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Social construction and integration
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ABSTRACT Social construction, which has made key contributions to contemporary international relations (IR) and institutional theorizing, has yet to make significant in-roads among scholars of integration. This is unfortunate, for it has privileged methodological individualism in the study of European institutions – either in its strict (rational choice institutionalism) or more loose (historical institutionalist) versions. As a result, too much debate has focused on which institutions matter in the integration process, and not on how they have effects. This article examines the latter, arguing that a sociological and social constructivist understanding of institutions as constitutive can significantly broaden the methodological tools we bring to the study of integration; it will also help us to explore how, or, indeed, whether, integration is affecting fundamental actor identities, and not simply constraining strategy or behaviour.

KEY WORDS Constructivism; integration; learning; norms; persuasion; social mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

Over forty years after the European project began, it is striking how little we know about its socialization and identity-shaping effects on national agents. Indeed, prominent Europeanists are themselves deeply divided on this question, with some arguing that integration has led to a fundamental shift in actor loyalty and identity, while others claim the opposite. The basic premiss of this article is that both schools are right: constructing European institutions is a multi-faceted process, with both rationalist and sociological toolkits needed to unpack and understand it.¹

Put differently, much of European integration can be modelled as strategic exchange between autonomous political agents with fixed interests; at the same time, much of it cannot. Constitutive dynamics of social learning, socialization, routinization and normative diffusion, all of which address fundamental issues of agent identity and interests, are not adequately captured by strategic exchange or other models adhering to strict forms of methodological individualism. For these constitutive processes, the dominant institutionalisms in studies of integration – rational choice and historical – need to be supplemented by a more sociological understanding of institutions that stresses their interest- and identity-forming roles.
After briefly addressing definitional issues and the literature on integration, I argue that social construction, a growing literature in contemporary international relations (IR), can help students of integration to theorize and explore empirically these neglected questions of interest and identity. Specifically, the article shows how a social constructivist cut at institution building explains key aspects of Europeanization – social learning and normative diffusion – better than its rationalist competitors, with the practical goal being to elaborate the specific methods and data requirements for such work.

Before proceeding, three comments are in order. First, my analytic starting point is that research on integration should be problem-, and not method-, driven; the goal is to encourage dialogue and bridge building between rationalists and social constructivists. By itself, each school explains important elements of the integration process; working together, or at least side-by-side, they will more fully capture the range of institutional dynamics at work in contemporary Europe. Indeed, too many constructivists are themselves method-driven, ignoring the obvious empirical fact that much of everyday social interaction is about strategic exchange and self-interested behaviour.²

Second, and following on the above, the constructivism favoured in this article belongs to what has been called its modernist branch. These scholars, who combine an ontological stance critical of methodological individualism with a loosely causal epistemology, are thus well placed, within the integration literature, ‘to seize the middle ground’ – staking out a position between positivist and agent-centred rational choice, on the one hand, and interpretative and structure-centred approaches on the other.³

Third, the article’s central focus is theoretical and methodological, and not empirical. My concern is how one could develop and apply, in a systematic manner, constructivist insights to key puzzles in the study of integration. Empirically, I seek only to establish the plausibility of such propositions, and do so in two ways: (1) by drawing upon arguments and evidence from a wide range of existing studies on European integration; and (2) by reference to my own work in progress.

INSTITUTIONS AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Of the many institutionalisms floating around these days in economics, political science and sociology, I need briefly to discuss three: rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism, and sociological institutionalism. For rational choice scholars, institutions are thin: at most, they are a constraint on the behaviour of self-interested actors – be they interest groups or unitary states in IR. They are a strategic context that provides incentives or information, thus influencing the strategies that agents employ to attain given ends. In this thin conception, institutions are a structure that actors run into, go ‘ouch’, and then recalculate how, in the presence of the structure, to achieve their interests; they are an intervening variable.⁴

