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‘On a clear day you can see the EU¹’

Case Study Methodology in EU Research

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Methodological and theoretical challenges

This article presents some observations about case studies in the EU literature. The discussion is based on a crude typology that distinguishes between two types of theoretical ambitions: a) applied theory for interpretation and explanation, and b) theory elaboration and construction. In both cases it is important to distinguish between theory as tools of explanation and theory as full explanations of concrete events (Eckstein 1975: 131). Concepts and theories can account for specific cases, and case studies can provide rich material for theory construction. On the other hand there may be problems of handling multi-causality, no way to measure partial effects or to draw conclusions in terms of probability.

The emphasis on theoretical programmes in EU research is not matched by a corresponding interest in methodological issues regarding empirical studies. Case studies have dominated since the first attempts to grasp European integration, but they represent vastly different

¹ The title is inspired by Wright (1979) ‘On a clear day you can see General Motors’; about the internal complexity and internal political processes of the automobile giant, as seen by the former CEO John Z. De Lorean.

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theoretical ambitions and sophistication (Hix 1998:43-44). The large majority of studies, including many that are analytically clear and convincing, handle methodological issues implicitly. Explicit discussions of methodological issues are few, and tend to focus on meta-theory. The article identifies some key methodological challenges and uses EU case studies as examples, but it does not claim to provide an extensive overview of EU research.

The EU-literature illustrates the whole spectre of possible ways to conduct case studies:

McDonald (1994) uses anthropological fieldwork to describe and conceptualise the Commission as a multi-national professional culture. Surveys can use informants as observation units, but with the intention of characterising a larger unit (like Commission officials' attitudes to European development, Laffan 1998). Game theoretical models can be used to interpret empirical processes, like the relationship between member states or central EU institutions. Moravcsik (1998) uses a wide variety of empirical data to document underlying state interests in treaty negotiations. Other influential books like *The Transformation of Governance in the European Union* (Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999) and *Policy-Making in the European Union* (Wallace and Wallace 1998), to mention a few, are also based on case-study evidence.

This article is not an attempt to take stock of theory development on EU integration, or to solve the problems of emerging research programmes. The focus is on how case studies can be explained by or used to build conceptual models and theories about the EU. However, such questions are closely related to theory development, since questions of data, their interpretation and analysis depends on the theoretical assumptions and analytical strategies that motivate a study. Theoretical programmes will be introduced and discussed to the extent necessary for the methodological discussion. Increased pluralism and the growing volume of EU research should be paralleled by more conscious methodological reflection. Methodology here means a concern with the logical structures and procedures of scientific enquiry. There is a need for all of us to become methodologically more 'conscious thinkers'. (Sartori 1970: 1033).

How can one or a few cases, focusing on parts of the EU system or particular processes within the EU, speak to the larger issues of EU integration? Theory development can vary

with respect to forms and levels of generalisation. One important form of theorising is formulation and refinement of concepts or conceptual models. Concepts are ideal type constructions – defining core elements of key phenomena or processes. Conceptual models differ from concepts in that they postulate the nature of a) structural linkages or b) (causal) mechanisms linking a set of concepts that are treated as theoretical variables. When a set of claims about the strength and forms of relationships can be substantiated, it becomes a theory. The level of generality may vary greatly, from attempts to grasp particular processes to claims about the overall nature of the EU.

When cases are explained by or employed as support for fairly general and abstract theories, theory developments are governed by theoretical frames. Such frames are sometimes specified as theoretical programmes. A general definition of a research programmes is that it is based on a) an overall interpretation of the phenomenon to be studied, b) assumptions about actors, processes and systems, and c) a set of key questions to be pursued in empirical studies. What actually constitutes a research programmes is a matter of discussion. Theoretical frames may develop into research programmes, and successful programmes mature with theoretical and methodological refinement, as well as accumulative empirical knowledge.

Cases are often discussed as a small N problem. This implies that cases are *only* amputated (representative statistical) samples. If so, one should be very careful about empirical and theoretical generalisation. However, case studies can also be regarded as quasi-experiments, where thoughtful arguments and careful case selection can lead to valid *analytical* generalisations. A theoretically focused study has to be based on assumptions and pre-knowledge – empirical as well as theoretical – about significant processes and relationship. Such arguments were underlying the methodological programme of grounded theory (Glaser and Straus 1967) and was also emphasised in the methodological discussion on comparative politics (Lijphardt 1975). Similar ideas were effectively reintroduced in the methodological discourse by Yin (1981, 1989) and followed by a more general interest in case-based generalisations (Ragin and Becker 1992, King, Keohane and Verba 1994, Andersen 1997, Bennett and George 2003).

Small Ns *can* yield big conclusions. This reasoning seems to underlie a number of case studies about the EU, but often without an explicit reference to the methodological literature.

The rest of the article is divided in six sections. In the first we briefly describe the role of research programmes in EU research. The next section discusses the basic challenges for empirical and theoretical generalisations based on case studies. The third section looks at how existing theory can be used as interpretative and explanatory framework. We then take a closer look at some possibilities for theory elaboration and construction. The fifth section raises some issues relating to the further development of emerging research programmes. In the final section we summarise arguments and implications for future research.

