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Social Constructivism and European Integration

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Introduction

Social constructivism has reached the study of the European Union (EU) only recently, at least as compared with International Relations or Comparative Politics in general.¹ The publication of a *Journal of European Public Policy* special issue in 1999 marks a turning point in this regard (Christiansen, Jørgensen, and Wiener 1999; but see Jørgensen 1997). Social constructivism entered the field of EU studies mainly as a 'spill-over' from the International Relations discipline, but also because of profound misgivings among scholars about the rather narrow focus and sterility of the debates between neofunctionalism and (liberal) intergovernmentalism. Research inspired by social constructivism promises to contribute substantially to European integration studies, both theoretically and substantially, as I argue in the following. This chapter proceeds in the following steps. First, I will introduce social constructivism as an approach to the study of European integration and a challenge to more rationalist approaches such as liberal intergovernmentalism, but also a version of neofunctionalism. Second, I take a closer look at the question of European identity as a particular subject area to which research inspired by social constructivism can contribute. Third, the chapter discusses some constructivist contributions to the study of EU enlargement. I conclude with remarks on the future of European integration research inspired by social constructivism.

Social constructivism as an approach to European integration

There is considerable confusion in the field of European studies on what precisely constitutes social constructivism and what distinguishes it from other approaches to European integration. As a result, it has become fairly common to introduce constructivism as yet another substantive theory of regional integration, such as liberal

intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik 1993) or neofunctionalism (Haas 1958; see Schmitter's contribution to this volume). Yet, it should be emphasized at the outset that social constructivism as such does not make any substantive claims about European integration. Constructivists may join an intergovernmentalist reading of interstate negotiations as the central way to understand the EU. They may equally join the neofunctionalist crowd emphasizing spill-over effects and the role of supranational institutions (see, e.g. Haas 2001). And constructivists could certainly contribute to the study of the EU as a multi-level governance system and to an institutionalist interpretation of its functioning (see Jachtenfuchs and Kohler-Koch's as well as Pollack's contribution to this volume).

It is equally misleading to claim, as some have argued, that social constructivism subscribes to a 'post-positivist' epistemology (how can we know something?), while conventional approaches are wedded to positivism and the search for law-like features in social and political life. Unfortunately, terms such as 'positivism' are often used as demarcation devices to distinguish the 'good self' from the 'bad other' in some sort of disciplinary tribal warfare (for an excellent discussion of this tendency in International Relations theory see Wight 2002). However, if 'post-positivism' means, first, a healthy scepticism toward a 'covering law' approach to social science irrespective of time and space and instead striving toward middle-range theorizing; second, an emphasis on interpretive understanding as an intrinsic, albeit not exclusive, part of any causal explanation; and, third, the recognition that social scientists are part of the social world which they try to analyse ('double hermeneutics' see Giddens 1982), then—is anybody still a 'positivist' (to paraphrase an article by Legro and Moravcsik 1999)? In sum, while there are some radical constructivist positions denying the possibility of intersubjectively valid knowledge claims in the social sciences, this view is by no means a defining and unifying characteristic of social constructivism as a meta-theoretical approach to the study of social phenomena (on this point see also Ruggie 1998).

Defining social constructivism

So, what then is 'social constructivism' (for the following see, e.g. Adler 1997, 2002; Fearon and Wendt 2002; Wendt 1999; Christiansen, Jorgensen, and Wiener 2001)? It is a truism that social reality does not fall from heaven, but that human agents construct and reproduce it through their daily practices. Berger and Luckmann (1966) called this 'the social construction of reality'. Yet while this is a core argument of social constructivism, as a truism it does not provide us with a clear enough definition. Therefore, it is probably most useful to describe constructivism as based on a social ontology which insists that human agents do not exist independently from their social environment and its collectively shared systems of meanings ('culture' in a broad sense). This is in contrast to the methodological individualism of rational choice according to which '[t]he elementary unit of social life is the individual human action' (Elster 1989: 13). The fundamental insight of the structure-agency debate, which lies at the heart of many social constructivist works, is not only that social structures and agents are mutually

co-determined. The crucial point is that constructivists insist on the mutual *constitutiveness* of (social) structures and agents (Adler 1997: 324–5; Wendt 1999: ch. 4). The social environment in which we find ourselves, defines ('constitutes') who we are, our identities as social beings. 'We' are social beings, embedded in various relevant social communities. At the same time, human agency creates, reproduces, and changes culture through our daily practices. Thus, social constructivism occupies a—sometimes uneasy—ontological middleground between individualism and structuralism by claiming that there are properties of structures and of agents that cannot be collapsed into each other.