For historical institutionalists, institutions get thicker, but only in a long-term historical perspective. In the near-term here and now, they are thin – structuring the
game of politics and providing incentives for instrumentally motivated actors to rethink their strategies; they are a constraint on behaviour. Over the longer term, however, institutions can have deeper effects on actors as strategies, initially adopted for self-interested reasons, get locked into and institutionalized in politics. Institutions thus can be both intervening and independent variables.\(^5\)

Sociological institutionalists are unabashedly thick institutionalists. Not only in the distant future, but in the near-term, institutions constitute actors and their interests. What exactly does it mean for institutions to constitute? It is to suggest that they can provide agents with understandings of their interests and identities. This occurs through interaction between agents and structures – mutual constitution, to IR scholars. The effects of institutions thus reach much deeper; they do not simply constrain behaviour. As variables, institutions become independent – and strongly so.\(^6\)

In our research and theorizing about Europe, should one of these institutionalisms be favoured, serving as the baseline? The answer here is ‘no’, for ultimately this is an empirical question. No doubt, there are many situations and aspects of integration where agents operate under the means-end logic of consequences favoured by rationalist choice and some historical institutionalists (meetings of the European Council or the hard-headed interstate bargaining that features prominently in intergovernmentalist accounts). At the same time, the less static perspective favoured by sociologists reminds us that much social interaction involves dynamics of learning and socialization, where the behaviour of individuals and states comes to be governed by certain logics of appropriateness (informal communication in working groups of the Council of Ministers, European-level policy networks centred on the Commission). Unfortunately, these latter logics, while equally compelling and plausible, have received little systematic theoretical attention in studies of Europeanization.

Indeed, to students of international politics well versed in the never-ending neo-realist–neo-liberal controversy, the debates over Europeanization and European integration produce an eerie feeling of \textit{déjà vu}. On the one hand, the discussion has helped advocates of opposing approaches to sharpen their central arguments and claims; similar intellectual clarifications have occurred over the past decade in the debate between neo-realists and neo-liberals in IR.

At the same time and in a more negative sense, the debate over Europeanization, like any academic discourse, has emphasized certain methods and actors at the expense of others. To my reading, much of the discussion has been about institutions – be they encompassing governance or federal structures, historically constructed organizational and policy legacies, or, more narrowly, bodies of the European Union (EU) such as the Commission or European Council. Moreover, in most cases, the analysis is about how such institutions structure the game of politics, provide information, facilitate side payments or create incentives for agents to choose certain strategies.

Such an emphasis, however, comes at a cost. It short-changes the role that institutions can play in politics, or, more to the point, in European integration. In particular, their constitutive role, typically stressed by sociologists, is neglected. If
the neo-debate in contemporary IR can be accused of neglecting fundamental issues of identity formation, much of the current discussion about European integration can be accused of bracketing this constitutive dimension of institutions. Put differently, the great majority of contemporary work on European integration views institutions, at best, as intervening variables. Missing is a thick institutional argument, derived from sociology, that demonstrates how European institutions can construct, through a process of interaction, the identities and interests of member states and groups within them.7

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND INTEGRATION

In this section, I develop an approach that addresses the above-noted gaps, and do so by drawing upon a growing and vibrant body of IR scholarship: social constructivism. As presently elaborated, constructivism – at least the modernist branch of concern here – is an argument about institutions, one which builds upon the insights of sociological institutionalism. It is thus well suited, in a conceptual sense, for expanding our repertoire of institutional frameworks for explaining European integration. Moreover, modernist social constructivists remind us that the study of politics – or integration – is not just about agents with fixed preferences who interact via strategic exchange. Rather, they seek to explain theoretically both the content of actor identities/preferences and the modes of social interaction – so evident in everyday life – where something else aside from strategic exchange is taking place.8

So defined, constructivism has the potential to contribute to the study of integration in various areas. Below, I consider two: learning and socialization processes at the European level; and the soft or normative side of Europeanization at the national level. In each case, I explore what a constructivist approach entails, how it could be carried out empirically and its value added compared to existing work on integration. I also address and counter the argument that my results cannot be generalized. The section concludes by noting how a constructivist approach to integration can build upon and systematize theoretical arguments and descriptive insights advanced by a growing number of Europeanists; I also argue that the whole exercise is not one of reinventing the wheel.