Cases and research programmes

EU research has gone through several stages in terms of the number and types of theoretical programmes, which have been influential. A common denominator has been a focus on the causes and nature of system integration. Case studies raise a number of questions related to data gathering, analysis, case selection and analytical strategies. However, assumptions about the nature of integration and the key questions for research have differed with respect to scope, theoretical ambitions and methodological consciousness.

In the 1950s and 1960s there was a strong dominance of (neo) functional theory, focusing on various mechanisms of spill-over, which transformed and undermined the traditional nation state. The normative view, that the EU (EEC) made it possible to reap inherent benefits in terms of increased rationality and efficiency, was close to that of the EU project. From the 1970s the functionalists were challenged by intergovernmentalists who focused on the role of self-interested and autonomous nation states in shaping EU integration to their advantage. In this perspective, the driving force was increased economic and political globalisation. To meet such challenges states have a need for increased cooperation, and the EU is an especially dense case of it.

Both functionalism and intergovernmentalism view the EU as a case of international cooperation; i.e. the general case definition is given. In this sense they have a meta-theory of case selection. Established general models are used to explain what is happening in the EU. This also means that EU's institutional structure and processes of integration are defined in terms of pre-established key concepts. In this way, these theoretical efforts *exploit* established theoretical models.

During the 1990s a key question in EU research was whether EU integration could be best accounted for by neo-functionalism or intergovernmentalism. However, from the mid 1990s the dominance of one or two theoretical perspective has increasingly been replaced by a variety of theoretical perspectives. Many come under the general umbrella called ‘institutionalist’ approaches. This umbrella serves as a general framework for various types of theorising. As programmatic research efforts they vary considerably.

One programmatic effort is the constructivist programme in international relations. Its ‘institutionalism’ is not aimed at specifying a structural matrix, but rather to show how rational elite actors are socialised to accept and act upon particular norms (Checkel 2001). This approach modifies the concepts of rational actor and actorhood. However, it can be viewed as a branch of the intergovernmentalist approach when it comes to the basic assumptions about states and international state system. Its scope is confined to elite actors. Empirical studies are guided by a deductive logic and methodological consciousness. Its maturity as a research programme comes from its exploitation of an international relations perspective.

There are also other programmatic efforts that represent ‘institutionalist’ approaches to the EU. They differ from those mentioned above in several ways. Although they are based on general concepts and theories, they are more oriented towards establishing new interpretations of the EU as a case. This is not the same as saying that the EU is unique, in the sense that it can only be understood and explained as a particular case. In contrast, what characterises these approaches is that they *explore* (rather than just exploit) general concepts to understand the EU. They vary considerably with respect to theoretical and methodological ambitions, and in the ways they are used as umbrellas for empirical research.

One example is the multi-level governance perspective (Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999). It is ‘institutionalist’ in the sense that its ambition is to develop a conceptual model to capture the complex structure of EU governance processes. The idea of multi-level governance – sometimes pictured as a marble cake – is developed as a context for the description and analysis of various processes. While multi-level governance is not unique to the EU, the EU represents a special form of it. It has a broad scope with respect to what kind of actors and processes may be involved in various types of governance. It is a refined framework for

detailed empirical research. Explanations are not linked to a small set of theoretical mechanisms, but rather embedded in rich contexts.

Other examples of institutionalist approaches can be characterised as sociological institutionalism. Within this group we find considerable variation with respect to theoretical ambitions and level of analysis (Olsen 2001, Stone Sweet et. al. 2001, Jacobsson 1999). They are called sociological because they use broad concepts of actors and social action to theorise institutions and processes of institutionalisation. What characterises the EU as a configuration is that it is complex and in a flux, and it is not clear what the end result will be. However, general theories of institutions and institutionalisation are employed to explore and explain unfolding events. Compared to other programmes mentioned above they have a broad scope, but are less developed in terms of empirically focused research programmes. However, they seem to have growing attraction as theoretical frames for empirical studies that vary greatly with respect to theoretical and methodological ambitions.

The present pluralism in EU studies reflects a growing realisation that the EU is a complex and heterogeneous configuration, both in structural terms and in terms of the kind of processes that are operating. It is generally agreed that EU integration affects virtually all aspects of politics, economy and society in the EU member states. However, it is not clear what exactly constitutes integration or ‘Europeanisation’, or through which processes it operates (Olsen 2002). Effects vary widely across countries and sectors. There is no agreement about how convergence and divergence should be conceptualised or measured. A key challenge is to grasp ‘the nature(s) of the beast’ (Risse-Kappen 1996).

Consequently, the question is not primarily how to measure, but what to measure. A number of theoretical ideas and perspectives about institutions and institutionalisation have been employed. Attempts to capture the overall nature of the EU, in terms of a limited set of concepts and theoretical processes, are paralleled by interest in how such ideas are reflected in various parts of the system. However, case studies are still the dominant empirical research strategy. A complex picture is emerging, raising a number of methodological challenges. This paper is *not* a survey of how such issues have been dealt with in the EU literature, or how they should be solved. The intention is just to identify some issues and examples that are important to theorising based on cases.

The challenges for case study methodology

A basic issue in the literature on case studies has to do with how and under what conditions it is possible to generalise from one or a few cases. There are two types of generalisation. The first concerns how is it possible to use a study of a part of an empirical unit to characterise the whole unit. The other has to do with the theoretical representativity of particular cases.