This claim has important, if often overlooked, repercussions for the study of the European Union. The prevailing theories of European integration—whether neofunctionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, or 'multi-level governance'²—are firmly committed to a rationalist ontology which is agency-centred by definition (see Haas's recent interpretation of neofunctionalism in Haas 2001). This might be helpful for substantive empirical research, as long as we are primarily in the business of explaining the evolution of European institutions. If institution-building and, thus, the emergence of new social structures are to be explained, agency-centred approaches are doing just fine. Here, a constructivist perspective will complement rather than substitute these approaches by emphasizing that the interests of actors cannot be treated as exogenously given or inferred from a given material structure. Rather, political culture, discourse, and the 'social construction' of interests and preferences matter.

Take the debate on the future of the European Union as it has evolved from the 1990s onwards. Do the German and French contrasting visions of a future European political order reflect some underlying economic or geopolitical interests? If this were the case, we would expect most French politicians to plead for a federalist vision of the EU, since France should be obviously interested in binding a powerful Germany as firmly as possible to Europe. In contrast, most German contributors should embrace a 'Europe of nation states', as a means of gaining independence from the constraining effects of European integration. Thus, an emphasis on material power as well as economic or security interests would mis-predict the positions in the current debate. Those positions, however, can be explained as reflecting competing visions of a good political and socio-economic order which are deeply embedded in the two countries' contrasting domestic structures and political cultures.

Yet, such an emphasis on ideational, cultural, and discursive origins of national preferences complements rather than substitutes an agency-based rationalist account. 'Soft rationalism', which takes ideas seriously, should be able to accommodate some of these concerns. The more we insist that institutions including the EU are never created from scratch, but reflect and build upon previous institutional designs and structures, the further we move away from rational-choice approaches, even of the 'soft' variety. The issue is not so much about path-dependent processes and 'sunk costs' as emphasized by historical institutionalism (Pierson 1996), but about institutional effects on social identities and fundamental interests of actors. Thus, a constructivist history of the EU would insist against liberal intergovernmentalism in particular, that we cannot even

start explaining the coming about of the major constitutional treaties of the Union without taking the feedback effects of previous institutional decisions on the identities and interests of the member states' governments and societies into account. Finally, such a re-written history of the EU would focus on the ongoing struggles, contestations, and discourses on how 'to build Europe' over the years and, thus, reject an imagery of actors including governments as calculating machines who always know what they want and are never uncertain about the future and even their own stakes and interests.

The differences between constructivism and a liberal intergovernmentalist approach to European integration are, thus, pretty clear as the latter is firmly based on a rationalist ontology that takes actors' preferences as given. It is less clear, though, how constructivism differs from neofunctionalism. On the one hand, neofunctionalism constitutes an actor-centred approach to European integration (see Haas 1958, 2001). It starts with egoistic utility-maximizing actors who cooperate to solve some collective action problems. At some point, the functional logic takes over ('spill-over') leading to further integration. On the other hand, neofunctionalism also talks about normative integration, the 'upgrading of common interests', and the shift of loyalties (identities) from the national to the supranational levels. This latter language implies some constitutive effects of European integration on the various societal and political actors. If European integration is supposed to transform collective identities, we have moved beyond a narrow rational-choice approach and toward a much 'thicker' understanding of institutions. In sum, there are aspects to neofunctionalist accounts that resonate pretty well with a constructivist focus on the constitutive rather than the purely regulative impact of norms.

Agency, structure, and the constitutive effect of norms

The constructivist emphasis on the mutual constitutiveness of agency and structure becomes even more relevant for the study of European integration, the more we focus on the *impact* of Europeanization on the member states and their domestic policies, politics, and polities. Recent work on European integration has started to look at the various ways in which the integration process itself feeds back into the domestic fabric of the nation states (e.g. Cowles, Caporaso, and Risse 2001; Goetz and Hix 2000; Börzel 2002; Knill 2001; Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999; Héritier et al. 2001). Thus, European integration studies increasingly analyse the EU as a two-way process of policy-making and institution-building at the European level which then feed back into the member states and their political processes and structures. It is here where the difference between the methodological individualism emphasized by rational choice, on the one hand, and the constructivist focus on the mutual constitutiveness of agency and structures matters a lot.

The reason for this can be found in the way in which social constructivists conceptualize how institutions as social structures impact on agents and their behaviour. Rationalist (or 'neo-liberal' in International Relations jargon, see Keohane 1989) institutionalism views social institutions including the EU as primarily constraining the

behaviour of actors with given identities and preferences. These actors follow a 'logic of consequentialism' (March and Olsen 1989, 1998) enacting given identities and interests and trying to realize their preferences through strategic behaviour. The goal of action is to maximize or to optimize one's interests and preferences. Institutions constrain or widen the range of choices available to actors to realize their interests. The EU's liberalization of telecommunications markets, for example, broke up state monopolies while empowering foreign companies to penetrate the markets of their competitors (Schneider 2001).

