaping new spaces of power and domination? While acknowledging that actors in social fields are unequally endowed (2008, p. 214), Fligstein's examination of a European conflict in the making does not pay much attention to the inequalities of power either within or across the societies that make up the Union (Favell, 2008a, p. 500). This lack of concern with power is a departure from the analysis of structured power relations that was at the heart of historical institutionalism's original agenda.[7] In this sense, Fligstein's use of the concept of field is also not quite the same as that of Pierre Bourdieu, who had a much more agonistic take on social interaction (Kauppi, 2003).

The Bourdieusian approach is particularly evident in the work of the Strasbourg school of European political sociology, whose members place asymmetries of power front and centre in their empirical analyses of the EU. These scholars find that the social strata most likely to play a part in European fields are also those who adhere to the liberal discourse promoted by the Commission. 'A structural sociology in terms of fields' applied to students at the College of Europe, members of the European Parliament, Commission directors-general, senior officials in the Council Secretariat or Permanent Representatives demonstrates that Europeanization is also making a European elite (Kauppi, 2005; Cohen *et al*, 2007; Georgakakis and de Lasalle, 2007). Similarly influenced by Bourdieu, political sociologists (within a much larger set of projects on the sociology of law) have tracked the transformation of the European legal field and the shift in economic and political power among European and American firms prompted by the massive expansion in Community law and legal institutions (Dezalay, 2007; Vauchez, 2008). In a more neo-institutionalist vein that also seeks to incorporate power struggles, research has been conducted on bureaucrats in interior ministries (Guiraudon, 2003) and defence policymakers (Mérand, 2008b), who have gradually invested the European level as a way to bolster their position in the domestic field of power.

We see then that it is possible to pay attention to social relations, agency and power without ignoring formal institutional developments. But the institutions need to be seen as being built through social processes rather than merely by rational intention or mechanical reproduction. Secondly, they must be treated as products of action through time, and not simply as constraints or payoff matrices. An institution can be a set of formal rules and informal norms that persists through time, but it is also always a pattern of social relations, which can be competitive, oppositional and characterized by unequal power relations. Conceiving of institutions in this way, sociologists provide a useful way to

reanimate the structure-agency debate in neo-institutionalism that is convergent with efforts on the part of some historical institutionalists (Jenson, 1990; Thelen, 1999; Campbell, 2004).

Norms, ideas and practices

As we have noted, when historical institutionalism bifurcated in the mid-1990s, attention to cognitive processes was one of the two main trajectories.[8] This trajectory has generated a rich body of work in comparative politics, although its application to EU studies has been more limited. The main difficulty that has arisen in EU studies came from an overemphasis on binary alternatives: strategy versus norms or ideas versus interests.

While many institutionalists now acknowledge the importance, with respect to strategy versus norms debate, of going beyond an either/or approach *empirically*, they nonetheless prefer to retain the *analytical* distinction. This binary reasoning can be traced back in part to the now standard distinction made by March and Olsen between the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness.[9] The first describes behaviour as the product of calculation of one's interest and the anticipated consequences of action. This notion is obviously most easily married to a rational-choice perspective. The second is less obvious in everyday language terms and merits a summary (March and Olsen, 1998, p. 949):

> Within the tradition of a logic of appropriateness, actions are seen as rule-based. Human actors are imagined to follow rules that associate particular identities to particular situations, approaching individual opportunities for action by assessing similarities between current identities and choice dilemmas and more general concepts of self and situations. Action involves evoking an identity or role and matching the obligations of that identity or role to a specific situation. The pursuit of purpose is associated with identities more than with interests … Appropriateness need not attend to consequences, but it involves cognitive and ethical dimensions, targets and aspirations. As a cognitive matter, appropriate action is action that is essential to a particular conception of self.