Empirical generalisation has to do with how and under what conditions empirical patterns in parts of a system can be generalised to the whole system. In traditional anthropology the assumption was that the parts were simply the total in miniature (Leach 1954). This was a (at least partly) valid assumption when studying small societies with little differentiation. In modern societies this is generally not the case, and this is well demonstrated in the EU literature. Claims about typical empirical patterns often depend upon which part of the EU has been studied.

Smith (1997: 233) points out that ‘in the field of Community studies, isolated case-studies of grand bargainings, policies and institutions have been the rule rather than the exception’. And, she continues: ‘the eagerness to engage in theoretical debates on the basis of such studies .. is rarely matched by concerns for the generalisability of the arguments’ empirical foundation.”(pp.234). Consequently, in theoretical debates disagreement is not only motivated by conceptual differences, but also the arbitrariness of the empirical foundation.

For a long time, the basic interpretation of EU as a case was located in theoretical frameworks of international integration and cooperation. However, the rise of alternative theoretical frames or programmes was not only, or perhaps even primarily, due to the failure of such programmes to substantiate particular hypotheses and claims. Growing knowledge about various parts, functions or processes created problems for general claims about a heterogeneous and complex system such as the EU. The EU faces problems similar to those of the first Chicago School in sociology studying a ‘multi-ethnic’ metropolis in dramatic change during the 1920s. The empirical variations documented in numerous studies of ‘encounters’ could not be aggregated into typical empirical patterns. The diversity could not be contained in structural and normative configurations of social theory that reflected the traditional European society.

The empirical diversity and complexity facing the Chicago School was, nevertheless, manageable in that all individual cases were eventually regarded as special instances of symbolic interaction (Andersen 1997). Empirical studies were used as input for generalisations to theoretical models focusing on abstract properties of all encounters. The complexity and heterogeneity of the EU raises some of the same challenges for attempts to generalise about the nature of EU integration. Generalisations must be linked to a theoretical interpretation of the EU system which emphasises general characteristics; as an inter-state system (Moravcsik 1998), a governance system (Kohler-Koch 1996, Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999), an organisational sphere where individual states are increasingly integrated into a larger unit (Olsen 1998:2) or as a special case of a global rationalisation process (Andersen 2001). How can case studies contribute the development of such perspectives?

Theoretical generalisation raises the question of how empirical patterns can be regarded as representative for a theoretical phenomenon. Although we cannot generalise from particular cases to an overall empirical pattern, we may be able to interpret empirical patterns as representing theoretically significant variations. The challenge for theoretical inference is to argue convincingly that case variations can be regarded as typical representations of theoretical dimensions, variables, relationships or mechanisms. Such arguments have two steps: First, that a particular interpretation provides order to the data, AND in addition directs attention to additional observations that, preferably, are considered non-trivial and risky. Second, that cases are selected in such a way that other disturbing (known) theoretical factors have little or no effects. In other words cases are treated as representative for a theoretical universe, rather than an empirical universe (Ragin and Becker 1992: ch.1³).

All interpretations imply generalisation, and vice versa. The case-study literature discusses various types of theoretical ambitions and how problems of analytical control can be handled through empirical research designs (case selection) (Glaser and Straus 1967, Lijphart 1971, Eckstein 1975, George 1979, Yin 1989, King, Keohane and Verba 1994, Bennett and George 2003). Traditionally such discussions usually paid little attention to underlying meta-

³ As the authors point out, researchers often fail to make this distinction explicit.

theoretical assumptions, i.e. theoretical programmes or frames. The major concern was how to (in)validate substantial theoretical claims in various areas when the sample contained few cases with high complexity (like Western nation states) (Lijphart 1971/75). The challenge was to present compelling theoretical and substantive criteria for case selection (Ragin et al. 1996: 752).

The literature discusses different types of studies, where theoretical ambition may vary. Here we will just distinguish between two major types of theoretically guided studies; a) theory as interpretative and explanatory framework(s) and b) theory elaboration and construction. Both types of theoretical case studies are common in the EU-literature, but the corresponding methodological issues are not often made explicit. *Theoretical interpretation and explanation* is the systematic application of concepts and theories to make sense of an empirical phenomenon. *Theory elaboration and construction* confronts specific implications of concept and theories with (rich and detailed) case-study material; to develop and modify existing theoretical generalisations and their scope conditions. The latter is not a testing of theoretical implications in a statistical sense, based on probabilistic expectations. It is careful analytical inference, to improve tools of theoretical explanations.

The few examples of methodological discussions in the EU literature mostly focus on meta-theoretical issues underlying competing theoretical programmes. These controversies reflect broader concerns related to theory building, and as such they are important elements of analytical strategies underpinning attempts to generalise from case studies. The issues they raise are closely related to those focusing on empirical research designs (see for instance Scharpf 1999). The challenge is to be explicit about methodological assumptions that allow us to draw valid theoretical conclusions from case studies. Although starting from theory or theoretical programmes, the interaction between deductive-inductive reasoning, as spelled out in the methodology of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), still holds. In this sense there is one basic scientific logic, covering theorising based on cases as well as empirically representative data. ‘What makes a statistical treatment theoretically significant has nothing to do with statistics’ (Sartori 1970: 1037, see also King, Keohane and Verba 1994).