Learning and socialization

What does it mean for an agent to learn? Social learning involves a process whereby actors, through interaction with broader institutional contexts (norms or discursive structures), acquire new interests and preferences – in the absence of obvious material incentives. Put differently, agent interests and identities are shaped through interaction. Social learning thus involves a break with strict forms of methodological individualism. This type of learning needs to be distinguished, analytically, from the simple sort, where agents acquire new information, alter strategies, but then pursue given, fixed interests; simple learning, of course, can be captured by methodological-individualist/rationalist accounts.9

Consider small group settings: it is intuitively obvious that there are times when
agents acquire new preferences through interaction in such contexts. This is not to
deny periods of strategic exchange, where self-interested actors seek to maximize
utility; yet, to emphasize the latter dynamic to the near exclusion of the former is an
odd distortion of social reality. Now, the perhaps appropriate response is ‘so what?’
In an abstract sense, it readily can be appreciated that social learning takes place at
certain times, but how can one conceptualize and empirically explore whether
and when it occurs? Luckily, there is a growing literature in contemporary IR – by
constructivists, students of epistemic communities and empirically oriented
learning theorists – that performs precisely this theoretical/empirical combination.
More specifically, this research suggests four hypotheses on when social learning
occurs; these could be translated to empirical work conducted at the European level.

1 Social learning is more likely in groups where individuals share common pro-
fessional backgrounds – for example, where all/most group members are lawyers
or, say, European central bankers.
2 Social learning is more likely where the group feels itself in a crisis or is faced
with clear and incontrovertible evidence of policy failure.
3 Social learning is more likely where a group meets repeatedly and there is high
density of interaction among participants.
4 Social learning is more likely when a group is insulated from direct political
pressure and exposure.\textsuperscript{10}

Clearly, these hypotheses require further elaboration. For example, can a crisis
situation be specified a priori and not in a \textit{post-hoc} fashion as is typically done?
When is the density of interaction among group participants sufficiently high for a
switch to occur from strategic exchange to interactive learning? These are difficult
issues, but they are only being raised because a first round of theoretical/empirical
literature exists. Europeanists could build upon and contribute to this work – for
example, by exploring and theorizing the impact, if any, of different EU voting rules
(unanimity, qualified majority voting) on these group dynamics.

The deductions also point to a powerful role for communication. However, in
keeping with this article’s attempted bridging function, it is a role between that of
the rationalists’ cheap talk, where agents (typically) possess complete information
and are (always) instrumentally motivated, and the postmodernists’ discourse
analyses, where agents seem oddly powerless and without motivation. Yet, this role
itself requires further unpackaging: underlying my communication/learning argu-
ments are implicit theories of persuasion and argumentation.\textsuperscript{11}

On the latter, students of integration can and should exploit a rich literature
in social psychology, political socialization and communications research on
persuasion/argumentation. At core, persuasion is a cognitive process that involves
changing attitudes about cause and effect in the absence of overt coercion; put
differently, it is a mechanism through which social learning may occur, thus leading
to interest redefinition and identity change. The literature suggests three hypotheses
about the settings where agents should be especially conducive to persuasion:
When they are in a novel and uncertain environment and thus cognitively motivated to analyse new information; when the persuader is an authoritative member of the in-group to which the persuadee belongs or wants to belong; and when the agent has few prior, ingrained beliefs that are inconsistent with the persuader’s message.  

While these deductions partly overlap with the first set, further work is still needed – for example, how to operationalize ‘uncertain environments’ and integrate political context. On the latter, my strong hunch is that persuasion will be more likely in less politicized and more insulated settings. All the same, both sets of hypotheses do elaborate scope conditions (when, under what conditions persuasion and learning/socialization are likely), which is precisely the promising middle-range theoretical ground that still awaits exploitation by both constructivists and students of European integration.