This distinction made by two prominent institutionalist thinkers (and widely accepted in EU studies) delinks interests and strategic rationality on the one hand from identities, norms and other 'cognitive matters' on the other (see also Wiener (2007, p. 5) who works with this distinction). Stripped of the nuances to which we cannot do justice here, the implication is that one logic of action will dominate the other depending on the institutional framework. The assumption

is that both the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness exist, but that they cannot describe the same kind of behaviour, correspond to different variables and thus require different theoretical approaches (Jupille *et al*, 2003).

Such notions have given rise to an approach that can be labelled 'both/and'. Epistemologically, this approach *ascribes* strategic considerations to rational-choice institutionalism and normative factors to constructivism (see for example Checkel, 2007, p. 19). Methodologically, it *prescribes* using rationalism and constructivism sequentially or in combination to explain different social patterns. In his analysis of decision-making in the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER), for example, Jeffrey Lewis (2007) proposes a 'controlled-competitive mode of testing' that distinguishes actions that are objectively 'rational' from actions that are 'appropriate' because they are the product of socialization. Actors are deemed capable of enacting both logics *a priori*, but not at the same time.

An insistence on maintaining this analytical distinction between strategy and norms fits uneasily with the sociological tenet that *any* strategy is socially embedded and, conversely, that norm creation or maintenance always involves some kind of strategic calculation (Jenson, 1989, pp. 237–238; Kauppi, 2003, p. 777; Hay, 2006). This more sociological approach is used, for example, by Jabko (2006) to analyse the Commission's political strategy in creating the Single Market and Woll (2008) to study interest groups *vis-à-vis* EU institutions. Observing that actors are not generally capable of distinguishing what is profitable from what is right in a given social context, these authors document that rational and normative behaviour are two sides of the same coin: rationality is socially constructed in the same way that norms have to be strategically deployed. What is 'practical' is also 'logical' among lobbyists and will be self-evident to them. Motives are situational because the logic of practice is grounded in social context.

Like strategy and norms, ideas and interests also tend to be disassociated in institutionalist studies which examine policy-making within European and member state institutions. There are proposals for example to foreground an 'ideational variable' that 'just as any other factor, sometimes matters, sometimes does not matter in the explanation of policy change' (Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004, p. 184) or to measure the weight of ideas in comparison to institutions and interests (Palier and Surel, 2005). Yet as far back as Max Weber's *Social Psychology of World Religions*, which distinguished material and ideational interests, most sociologists have rejected the dichotomy between interests and ideas.

This treatment of 'ideas' and 'discourse' in EU policy studies by self-identified institutionalists rips the ideational from its social and sociological anchors. Sensitivity to the importance of meaning-making within research on

European politics loses its analytic force when ideas are only 'sometimes' important. Treating them as a *variable* that may or may not be important at one moment but not another contradicts the conceptualization of ideas inherited from classical sociology, and adopted by many historical institutionalists.[10] This is a loss of the understanding that there is representational content to any action on the part of policy-makers and citizens but that, conversely, these involve power. A more sociological perspective is that representation involves 'the power to give meaning to social relations and thereby to represent and dispute over ''interests'' ' (Jenson, 1990, p. 663). The question most properly asked, then, is not whether actors have objective interests or subjective ideas; it is, rather, what do they perceive to be the right and the wrong way of pursuing their goals (strategy) in a given social interaction. In other words, which ideas do they hold about what their interests are?

It is not enough, of course, to question the separation of strategy/identity or ideas/interests. It is also important to understand how worldviews, or 'meaning-making in action', is produced through social practices. Here again the founding fathers of sociology had messages still relevant today. Marx and Durkheim and especially the followers of Durkheim (such as Marcel Mauss, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Pierre Bourdieu) examined causal links between social structures and mental structures, their notion being that only a study of practices can reveal the symbolic representations via which actors develop their own motives. This is what Jonathan White (2009) does in his ethnography of the everyday political discourse of taxi divers *vis-à-vis* the EU. A similar attempt at making sense of worldviews is made by Favell (2008b), who shows how 'Euro-stars' shape their ordinary representations of 'Europe' through the mundane activities of looking for a job, an apartment or new friends in Eurocities such as Brussels or London. In these accounts, actors engaged in social and institutional practices never clearly distinguish their 'interests' from their 'ideas', or calculate material from normative benefits.