Case studies have both strengths and weaknesses compared to those based on statistical techniques. A major strength of case studies is that they often have a good grasp of their problem area, while analytical strategies are often implicit. Studies are 'good' because they throw light on the subject area or add to our understanding. An exception to this is Eckstein's study of Norway as a deviant case among Western democracies (1966). He is remembered for his methodological sophistication, but he has been criticised for misinterpreting his data on Norway, and rightly so (Torgersen 1967). In the EU literature there seems, in contrast, to be a fair amount of methodologically 'unconscious' theorising going on. Below we shall briefly discuss some challenges for theoretically motivated case studies, with examples from the EU literature.

Theory as interpretative and explanatory framework

Many case studies – also in the EU literature – are motivated by empirical concerns. That is, their aim is to throw new light over an empirical issue at hand, considered to be of some interest. However, we should distinguish between situations with different degrees of pre-knowledge. If little is known, case studies are often undertaken because the researcher expects that the clarification of conceptual dimensions or causal mechanisms in one case will have implications for understanding of other similar cases. This is the strategy for constructing grounded theory 'from scratch'. This approach is recommended when relevant theory is weak and concepts vague (Ragin et al 1996: 750). In the study of the EU the starting point is more often some base-line theory considered to be of particular relevance in an area. The ambition is to apply theory, develop empirical implications and construct explanations. Pre-existing theory can be more or less developed.

For a long time EU studies were dominated by integration theory and intergovernmentalist theory. Both aspired to give an essential interpretation of the EU, providing key concepts and mechanisms within an integrated framework of explanation. As a consequence, case studies often applied one or both theories to explain particular variations. Interpretations were authoritative and explanations rested on belief in the validity of the general theories. The debate about which of the two perspectives was best suited to explain European integration continued up to the late 1990s. Schmidt (1997:233) warned about the sterile debates and dubious generalisations produced by studies caught in this dichotomy. In terms of empirical

research ‘the tail was wagging the dog’. Gradually, however, EU research has opened up for a variety of theoretical perspectives to accounts for parts of the EU, or the EU as a whole.

A key issue when using theory as an interpretative framework has to do with the validity of interpretations. Data construction and explanation is highly dependent on the assumptions of the theoretical concepts and theories used to make sense of the case. There are two basic types of theory, empirically grounded versus axiomatic and formal.

Applying existing theory to various aspects of the EU is an attempt to make various institutions, functions, processes or outcomes ‘understandable’. Theories vary considerably with respect to generality and substance. For instance Pijnenburg (1998) explores the fruitfulness of analysing EU lobbying as ad hoc coalitions. Other studies identify or reconstruct dimensions in areas of policy and regulation, or analyse aspect of EU institutions, the relationship between institutional changes at the EU and member state level and so on. Sometimes processes or relationships are interpreted in terms of formal game theory. Examples are numerous; the point is that concepts and theories about substantive areas of politics and society are employed to highlight various aspects of the EU. Most studies are single case studies.

When looking at the EU as a whole there are also competing interpretations painting quite different pictures; like new intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik 1998) and the multi-level governance perspective (Kohler-Koch 1996; Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999). The development of these perspectives can be analysed as theory elaboration and construction (we will return to Moravcsik below). However, they have also become part of a repertoire for making sense of and explaining various parts of the EU.

The intergovernmental model employs a formal theoretical framework which make assumptions about the states as key actors, where exogenous interests are the key to understanding the outcomes of EU level bargaining processes (Moravcsik 1993, 1998). In contrast the governance perspective views the EU as a complex, multi-level political system with multiple authority centres, and with unclear and overlapping boundaries between levels, authorities and functions. Within this perspective interests are (re) shaped as part of reflexive

processes, with no clear boundary between domestic and EU level processes (Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999).

Such perspectives have quite different implications for empirical studies of the EU, representing rather different images of the EU. Forster (1998) argues that the British negotiation position over the Maastricht treaty was developed in a way consistent with the latter, thus challenging the empirical realism of the neo-intergovernmentalist perspective. Sometimes such general perspectives are used to contextualise studies of various parts of the EU drawing upon other concepts and theories. For instance Grande (1996) discusses states and interest groups in a framework of multi-level decision-making. Such studies may also be seen as further specification of the general governance perspective, and therefore having elements of theory elaboration.

The concepts and theories applied focus on certain data, edit the story and (in some instances) provide theoretical mechanisms. The challenge is, as illustrated by Allison (1969), that more than one interpretation is possible. General theoretical mechanisms will usually imply partial relationships, but this cannot be measured empirically in case studies. How then to argue 'best fit'? All concepts and theories imply ideal data sets. They serve as base-line models for evaluating available data. In a fieldwork situation the question is often discussed in relation to how (competing) core concepts can organise key observations, in a way that do not exclude (rich) data relating to the key issues at hand. This is not, however, only a question of how well interpretations fit existing data. The acid test is to what extent an interpretation yields additional empirical implications, preferably surprising and risky, that are consistent with the overall interpretation.

Tallberg (2000) applies principal-agent theory to re-evaluate the controversy between intergovernmentalists and integrationists in relation to the role of supranational EU institutions. Drawing on formal theory he develops an interpretative framework for case studies. This approach makes it possible to develop empirically testable claims, and as such it is an excellent study. But, again, how much is dependent on the choice of model? As always, the underlying assumptions imply certain data and interpretations (Caporaso 1999). In what ways and under what conditions are such assumptions valid? This kind of question leads us to

the other major type of case studies where the intention is not only to apply, but also critically evaluate, elaborate and construct concepts and theories.