What are the data requirements for research based on the above hypotheses? Essentially, you need to read things and talk with people. The latter requires structured interviews with group participants; the interviews should all employ a similar protocol, asking questions that tap both individual preferences and motivations, as well as group dynamics. The former, ideally, requires access to informal minutes of meetings or, second best, the diaries or memoirs of participants. As a check on these first two data streams, one can search for local media/TV interviews with group participants. This method of triangulation is fairly standard in qualitative research; it both reduces reliance on any one data source (interviewees, after all, may often dissimulate) and increases confidence in the overall validity of your inferences.

For students of integration, is this a feasible undertaking? Drawing upon my own work in progress, I suggest that the answer is ‘yes’. In a larger project, I am studying the appearance and consolidation of new European citizenship norms; an important concern is to explain, at the European level, whether and how new understandings of citizenship are emerging. To date, my focus has been on Strasbourg and the Council of Europe (CE), for this has been where the more serious, substantive work has occurred. When the CE is trying to develop new policy, it often sets up committees of experts under the Committee of Ministers, the intergovernmental body that sits atop the Council’s decision-making hierarchy. In a sense, then, these committees are the functional equivalent of the working groups of the EU’s Council of Ministers.

I have been examining the Committee of Experts on Nationality, the group that was charged with revising earlier European understandings of citizenship that dated from the 1960s. My particular interest was to describe and explain what occurred in this group as it met over a four-year period: for example, why did it revise existing understandings on dual citizenship to remove the strict prohibition that had previously existed at the European level? To address such issues, I did the following. First, three rounds of field work were conducted in Strasbourg; during these trips, I interviewed various individuals who served on the Committee – members of the
Council Secretariat and experts. Second, I conducted interviews in several member state capitals, meeting with national representatives to the committee of experts. Third, as a cross-check on interview data, more recently I was granted partial access to the confidential meeting summaries of the Committee.15

This was a considerable amount of work, but the pay-off was high. Over time, particular individuals clearly shifted from what they viewed as a strategic bargaining game (for example, seeking side payments to advance given interests) to a process where basic preferences were rethought. This shift was particularly evident on the question of dual citizenship, where a growing number of committee members came to view the existing prohibition as simply wrong. Processes of persuasion and learning were key, and such dynamics were greatly facilitated by a growing sense of policy failure – the number of dual nationals was climbing rapidly despite the existing prohibition – and the committee’s insulation from publicity and overt political pressure. Indeed, the committee benefited from the public perception of Strasbourg as a quiet backwater of Europeanization – with the real action occurring in Brussels. This allowed it to meet and work out revised understandings on citizenship prior to any overt politicization of its work.

At the same time, it should be stressed that not all committee members learned new interests. Indeed, the national representative of one large European state held deeply ingrained beliefs that were opposed to arguments favouring a relaxation of prohibitions on dual citizenship. Consistent with the above deductions, there is no evidence that this individual was persuaded to alter his/her basic preferences.

The point of this example is not to dismiss rationalist accounts of strategic bargaining. Rather, it is to note the value added of a middle-range constructivist supplement to these more standard portrayals: it led me to ask new questions and employ a different set of research techniques. The result was to broaden our understanding of how and under what conditions new European institutions – norms – are constructed through processes of non-strategic exchange.

Whether or not one accepts my particular arguments, the basic point remains. In making claims about socialization, learning, persuasion or deliberation promoted by, or conducted within, European institutions, students of integration must theorize these dynamics. In recent years, it has become almost a cottage industry to cite such processes as central, while simultaneously failing to elaborate their theoretical underpinnings. The result has been a near total disconnect between analytic claims and empirical documentation that such dynamics are at work. As one scholar has correctly noted in reference to the EU, ‘what is needed is a decision-making theory which includes in its analysis the ways in which preferences, beliefs and desires are shaped by participation in the decision-making process itself.’16