In contrast, social constructivism and sociological institutionalism emphasize a different logic of action, which March and Olsen have called the 'logic of appropriateness': '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' (March and Olsen 1998: 951). Rule-guided behaviour differs from strategic and instrumental behaviour in that actors try to 'do the right thing' rather than maximizing or optimizing their given preferences. The logic of appropriateness entails that actors try to figure out the appropriate rule in a given social situation. It follows that social institutions including the EU can no longer be viewed as 'external' to actors. Rather, actors including corporate actors such as national governments, firms, or interest groups are deeply embedded in and affected by the social institutions in which they act.

This relates to what constructivists call the *constitutive* effects of social norms and institutions (Onuf 1989; Kratochwil 1989). Many social norms not only regulate behaviour, they also constitute the identity of actors in the sense of defining who 'we' are as members of a social community. The norm of sovereignty, for example, not only regulates the interactions of states in international affairs, it also defines what a state *is* in the first place. Constructivists concentrate on the social identities of actors in order to account for their interests (e.g. Wendt 1999: ch. 7; also Checkel 2001a). Constructivism maintains that collective norms and understandings define the basic 'rules of the game' in which they find themselves in their interactions. This does not mean that constitutive norms cannot be violated or never change. But the argument implies that we cannot even describe the properties of social agents without reference to the social structure in which they are embedded.

Consequently, the EU as an emerging polity is expected not just to constrain the range of choices available to, say, nation states, but the way in which they define their interests and even their identities. EU 'membership matters' (Sandholtz 1996) in that it influences the very way in which actors see themselves and are seen by others as social beings. Germany, France, Italy, or the Netherlands are no longer simply European states. They are EU states in the sense that their statehood is increasingly defined by their EU membership. The EU constitutes states in Europe insofar as it maps the political, social, and economic space enabling private and public actors to define their interests and go about their business (Laffan, O'Donnell, and Smith 2000; Jönsson, Tägil, and Törnqvist 2000). EU membership implies the voluntary acceptance of a particular

political order as legitimate and entails the recognition of a set of rules and obligations as binding. This includes that European law is the 'law of the land', and, thus, a constitutional order 'without constitution' (at least for the time being, see Weiler 1995; Shaw 2001). Thus, constructivists emphasize that the EU deeply affects discursive and behavioural practices, that it has become part of the 'social furniture' with which social and political actors have to deal on a daily basis. Such a view implies that EU membership entails socialization effects (Checkel 2000, 2001b). At least, actors need to know the rules of appropriate behaviour in the Union and to take them for granted in the sense that 'norms become normal'.

Constructivist emphasis on norm-guided behaviour and constitutive rules does not imply, however, that norms are never violated. Any study of the implementation of the *acquis communautaire* shows that compliance rates vary significantly among member states and across issue-areas (Börzel 2001). Acceptance of a social and political order as legitimate might increase compliance rates with the law. However, we all occasionally run a red light. Does this mean that we do not accept the rule as binding and valid? Of course not. We can infer from the communicative practices of actors whether or not they consider a norm as legitimate. Do they try to justify their behaviour in cases of rule violation? Do they recognize misbehaviour and offer compensation?

Communication and discourse

The emphasis on communicative and discursive practices constitutes a final characteristic feature of social constructivist approaches. If we want to understand and explain social behaviour, we need to take words, language, and communicative utterances seriously. It is through discursive practices that agents make sense of the world and attribute meaning to their activities. Moreover, as Foucault reminds us, discursive practices establish power relationships in the sense that they make us 'understand certain problems in certain ways, and pose questions accordingly' (Diez 2001: 90). And further, '[a]lthough it is "we" who impose meaning, "we" do not act as autonomous subjects but from a "subject position" made available by the discursive context in which we are situated' (*ibid.*, referring to Foucault 1991: 58).