Theory elaboration and construction

Again, the focus can be various aspects of the EU or the EU as a whole (whatever that is), and the starting point can be axiomatic or empirically grounded concepts and theories. Sometimes working with rich empirical data can make us alert to the limitations of specific theories. This can lead to attempts to further specify assumptions, dimensions of concepts and relationships or scope conditions. Often researchers are ‘folk Bayesians’; i.e. they use pre-existing knowledge as a basis for identifying relevant theory and cases. McKeown (1999: 180) argues that this is consistent with Eckstein’s (1975) ideas about critical cases. He assumed that the researchers’ prior knowledge about the (problematic) status of a case in relation to theory (they are relevant, but unlikely to hold) is a preconception for case selection.

This theoretical strategy is found in many case studies of the EU. For instance concepts and theories based on nation states are challenged when applied to the EU. This is often the starting point for reformulating concepts, relationships or mechanisms. The analytical basis for this is the assumption that a case belongs to the theoretical universe (relevance), but at the same time specific expectations are violated. The conclusions and the alternative formulations have been substantiated in terms of general knowledge, outside the case at hand (Yin 1981, King, Keohane and Verba 1994, Andersen 1997). Such knowledge can be empirical, theoretical or based on discussions about how observations are related to meta-theoretical assumptions.

Most of the case-study literature emphasises how the assumption of critical cases leads to empirical case selection, making it possible to focus on the key theoretical variables and relationships. A major concern is to achieve analytical control; i.e. to be able to focus on certain conceptual properties or relationships between variables, while at the same time striving to eliminate variations that might create problems for the analysis. Empirically this is often done through some sort of matching (most similar cases). However, various degrees of analytical control can be achieved by drawing on pre-existing knowledge about the theoretical properties of certain types of cases. The possibility for accurate theoretical sampling is related to the depth and detail of pre-existing knowledge. This is an important

point, since it is often argued that case studies are most fruitful when little is known in an area (Ragin et al 1996:750).

A number of EU studies seem to use a 'critical case' strategy, although often in a loose way. A key assumption is that cases are typical instances of theoretical cases, as specified in concepts, models and theories. Studies often show that concepts and theories do not fully cover the empirical observations, and mechanisms do not fully explain outcomes. This leads to supplementary or alternative conceptualisations and hypotheses about the EU or parts of it. For instance Wendon (1998) introduces the Commission's strategic understanding of the relationship between policy image and institutional venues as a key to its entrepreneurial role. Smith explicitly (1997) compares cases of policy reform in a critical case design. Initially they seemed to reflect to neo-integovernmentalist and neo-integration mechanisms. However, her studies reveals previously missed interaction effects between such integration mechanisms within the EU.

Another type of theory elaboration and construction has a somewhat different starting point. Existing and dominant theoretical perspectives do not fully capture 'what is going on', but alternative theory development is guided by an alternative theoretical programmes. Case studies are used to develop and test empirical implications of theoretical formulations. Alternative theories are confronted, but the emphasis is more on theory development than on rejecting specific alternative theoretical claims. Such efforts are not necessarily driven by specific failures of existing theories (although this may have played an important role earlier), but rather alternative foundations for theory building.

The most prominent example of how case studies are used to develop a theoretical programme in EU research is Moravcsik's (1998) *The Choice for Europe* (1998). This is an impressive work in terms of deductive underpinning, clarity of argument and empirical scholarship. It presents the most complete, theoretically disciplined and methodological self conscious historical account of the antecedent conditions, bargaining processes and outcomes of five intergovernmental negotiations that have shaped European integration (Scharpf 1999: 164). It is a formidable statement of liberal intergovernmentalism, which Moravcsik himself has done so much to develop. At the same time it provides a new synthesis for the field of regional integration studies generally and European Union studies in particular (Caporaso

1999:160). It is a contribution to international relations theory, locating the study of EU integration in the mainstream of theorising about the relationship between the state and the international system (Wallace 1999: 156).

The programme of liberal intergovernmentalism has an essential interpretation of key elements and relationships, actors and processes. There is a set of key questions which guides and focuses empirical research. The transparency of the research strategy behind this works also lends itself to pointed criticisms. In this context, an important question is ‘what is a case?’ Caporaso (1999:162) argues that Moravcsik has a meta-theory of cases and case selection. ‘For him a case is a relatively discrete and bounded event or set of events. Although these cases are protracted and have considerable temporal range, they are distinctively not what we would call processes’. So, he looks for evidence in particular places. According to Caporaso, this makes him less bold, but more precise than some of the competing theories he has rejected. In a similar vein Sharpf (1999: 165) criticises Moravcsik for selection bias: ‘Since only intergovernmental negotiations are being considered, why shouldn’t the preferences of national governments have shaped the outcomes?’

The constructivist programme in the international relations (IR) literature shares the essential interpretation of the EU system as a set of interdependent states. However, it makes different assumptions about actors, interests and processes. Case studies are not motivated only, or primarily, by the wish to understand specific empirical problems of the EU, but to develop theory (Risse-Kappen 1996, Checkel 2001). Rather than specific discussions of case selection, methodological discussions tend to involve questions about ontological or epistemological assumptions that are brought to bear in the analysis. This programme explicitly challenges the assumptions of the rational choice paradigm. This has drawn criticisms from Moravcsik (1999), which in turn has been refuted by Risse and Wiener (1999). The exchange was continued by Checkel (2001) and Moravcsik (2001). The arguments are about the nature of actors and rules, and their role in explanations, and not about the essential nature of the EU.