Socialization/Diffusion pathways

Constructivists view norms as shared, collective understandings that make behavioural claims on actors. When thinking about norms in the EU context, two issues must be addressed: (1) through what process are they constructed at the European level; and (2) how do such norms, once they reach the national level, interact with
and socialize agents? Now, the distinction between European and national levels is false, as multiple feedback loops cut across them; at the same time, the dichotomy can be justified analytically as it helps one to unpack and think through different stages in the process of European norm construction. In what follows, I am less interested in formal legal norms developed and promulgated, for example, by the European Court of Justice; a growing body of literature in both law and political science already addresses such understandings and their impact. Rather, the constructivist value added comes from its focus on the less formalized, but pervasive social norms that are always a part of social interaction.\textsuperscript{17}

On the first issue – the process of norm development – constructivists have theorized and provided empirical evidence for the importance of three dynamics. First, individual agency is central: well-placed individuals with entrepreneurial skills can often turn their individual beliefs into broader, shared understandings. The importance of this particular factor has been documented in case studies covering nearly a one-hundred year period and a multitude of international organizations and other transnational movements. In the literature, these individuals are typically referred to as moral entrepreneurs; in the language of my earlier discussion, they are the agents actively seeking to persuade others.\textsuperscript{18}

Second, such entrepreneurs are especially successful in turning individually held ideas into broader normative beliefs when so-called policy windows are open. This means that the larger group, in which the entrepreneur operates, faces a puzzle/problem that has no clear answer, or is new and unknown. In this situation, fixed preferences often break down as agents engage in cognitive information searches. While the policy-window concept was first elaborated by public policy (agenda-setting) and organizational theorists (garbage-can models), it was only more recently that constructivists applied its insights in the international realm to explain norm formation.\textsuperscript{19}

Third, processes of social learning and socialization (see the previous section) are crucial for furthering the norm creation process first begun by individual agents exploiting open policy windows. The basic point is that individual agency is insufficient to create durable social norms. A brief example clarifies the point. In the mid-1980s, several close advisers to Soviet leader Gorbachov played the part of entrepreneurs seeking to advance new ideas about international politics. In the near-term, such individually held beliefs, which were influential in shaping Gorbachov’s own preferences, were decisive in bringing the Cold War to a dramatic, peaceful and unexpected end. Yet, once the USSR collapsed and Gorbachov was swept from power, these ideas largely vanished, as many analysts of Russian foreign behaviour have noted. Put differently, absent social learning among a larger group of actors – that is, the development of norms – the particular ideas held by specific agents had no real staying power.\textsuperscript{20}

When and if new European norms emerge, one must still theorize about the mechanisms through which they diffuse to particular national settings and (perhaps) socialize agents. Here, constructivists have identified two dominant diffusion pathways: societal mobilization and social learning. In the first case, non-state actors and policy networks are united in their support for norms; they
then mobilize and coerce decision-makers to change state policy. Norms are not necessarily internalized by the élites. The activities of Greenpeace or any number of European non-governmental organizations (NGOs) exemplify this political pressure mechanism.\textsuperscript{21}

The second diffusion mechanism identified by constructivists is social learning, where agents – typically élite decision-makers – adopt prescriptions embodied in norms; they then become internalized and constitute a set of shared intersubjective understandings that make behavioural claims. This process is based on notions of complex learning drawn from cognitive and social psychology, where individuals, when exposed to the prescriptions embodied in norms, adopt new interests.\textsuperscript{22}

A key challenge is to develop predictions for when one or the other of these mechanisms is likely to be at work. To date, constructivists have been silent on this issue; however, my work on European citizenship norms suggests a possibility. I hypothesize that the structure of state–society relations – domestic structure – predicts likely diffusion pathways, with four categories of such structures identified: liberal, corporatist, statist and state-above society. From these, I deduce and predict cross-national variation in the mechanisms – social mobilization and social learning – through which norms are empowered.\textsuperscript{23}

A brief example highlights the utility of the approach as well as the attendant data requirements. In the project on European citizenship norms, I have explored whether and in what way they diffused to several European states, including the Federal Republic of Germany. Consider this German case. I first did research on the basic structure of state–society relations in the country; like many others, I concluded that the polity is corporatist. That is, it possesses a decentralized state and centralized society, with a dense policy network connecting the two parts; both state and society are participants in policy-making, which is consensual and incremental.