There are at least two ways in which the study of communicative practices has recently contributed to our understanding of the European Union. First, some scholars have started applying the Habermasian theory of communicative action to international relations (Habermas 1981, 1992; Müller 1994; Risse 2000). They focus on arguing and reason-giving as an agency-centred mode of interaction which enables actors to challenge the validity claims inherent in any causal or normative statement and to seek a communicative consensus about their understanding of a situation as well as justifications for the principles and norms guiding their action, rather than acting purely on the basis of strategic calculations. Argumentative rationality means that the participants in a discourse are open to be persuaded by the better argument and that relationships of power and social hierarchies recede into the background. Argumentative and deliberative behaviour is as goal-oriented as strategic interactions, but the

goal is not to attain one's fixed preferences, but to seek a reasoned consensus. As Keohane put it, persuasion 'involves changing people's choices of alternatives independently of their calculations about the strategies of other players' (Keohane 2001: 10). Actors' interests, preferences, and the perceptions of the situation are no longer fixed, but subject to discursive challenges. Where argumentative rationality prevails, actors do not seek to maximize or to satisfy their given interests and preferences, but to challenge and to justify the validity claims inherent in them—and are prepared to change their views of the world or even their interests in light of the better argument.

Applied to the European Union, this emphasis on communicative action allows us to study European institutions as discourse rather than merely bargaining arenas allowing for deliberative processes to establish a reasoned consensus in order to solve common problems. Joerges and Neyer in particular have used this concept to study the EU comitology (Joerges and Neyer 1997b; Neyer 2002), while Checkel has emphasized persuasion and social learning in various settings of the EU and other European institutions (Checkel 2000, 2001a, 2001b).

The second way in which discursive practices have been studied in the EU, does not so much focus on arguing and reason-giving, but on discourse as a process of construction of meaning allowing for certain interpretations while excluding others (see also Wæver's contribution to this volume). In other words, this work focuses on discursive practices as means by which power relationships are established and maintained. Who is allowed to speak in a discursive arena, what counts as a sensible proposition, and which constructions of meaning become so dominant that they are being taken for granted? Rosamond's work on European discourses on globalization has to be mentioned here as well as Diez's study of the British discourse on European integration (Rosamond 2001; Diez 1999, 2001; see also Larsen 1999).

The latter work is related to a somewhat more radical version of social constructivism than those contributions mentioned so far. To the extent that these more radical positions deny the possibility of truth claims in social sciences, they take a different epistemological stance than the moderate constructivists discussed here. However, these distinctions should not be exaggerated. When it comes to actual empirical research, most scholars of 'discourse analysis' still use rather conventional methods of qualitative content analysis to make their points (compare Larsen 1999; Marcussen 2000; Jachtenfuchs, Diez, and Jung 1998; Marcussen et al. 1999).

The three contributions of social constructivism

In sum, there are at least three ways in which social constructivism contributes to a better understanding of the European Union. First, accepting the mutual constitutiveness of agency and structure allows for a much deeper understanding of Europeanization including its impact on statehood in Europe. Second and related, emphasizing the constitutive effects of European law, rules, and policies enables us to study how European integration shapes social identities and interests of actors. Third, focusing on communicative practices permits us to examine more closely how Europe and the EU

are constructed discursively and how actors try to come to grips with the meaning of European integration.

In the following, I apply these abstract arguments to the question of European identity, which is highly relevant for the construction of Europe in both political and analytical terms.

The social construction of European identity

The contested nature of European identity

Most people agree that a viable and legitimate European polity requires some degree of identification in order to be sustainable. But European identity is a contested idea.³ Many people discuss the relationship between European and national identities in zero-sum terms. They follow *essentialist* concepts of collective identities taking cultural variables such as membership in ethnic groups as a given which then develop into national identities during the process of nation-building. If the causal connection between 'culture' and 'identity' is seen as a one-way street, there is not much one can do about this and supranational or post-nationalist identities are impossible. Collective identities will rest firmly with the nation state as the historically most successful connection between territory and people. French will remain French, while British remain British, and Germans remain Germans. 'Euro-pessimists' challenge the prospects for further European integration on precisely these grounds. They argue that a European polity is impossible, because there is no European people, no common European history or common myths on which collective European identity could be built (see Kielmansegg 1996).

Yet, we know from survey data and other empirical material that individuals hold multiple social identities. As a result, people can feel a sense of belonging to Europe, their nation state, their gender, and so forth. It is wrong to conceptualize European identity in zero-sum terms, as if an increase in European identity necessarily decreases one's loyalty to national or other communities. Europe and the nation are both 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991) and people can feel a part of both communities without having to choose some primary identification. Analyses from survey data suggest and social psychological experiments confirm that many people who strongly identify with their nation state, also feel a sense of belonging to Europe (Duchesne and Frogner 1995; Martinotti and Steffanizzi 1995; Herrmann, Brewer, and Risse forthcoming).

This finding is trivial for scholars studying collective identities, but nevertheless it has important implications for the political debates about Europe and the nation state. Take the contemporary debate about the future of the European Union and about a European constitution. Many people still hold that Europe lacks a *demos*, one indicator being the lack of strong identification with Europe in mass public opinion. Yet, 'country