The key issues for the IR constructivists are the relationships between choices and norms, between interests and identity and how institutions affect learning and socialisation. The aim is to develop interpretations, which imply causal arguments, with a deductive underpinning and observable empirical implications. As Risse and Wiener (1999: 776) point out: ‘It is

impossible to evaluate ideas ‘against’ interests in any meaningful sense, unless we specify *which* ideas and *which* interests. We can then test, for example, whether actors motivated by principled beliefs or norms of appropriate behaviour or, say, by instrumental search for power or material (interests)’. It is a programmatic effort, which provides direction to case based research.

The two research programmes that are mentioned above are examples of broader theoretical efforts in the area of international relations studies, now extended to EU studies. Both programmes represent an institutionalist approach. While one is based on rational choice, the other is based on a modified concept of rational actors and actions. In both cases states play the key role. These programmes do not, however, capture all aspects of what is broadly termed EU integration. Increasingly a broader sociological institutionalist frame has been invoked to capture ‘what goes on’.

Within this broad frame alternative assumptions are made about a) essential interpretations of EU integration, b) the nature of actors and processes, and c) key questions for research. These efforts are relatively heterogeneous, although broadly situated with sociological institutionalism, drawing upon fairly general theoretical ideas about institutions and institutionalisation. They reflect the increasing empirical knowledge about the heterogeneity of the EU, but they do not yet constitute anything like a coherent research programme. However, such theoretical frameworks seem to have growing attraction for the students of EU integration. Below we will briefly outline some characteristic of sociological institutionalism and attempts to develop clearer programmatic efforts within this framework.

The institutionalisation of Europe: how to elaborate research programmes?

Burawoy (1991) argues for the *elaboration* of abstract macro theory, or reconstruction of social theory through case studies; even detailed ethnographic case studies. As an example he uses Habermas’ hypothesis that the modern world is characterised by the penetration of the (private) life world by the capitalist system. This implies that in the modern metropolis everyday life is continually eroded, distorted, overpowered by and subordinated to institutional forces that seem outside human control. His book presents several cases (by his doctoral students) attempting to use micro data about various aspects of everyday life to develop hypotheses about the forms and conditions for such processes. A similar strategy

seems to be under way to develop implications of abstract theory in the context of European integration. Although not explicitly stated in these terms, this seems to be the basic idea behind attempts to establish a set of research programmes on the institutionalisation of Europe.

The study of the EU is to a large extent the study of specific institutions and institutional configurations and how they change. At the same time institutional arguments and models are increasingly invoked and introduced into the study of the EU (Aspinwall and Schneider 1998, Hix 1998, Jupille and Caporaso 1999). Some argue that an institutional turn has taken place in the study of EU, and 'that almost all any Europeanist with a minimal level of self-respect flags herself as an 'institutionalist' at the moment' (Aspinwall and Schneider 1998). The question is not, accordingly, whether institutions matter, but where, to what extent and why. The attempt to develop an institutionalist research programme may be regarded as elaboration of general and abstract concepts and theories.

Sociological 'institutionalists' are a heterogeneous lot. To the extent that theorizing is based on strict rational-actor models, institutions are rational and instrumental *constructions*. For some, institutional factors are introduced to modify a rational choice perspective and explain *evolution* (in contrast to construction). More sociologically oriented institutionalists emphasise the relative autonomy of institutions in shaping action, institutional reproduction, evolution and transformation. In contrast to rational choice institutionalist, who see institutions as reflections of issues and actors' preferences, sociological institutionalists believe that sources and consequences of institutionalisation must be conceptualised and explained in terms of more abstract and generic social processes (Stone et al 2001:4). Such efforts will be briefly elaborated below.

The institutionalisation of Europe is a complex, enduring, far-reaching project, characterised by striking variations with respect to the speed and scope of integration affecting different parts of the EU. Is it one Europe evolving, or several (Wallace 2001)? There is no consensus on empirical foci or a (few) unifying theoretical frame for studies of the EU. Empirical foci may be how decisions and institutions are shaped at the central EU level, how EU-level decisions influence the regional, national or sub-national level, the interplay between different levels or the relative uniqueness of various parts of the EU. Attempts to generalise are often challenged by detailed empirical accounts and counter examples.

There is a growing interest in various forms of institutional theory or models in political science and sociology; much for the same reasons that led the Chicago School to generalise abstract and general elements across a large number of ‘encounters’. Still, the picture is characterised by a multitude of approaches, emphasising different concepts, key processes and mechanisms. This is no attempt to provide a comprehensive overview and evaluation of sociological institutionalism in relation to the EU. We will just briefly discuss three efforts, which point towards programmatic sociological institutionalist approaches to the study of the EU; varying both with respect to theoretical and empirical ambitions.

The first strain of research is starting out from a general ideal type model of institutions and various institutional logics of a social system. In *The new European experiment in political organisation*, Olsen (1998) sketches an outline of a research programme on the institutionalisation of Europe. Although a political scientist, Olsen’s approach can be labelled sociological with respect to how he conceptualises institutions and institutionalisation processes. Going back to early organisation theory (March 1953) he asks the question ‘what happens to organised political units when they become part of a larger unit?’ (p.2). His point of departure is existing empirical (often case study based) knowledge about the ongoing changes in the EU. He then goes on to develop hypotheses about EU developments using general and abstract theory about how integration impacts a set of constituent units, drawing on general insights about institutional development.