Given this coding of the German structure, I next advanced predictions on the expected process whereby norms would have constitutive effects, arguing that societal pressure would be the primary and (élite) social learning the secondary mechanism empowering European norms in Germany. The logic is as follows. In a corporatist domestic structure, state decision-makers play a greater role in bringing about normative change than in the liberal case, where policy-makers are constantly pressured by social actors; however, this does not mean that they impose their preferences on a pliant populace. A hallmark of corporatism is the policy networks connecting state and society, with the latter still accorded an important role in decision-making. In this setting, I thus hypothesize that it is both societal pressure (primary) and social learning (secondary) that lead to norm empowerment.

With these predictions in hand, I then conducted extensive field work in the Federal Republic. To date, this research has confirmed my working hypotheses: emerging European norms on citizenship are diffusing and being empowered in Germany primarily via the mobilization of societal pressure; social learning at the élite level has been secondary. More specifically, these norms are connecting to a wide variety of social groups and individuals: NGOs favouring the integration of Germany’s large resident foreigner population; activists in the churches and trade
unions; and immigrant groups. At the decision-making level, one finds isolated evidence of élites learning new preferences from the norms (for example, a small group of Christian Democratic Bundestag deputies).  

Two streams of evidence are important for establishing the presence of these diffusion mechanisms, as well as their relative weighting. Most important were structured interviews with a wide range of actors – both societal and state. As at the European level, these discussions were designed to probe the degree to which agent preferences were changing and the motivations for such change. However, as the rationalists remind us, talk is cheap. Therefore, as a cross-check on the interview data, I consulted a wide range of primary documentation – official summaries of Bundestag debates, media analyses, and interviews given in newspapers or on TV.

What is the value-added of all this work? It convincingly demonstrates that a rational choice institutionalist understanding of the role that norms play in social life (norms as constraint) missed an important part of the story in the Federal Republic. I indeed found instances where domestic agents simply felt constrained by the European norms (for example, a number of officials in the Federal Interior Ministry); yet, in many other cases, I uncovered evidence of non-strategic social learning where agents, in the norm’s presence, acquired new understandings of interests. Clearly, much theoretical work remains to be done – in particular, elaborating scope conditions for when norms have constraining as opposed to constitutive effects. Addressing this latter point is crucial for, again, the obvious empirical fact is that norms do not always constitute.

Extending the argument

Perhaps, though, my constitutive analysis of European institutions only works because of the particular organization and policy area from which I drew empirical examples: the Council of Europe and human rights. Such arguments are largely irrelevant for the EU – a special type of institution with very different policy domains. Two responses counter such a critique.

First, there are well-established theoretical reasons for suspecting that Europe, especially Western Europe, is a most likely case for international institutions to have constitutive effects. Most important, it is an institutionally dense environment, one where theorists predict high levels of transnational and international normative activity. This logic, precisely because it is a particular way of viewing the social world, is in principle equally applicable to a variety of European institutions – whether their focus is human rights (CE) or political and economic affairs (EU).

Second, assume, despite the foregoing, that differences in policy domains do matter. That is, arguments about social learning or the constitutive effects of European norms just do not work when applied to the EU. After all, the process of European integration has largely been about market integration, where national and transnational business interests have played key roles. Such groups are quite different in structure and goals from the actors of civil society – domestic NGOs, churches – highlighted in several of my examples. However, if the institutional (enhanced role of the European Parliament) and substantive (third pillar of justice
and home affairs) innovations of Maastricht and Amsterdam continue to evolve, new actors and policy issues are increasingly likely to make themselves felt. Moreover, the current interest in Brussels, London and elsewhere in moving the EU away from a strict regulatory role to one emphasizing standard-setting and so-called ‘soft law’ plays to the strength of social actors like NGOs: it is precisely the promotion of such informal practices and norms where they are most influential.26

In fact, human rights pressure groups have begun utilizing the European Parliament as a means of generating precisely the sort of normative pressure from-below documented in my CE example. Moreover, immigration, which is now on the third pillar agenda, is an issue where previous studies have documented the extensive degree to which European state interests are constituted by broader international norms. On the related issues of citizenship and racism, recent work establishes that the 1996–7 Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) saw extensive mobilization by NGOs and other transnational movements, and their qualitatively different, when compared to the past, interaction with EU institutions, as well as the IGC itself. Thus, even if differences in policy domains are important, these are at present being blurred if not erased.27