'Thinking like a sociologist' in these terms has meant, therefore, examining the practices of actors (via ethnography or large-scale data collection) as well as locating the real spaces in which 'European' practice occurs. Sometimes these are the formal organizations at the EU or the member-state level, and sometimes they are informal practices of being 'European' in distant locations, such as rural communities. Morton Egeberg (1999), for example, shows how national officials transform their role perceptions as a result of interacting at the EU level in their daily organizational practices. In this special issue, Sophie Jacquot and Cornelia Woll describe how actors 'use' EU symbols strategically as they move between different levels of the European political system.

In sum, just as greater attention to social relations of power can enrich the analysis of the EU's institutional development, the study of social practices draws a more compelling picture of how symbolic representations, norms and

ideas are instantiated in European dynamics, and in turn shape patterns of behaviour. These dynamics occur within formal European organizations to be sure, but they also go far beyond the *rue de la Loi* in Brussels, the Court of Justice in Luxembourg or the Parliament in Strasbourg.

Concluding Remarks

The value-added of a sociological turn in EU institutionalism – or, more accurately, its return to sociology – is manifold. A first would move institutionalists beyond their fascination with the formal rules and arrangements of '… the most densely institutionalized international organization in the world …' (Pollack, 2004, p. 137). A second would be to temper sociologists' too sceptical view of 'EU institutionalism', a scepticism that puts them at risk of missing the key role of institutions because they can find few bridges between their concerns and those of institutionalism. But beyond these relatively minor improvements to interdisciplinary harmony, there are three aspects of 'thinking like a sociologist' that could profitably be integrated within EU institutionalism so as to improve the field as a whole – attention to actors, analysis of power and epistemology.

Actors could be brought back into all three of the dominant strands of institutionalization in order to uncover the ways strategic behaviour within structured social relations shapes outcomes. Actors have a role, to be sure, in rational-choice institutionalism but there they are treated as a disincarnated *homo oeconomicus* who reacts to market signals, while for constructivism they become place-markers in systems of norms. As we have suggested, sociologists working on the EU have begun to uncover the parts that actors – from taxi drivers producing subterranean forms of political legitimacy to military officers pragmatically involved in the Europeanization of military practices – play in the theatre of European integration.

Moving to the question of actors' motives, one of the strengths of sociology lies in its refusal to impose an ontology on actors. Instead, it focuses attention on the *relational* strategies of individuals and groups. An 'inclusive ontology', as Niilo Kauppi calls it, avoids the trap of the logic of consequences versus the logic of appropriateness as well as the error of slicing ideas from interests and institutions. This contribution is sorely needed because, 80 years after the death of Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, the tendency to dichotomize interests and ideas or to pit rationality against identity still pervades EU studies.

Lastly with respect to the role of actors, their motives and their unequal resources are made visible by another tradition of sociology – its reliance on intensive fieldwork. Rather than limiting oneself to crafting research designs

with a view to testing alternative hypotheses, fieldwork leads one to confront the empirical world head-on. By contrast, institutionalists rarely practise ethnography, for example. Beginning with Marc Abélès' (1992) fieldwork in the European Parliament and George Ross' (1995) study of the Delors Commission, sociologists (and anthropologists) have produced a series of inductive, fine-grained ethnographic studies of familiar EU objects that would be useful for institutionalists to consider, for example in order to understand parliamentarians (Kauppi, 2005), Council working groups (Smith *et al*, 2005) or public opinion (Medrano, 2003). It is perhaps no accident that many of these 'sociology of the EU' projects have been conducted in the land of Émile Durkheim.