This is a first step in formulating an empirical research programme embedded in an institutional approach, linking rather general and abstract mechanisms of institutionalisation to EU integration. The challenge is to develop this abstract model into a more concrete agenda for empirical research, where implications of abstract concepts and mechanisms are translated into key empirical research questions and corresponding criteria for case selection.

Further developments along this line are found in the paper *Organising European institutions of governance* (Olsen 2001). Some studies illustrate the importance of different institutional logics i.e. the role of (intended) rational choice versus the logic of appropriateness. In the same vein, Schimmelfennig (1999) shows how the initial political decision to enlarge EU to the East was dominated by normative factors of appropriateness, while questions about how

to distribute costs related to institutional changes as well as transfer of funds was governed by interests and calculation. Similarly, Andersen (1999) argues that the transformation of key energy sectors in the EU has been characterised by a similar change in emphasis regarding the logic of institutionalisation.

Another programmatic effort focuses on a limited set of theoretical mechanisms, treating them as theoretical variables to be employed to explain various aspects of the institutionalisation of the EU. The book *Institutionalising Europe* (eds. Stone Sweet, Sandholtz and Fligstein 2001) makes a substantial contribution in the direction of an empirical research programme, by outlining a conceptual model, a set of causal mechanisms and key questions that are pursued through a number of case studies. Rather than focusing on how one ideal type mechanism can account for major variation in particular cases, the question is how the impacts of different institutional logics and mechanisms vary over time. It is not a matter of calculation OR appropriateness; but how much, when and under what conditions. A key mechanism is related to the conception of institutional evolution; as a result of unforeseen and unintended consequences that accumulate over time.

Their starting point is that the 'EU is an unusual political entity. No existing supranational political system matches its organisational complexity, the density of substantive and procedural law, or the extent of its impact on national structures' (2001: 3). The EU is changing through a process of dynamic institutionalisation that produces outcomes that key actors could not expect or foresee. It is a matter of evolutions and change rather than design. The challenge is to understand how a new political space is institutionalised, as sites of collective governance. They propose to do this by specifying and elaborating on key concepts in institutional theory in a way which links institutions, organisations and actors. They identify a number of key issues relating to impact of institutions, feed-back effects, institutional coherence, and the relation between political institutions and society. It is, perhaps, the clearest programmatic effort in sociological institutionalist research on the EU.

A third effort is a broader attempt to understand how translocal sources of change are translated, modified and acted upon in local organisational settings. Starting out as an empirical programme focusing on public sector reforms, it has gradually developed into a conscious effort to combine various general theoretical principles and variables from

institutional theory into an empirically grounded research model. It also challenges basic notions about change through simple causal mechanisms of diffusion, imitation or external pressures (Johansson 2002). Rather than explaining local change through general mechanisms that emphasise convergence, it shows how local organisational processes reflecting competence, creativity and sense-making play a key role in modifying translocal forces of change. It is partly a change of focus, on diversity and uniqueness, rather than the homogenising and uniforming elements of broader institutional change. As such it opens up for a better understanding of how EU integration can be paralleled by local innovation, creativity and divergence.

Several studies of the EU have focused on the role of translocal ideas in particular institutional settings (Jacobsson 1999, Sahlin-Andersson 2000). Decisions and directives in the EU are often formulated in such a way that they are difficult to implement in a uniform way across member states. On the other hand, this opens up for creative and appropriate translations into local contexts. EU rules never replace existing rules completely; they become embedded in existing ways of thinking and doing things (Jacobsson 1999: 8). Performance may be measured against formal rules as well as against the everyday expectations, and the two standards may be loosely coupled. There is room not only for flexibility, but also strategic adaptation, although the space for local adaptation may vary across sectors and issue areas. As a programmatic effort, there is a strong emphasis on local processes of institutionalisation, combining and reinterpreting key concepts in institutional theory.

Where to go from here?

The literature on case-study methods points to the need for more detailed discussions about empirical design and the possibilities of drawing valid theoretical conclusions from one or a few units of analysis. This is closely related to the problems of evaluating basic theoretical assumptions in an area of theory construction. The role of theoretical research programmes in relation to case studies is an issue that needs further attention also in the general literature on case study methodology. Most of this literature has focused on grounded theory construction or how critical cases can challenge existing concepts and theories.

Theoretical programmes vary with respect to theoretical maturity and methodological rigour. The programmes that have a relatively narrow scope seem theoretically more developed and more conscious with respect to methodological issues. Broader sociological institutionalist approaches vary a lot. They are theoretically less mature, in the sense that even the most systematic contributions do not reflect a consensus about key issues and how to pursue them empirically. Some simply use ‘institutionalism’ as a regulative idea. However, there is no reason why anyone should not benefit from a more conscious methodological approach. This may be even more important when working within emerging theoretical programmes.

A key challenge for EU research is to combine overall theory with detailed empirical knowledge about the different part and processes of the EU.