Summary

My purpose in the foregoing was constructive. The goal was not to dismiss rational choice or historical institutionalist work on integration; those literatures are rich and offer many insights. Yet, because of their adherence to variants of methodological individualism, certain analytic/empirical issues – interest and identity formation, most importantly – are bracketed. A more sociological and constructivist understanding of institutions as constitutive allows one to address such questions. Constructivism, however, need not and, indeed, should not be viewed as terra incognita to Europeanists. In fact, a constructivist cut at integration is already evident, albeit implicitly, in both theoretical and empirical studies.

Theoretically, one has the recent work of Olsen, Kohler-Koch and Fligstein. Olsen’s writing, including that on the EU, has been concerned with broader institutional environments – how they provide the very basis of action for political agents, how they lead to rule-governed behaviour, which may supplant instrumental, strategic calculation, and how they promote learning. Yet, he has failed to explicate, in a theoretical sense, the processes through which such institutional dynamics occur. The constructivist work reviewed above suggests a number of ways in which these micro–macro linkages could be developed in a specifically European context.28

Much of the analysis in recent work by Kohler-Koch and Knodt is also premissed on sociological assumptions – in particular, their exploration of the domestic normative impact of EU institutions, where they do not simply constrain, but constitute agents and their preferences. Unfortunately, this argument is much less clear about the process through which, and the conditions under which, EU norms have such effects. Here, constructivist hypotheses on the mechanisms through which national level socialization and social learning occur might be relevant.29
Fligstein is also interested in constitutive dynamics but, in contrast to Kohler-Koch and Knodt, the focus is on Brussels. In his work on the Commission, he argues that, under certain conditions marked by crisis and uncertainty, it can play an entrepreneurial role in helping to culturally construct political action. Less clear, however, are the specific processes through which such construction takes place, as well as his theoretical understanding of an agency’s role. All the same, this analytic move hints at rich possibilities for a dialogue with those social constructivists who theorize the role of individual agency, entrepreneurs and policy windows in their work on normative change.30

Empirically, the last decade has seen an explosion of work on institutional fusion, policy networks, comitology and informal communication patterns centred upon and generated by EU institutions. While this research is extraordinarily rich in a descriptive sense, it is often under-theorized. To be fair, solid empirical work is often a prerequisite for theory building. All the same, more attention to theory would help these scholars to systematize their implicitly sociological view of institutions – and constructivism has much to offer here.

Consider three examples. Wessels, Rometsch and their collaborators have made a powerful and well-documented case for institutional fusion within the EU context, where the density of interaction between European and national institutions is such that old distinctions between the two levels no longer hold. These analysts ascribe an important symbolic and identity-shaping role to institutions – to constructivists, a constitutive role. Yet, they are silent, theoretically, on when, how and why such identity formation occurs, which leads them to advance an under-specified convergence thesis, where ‘the constitutional and institutional set-up of [EU] member states will converge towards one common model.’ Given that constructivists have already begun to specify scope conditions regarding institutions and identity change, the potential for theoretical cross-fertilization seems significant.31

In a second example, recent work by Beyers and Dierickx on the EU Council and its working groups suggests that informal communication is key for understanding their operation. Yet, this research, despite its empirical richness, neglects a crucial theoretical question: under what conditions – if at all – does this communication lead political agents away from situations of strategic exchange and into those marked by social learning, socialization and communicative action? For both theoretical (debates over the consequences of integration) and policy reasons (explaining when and why member state interests change), this issue is fundamental. However, because of their reliance on a methodologically individualist ontology, Beyers and Dierickx seem simply unaware that they are in fact well placed to address it. The point is not that they get the story wrong; rather, it is incomplete. And constructivism, with its concern for modelling modes of social interaction beyond strategic exchange, could provide analytic tools for filling out the picture.32

