

Why theorise at all?

There is no getting around the fact that the theorisation of European integration (and of political science in general) can be pretty complicated at times. However, when thinking about the theorisation of European politics it helps to be aware of *why* we are theorising in the first place.

This extract presents a number of reasons why political scientists theorise. It starts by suggesting that some scholars theorise in an effort to unearth the “laws” of European politics. Secondly, it continues by arguing that we sometimes theorise to help simplify and explain the world. Finally, the extract suggests that we sometimes focus on theory so as to be able to ascertain and question others’ (often hidden) assumptions about the world thus helping us to understand (and therefore critique) their arguments at a deeper level.

It must be noted that not all theorists are doing all of the above every time they theorise. Indeed, they are most often theorising for one of these reasons and there are often tensions between these different motivations. For example, one scholar may develop a theory that they think furthers knowledge and helps to make an argument about some aspect of the real world, while another may seek to understand the theoretical assumptions of that theory so as to critique the underlying premises of the first scholar’s arguments.

Unearthing the ‘laws’ of European politics

Theory in European politics is sometimes thought to be about the creation of law-like statements about European political processes. This type of endeavour sees theorisation as a process whereby facts about the world can be observed and then tested to see if they are true or false based on the observation of evidence. A scholar may, for example, through observing European summits come to the conclusion that the states with the largest populations always get their own way. They would then develop a theoretical proposition that a state’s influence at European summit meetings is directly proportional to the size of its population.

Following this they would then set out to test their theoretical proposition by looking at different European summits and seeing if the states with the biggest populations were the ones that obtained the most beneficial outcomes. If they find that they do, this confirms their theory and others can then use the

theory to explain (and perhaps predict) summit outcomes; if they find the opposite, they refine or reject the theory and start again. Often they will find that the theory works in part but needs some modification (e.g. it is size of population but only on economic issues, or whatever it might be).

Often such approaches take methods of theory development and testing from the natural sciences (such as Physics) and then apply these methods to the social world (Rosamond, 2000, p.8). Such an approach is thought to further knowledge by uncovering the general 'truths' of politics in Europe.

Theories as maps of the world

For some theorists, theorising is less about establishing true or false law-like facts about the world and more about developing *useful tools* that help us to understand the world.

Think, for example, of a map of the London Underground. Is it useful? Depends on what you want to do. If you want to get quickly from Victoria Station to Kings Cross on a rainy day and you don't want to get wet, a tube map is very useful as it tells you exactly what to do to get there (and it's cheaper than a London Taxi). Yet at the same time, the London Underground Map is not an accurate portrayal of London at all. It's not even an accurate portrayal of the actual layout of the London Underground. Indeed, the tracks do not go straight lines as indicated on the map nor are the distances between the stations anything like in scale with reality. The map only very loosely corresponds to actual reality.

Yet at the same time, the London Underground map helps you get from A to B quickly and easily. Why? Because it is a simplification of the real world that draws your attention to all of the key things that you need to know to understand what to do in practice (to be more technical, the logic of the map accurately matches the logic of the world). Get on this line, change lines at this station etc. Despite the fact that the map does not represent a very accurate picture of what London actually looks like in reality, it is still very convenient. The map is not true or false, just useful.

Theories in political science can sometimes be thought of in a similar way. The world is very complex and there are lots of things going on at any one time. When we look at theories our attention is being drawn to a number of *simplifying assumptions* that the theory makes about the world and

advocates of that theory would argue that these simplifying assumptions tell us (most of) what we need to know to understand what is going on in reality. Any more than we need to know is superfluous, any less and we are missing key details.

For example, some theories of European politics place a lot of emphasis on the role of the state and see the state as the core actor at the European level (see discussion of Liberal Intergovernmentalism later in this module). It is not that intergovernmentalists think the other actors (the Commission, Business groups etc.) do not exist. Rather, they suggest if you want to understand what is going on at the European level then what one really needs to do is focus attention on what states are doing.

Consequently, one way of looking at theories of European politics is as *intellectual maps* that draw our attention to the core aspects of the European political system that we need to factor in so as to understand what's going on. However, different theories often advocate different sets of factors as core, meaning that they (or rather the academics who advocate them) compete academically with each other. This brings us to our next point.

Knowledge is not neutral: Theory for critique and questioning

Another, more critical, reason for focusing on theory is so as to critique or challenge the assumptions that different scholars hold about the world. This motivation for theorisation is born of the idea that knowledge about politics is not neutral and that all scholars (including you and I) have underlying assumptions, biases and prejudices that guide what we think and the arguments that we make. Individuals often hold such *a priori* assumptions about European politics even if they are not aware of it.

Therefore, a number of scholars perceive the role of theory to be to critically reflect on these assumptions, especially the hidden ones, so that they can be brought to the fore. This approach to theory is often more (self) reflexive looking at the theories and the arguments themselves, rather than seeking to investigate the real world *per se*. Nonetheless, by exposing the political content, power imbalances or background assumptions of people's theories, such theorising can have a profound impact on the arguments that individuals or groups make in society. Theorising thus can be seen as way of helping to "intellectualise perceptions" (Rosamond, 2000, p.5) formulating explicitly what people are thinking and demonstrating how often theoretical

assumptions (whether explicit or hidden) determine the arguments that people make and the beliefs they hold.

Further reading:

Rosamond, B. (2000). *Theories of European Union Integration*. Macmillan: Basingstoke.