On the one hand, deductive theory formulation has the advantage of drawing upon accumulated insights into theoretical concepts and mechanisms. The challenges for studies starting out from this camp is to strengthen the links to the rich empirical data that increasingly are available, and in a way which makes it possible to refine theory and not only illustrate general and abstract insights. Too often general theoretical arguments are not pursued empirically.⁴ When they are, empirical implications should be as specific and unique as possible, which would also make them risky. However, when working within theoretical programmes, cases are not just rich empirical configurations. Cases focus on empirical variations that may be regarded as representative of key theoretical variables. In this sense theoretical programmes make us insensitive to rich empirical variations that may challenge our basic assumptions.

On the other hand, there are the rich empirical studies that demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of various EU phenomena. They may be interesting in themselves, but without a clear linkage to an overall (at least partial) perspective, it is hard to understand what it tells us about the EU. Theoretical interpretations of particular cases should be explicitly linked to wider theoretical frames. In contrast, we sometimes find that theory applied to particular cases only has a loose coupling to the more general frames that are used to legitimate the study. This applies to many ‘institutionalists’. In both cases the key is to develop

⁴ ‘Those who are forever packing their bags for a journey they do not intend to take’

intermediate, middle range, concepts and theoretical formulations that can be the basis for accumulation of knowledge about various substantial areas, functions or types of processes.

Middle range simply means that concepts and theories have specific and operational empirical implications, in terms of holistic interpretation as well as specific statements about relationships. And, some of these implications should be non-trivial and risky, to allow for 'stubborn facts'. Successful middle range theories will often combine abstract theoretical mechanisms. Means-ends rationality is usually not necessarily an alternative to the logic of appropriateness. The question is how they can be combined in particular instances. Examples of successful programmes that have developed in this way can be found, for instance, in organisation theory.

Another key challenge is to show how insights about EU and institutionalisation can focus empirical research on key issues on the EU agenda shaping its long-term development. Case selection and design should be more systematic, rather than ad hoc; thus strengthening the deductive element. Theoretical relevance can be established ad hoc in a logically stringent way. However, as Burawoy (1991) has argued, from a programmatic theoretical perspective deductive case selection is preferred.

The prospect of a 'big bang' starting in 2004/5; i.e. the entry of 10-12 new member countries within a few years, points to a final geographical boundary. It represents a peaceful unification of Europe, but the further integration of the EU will take time, and the end result is not clear. The debate over enlargement has focused on the tensions between short-term costs and long-term benefits. The effects on the struggle to extend and deepen integration are not clear. Enlargement represents an impetus for institutional change, but to what ends? Institutions, decision-making and various policy areas will be affected.

As Sedelmeier (2002) has pointed out, the debate over EU enlargement has suffered from a predominant focus on single cases, although some theoretically informed studies have emerged recently. The debate needs to be structured in way which may generate more general and cumulative insights. He proposes to do this in relation to the two research programmes on 'international organisations' discussed above – the rationalist and sociological, or constructivist, institutionalism. He then goes on to demonstrate the usefulness of these

theoretical approaches in structuring the debate by giving an overview of the state of research on EU enlargement. This illustrates how research programmes can provide case studies with theoretical focus and support.

Frequently asked questions about the EU are: Is the EU moving towards federalism or confederalism, or a federalism of nation states? In both cases, the assumption is that the EU is a variation of well-known institutional forms. Is it a coincidence that two dominant theoretical programmes, which pay little attention to the uniqueness of the EU, have been initiated and developed by US researchers? New programmatic efforts are more influenced by European researchers who want to make sense of the world within which they live and carry out their research. To what extent will European integration and convergence go hand in hand with a Europe of multiple identities and diverse allegiances? As Wallace (2001:581) has pointed out, one of the challenges for students of European political integration is that 'the subject does not stand still'. It is a system in transformation. This suggests that the general sociological perspectives on institutionalisation may be a useful way to frame attempt to generalise about EU integration.

The challenge is to pursue such issues in a way that combines insights from overall EU development with the considerable variations and differentiation we find across policy areas and between levels. Answers depend on a better understanding of the role of actors, rules and organisations in the emergence and expansion of political space in general (Stone et al 2001:4). This is the underlying agenda for sociological institutionalist approaches to the EU. However, so far they lack the precision that can be found in the area of international organisations.

One problem is that that theoretical explanations are too general; i.e. empirical implications are consistent with, but not unique to, the empirical pattern that is explained. Another problem is that explanations are too specific; i.e. detailed empirical patterns are explained, but without reference to the wider theoretical framework. Again, this directs the attention to need for bridging between general theory and empirical studies in the form of middle range concepts and theories. The broad scope and focus on complex social processes makes it harder to develop elegant and parsimonious theory. However, there is no reason to compromise on methodological rigour.

The discussion has focused on theoretically motivated case studies in a broad sense. Sometimes cases are carefully selected; other studies concentrate on theoretically relevant properties without much discussion of case selection. The above examples are just illustrations, but they suggest a need to take methodological issues relating to case studies more seriously. Walton (1992) talks about cases being invoked by theory; rather than being selected. The role of case studies may also be different within different types of theory elaboration and construction. As Scharpf (1999:166) has pointed out, a problem with the idea that social science should prefer general theories to 'sometimes true theories' is that general theory tends to impede theoretically interesting discoveries. 'Deviant cases are in danger of being downplayed as 'exceptions' rather than being exploited for the development of more reality-congruent theory through the introduction of analytically pertinent distinctions'.

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