The second contribution of a return to a more sociological form of institutionalism is the constant reminder that power structures exist and have effects. Whether this is conflict in the Weberian tradition or the relations of domination of Marxism, actors in formal organizations and institutions more broadly have differential access to positions of authority and to power over others. Taking unequal power relations into account brings a shift from the institution in and of itself to the institution as a vector of power. Attention to social relations and structured practice, which dovetails with the original intent of neo-institutionalism, reminds us that it is not the weak who create institutional fields, but the strong or the astute. Nor are these 'fields' level playing fields; their rules favour incumbents and hold down challengers. Put differently, analysing who writes and enforces the rules is as important as studying who follows the rules.

Finally, contemporary sociology adds a critical epistemological edge that can be mobilized to question the power relations within the 'constituted knowledge' that often shapes theoretical debates on European integration. Much of European studies is structured by the coincidence between personal political assessments of European integration and the deployment of a theoretical approach. The debate that opposed neofunctionalists to intergovernmentalists was particularly prone to this coincidence. It is useful to remind ourselves that our theoretical positions often barely conceal our political preferences as well as our political and academic positions of authority. Adopting a more Weberian position on the vocation of science would help significantly.

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About the Authors

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Notes

1 As Colin Hay (2006, p. 56) observes, the adjectives used to characterize institutionalism have proliferated in the past 20 years. The most common classification is the one made by Hall and Taylor (1996), who distinguish rational-choice, historical and sociological institutionalism, to which others subsequently added constructivist, discursive, normative, network, and other kinds of institutionalism. Our purpose in this article is not to classify, however, but to identify conceptual elements in several institutionalist approaches dominant in EU studies that are most at odds with a sociological perspective.

2 Here sociologists concur with constructivists who argue that formal institutional relations take place in a much richer 'Community environment' that makes the EU qualitatively different from federal systems or international organizations because of the ways in which political norms and social actors both constrain and enable Union institutions and member states (for example, Schimmelfennig, 2003; see also Checkel and Katzenstein, 2008, p. 17).

3 If this text signalled the arrival of the 'new' institutionalism as an intellectual social movement, there were obviously precursors, cited in both Evans *et al* (1985, Chapter 1) and Hall and Taylor (1996, 937ff).

4 They were also rejecting classic or 'old' institutionalism that characterized much political science before the 1950s. By choosing Otto Hintze over Woodrow Wilson or Walter Bagehot to consider constitutional rules (Evans *et al*, 1985, p. 11), they signalled a preference for historical sociology over the analysis of formal institutions of classic institutionalism.

5 Thelen and Steinmo (1992, pp. 1–2) described historical institutionalism as drawing inspiration from economics, political science and sociology. Moreover, its efforts to correct both Marxism (a profoundly 'interdisciplinary' project) and 1950 behaviouralism (also self-defined as drawing on several disciplinary traditions) made historical institutionalism also interdisciplinary, drawing together analysts trained as historians, sociologists and political scientists.

6 Julien Weisbein (2008, pp. 120–21) provides an overview of other studies which follow European society in construction, far from the usual institutions and geographical locations, by focusing on surfers, football teams and hunters.

7 Describing historical institutionalism, Hall and Taylor (1996, p. 241) write: 'Rather than posit scenarios of freely-contracting individuals, for instance, they are more likely to assume a world in which institutions give some groups or interests disproportionate access to the decision-making process; and, rather than emphasize the degree to which an outcome makes everyone better off, they tend to stress how some groups lose while others win'.

8 As noted, for Thelen and Steinmo (1992) concern with ideational innovation was one of the two central foci of their collection.

9 A second reason for maintaining the distinction is no doubt a lingering attachment to a statistical logic, in which 'variables' must be kept separate from each other. We do not explore this epistemological foundation in detail.

10 In her well-informed overview of historical institutionalism in comparative politics, Kathleen Thelen makes this clear. She describes, for example, a number of classic texts (Esping-Andersen's *Three Worlds*, Skocpol's *Protecting Workers and Mothers*, for example) that address the ideational: 'rather than taking the interests of political actors as given, all these authors step back to ask how groups originally got constituted in the particular ways they did, then to consider how this affects the groups' understanding and pursuit of their interests' including their potential for identity construction, successful claims-making and coalition-building (Thelen, 1999, p. 395).

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