Research on so-called comitology represents a third example where constructivist theorizing and empirical integration studies could profitably interact. Comitology refers to the complex set of committee rules that have evolved to implement EU policy and procedures; the system stems from a 1987 European
Council decision in which member states made clear their unwillingness to lose control of the implementation process – in particular, by ceding too much power to the Commission. These committees, by member state dictate, are composed of government representatives and, occasionally, additional experts; yet, the growing empirical literature on them notes how these representatives must often turn elsewhere for information and, more important, interpretation. Indeed, two analysts argue that ‘scientific evidence’ is accepted as the most valid currency for ‘effecting convincing arguments’ in comitology.33

The last point suggests a link to my earlier hypotheses on small groups, communication and social learning. Indeed, constructivist deductions on the role of common backgrounds, crisis, density of interaction, etc., could readily be exploited by these Europeanists to explore more systematically the conditions under which European committees, through learning and argumentation, socialize their participants.34

A final issue is not so much one of new theoretical directions for analyses of integration, but, instead, a look back. Simply put, is my call for bringing constructivist insights to bear on the study of the EU a short-sighted reinventing of the neo-functionalist wheel? After all, over thirty years ago, Haas and others were writing about the identity-shaping effects of the European project. Indeed, collective identity was to emerge via a ‘process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities towards a new centre, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing nation-states.’35

While references to social learning and socialization are evident in the work of many early neo-functionalists and regional integration theorists, the differences with constructivism are significant. Most important, the latter is not a general substantive theory that predicts constant learning or a growing sense of collective identity; rather, its aspirations are more modest. As currently being developed, it is a middle-range theoretical approach seeking to elaborate scope conditions for better understanding precisely when collective identity formation occurs. Constructivism is thus agnostic as to whether the endpoint of social interaction is greater common interests and identity. Neo-functionalists, at least implicitly, were not neutral on this question; there was a clear normative element to their scholarship.36

In addition, despite the strong allusions to identity formation and change, neo-functionalists failed to develop explicit micro-foundations that moved them beyond an agent-centred view of social interaction. In fact, there is a strong element of rational choice in their research. While considerable work remains, constructivists are attempting to elaborate such alternative foundations – their stress on logics of appropriateness and communicative action, for example.37

CONCLUSIONS

My arguments throughout this article were based on an obvious but too often neglected truism about our social world: the most interesting puzzles lie at the nexus where structure and agency intersect. The real action, theoretically and empirically,
is where norms, discourses, language and material capabilities interact with motivation, social learning and preferences – be it in international or European regional politics. Research traditions such as rational choice, postmodernism and, more recently, large parts of constructivism, which occupy endpoints in the agent-structure debate, have life easy: they can ignore this messy middle ground. Yet, the true challenge for both rationalists and their opponents is to model and explore this complex interface; this article has suggested several ways in which this could be done.38

As one scholar recently put it, ‘regional integration studies could uncharitably be criticized for providing a refuge to homeless ideas.’ While constructivism is certainly not homeless, Europeanists should resist the temptation simply to pull it off the shelf, giving it a comfortable European home in yet another N = 1, non-cumulative case study. Rather, these scholars have the opportunity – given their immensely rich data set – to push forward one of the most exciting debates in contemporary international and political theory.39

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NOTES

1 For the diverging views among Europeanists, compare Wessels 1998 and Laffan 1998. Thanks to Johan P. Olsen for alerting me to this latest round in a long-running and seriously under-theorized debate.

2 For example, Christiansen 1997.

3 On the different schools within constructivism, see Adler 1997b: 335–7. Checkel 1998 provides a critical overview of the modernist branch. The phrase ‘seizing the middle ground’ comes from Adler.

4 My analysis here and in the following paragraphs draws upon DiMaggio and Powell 1991: ch. 1; Longstreth et al. 1992: ch. 1; Koelble 1995; Kato 1996; Katzenstein 1996a: ch. 2; Finnemore 1996b; Hall and Taylor 1996.

5 For historical institutionalists employing a thin conception of institutions, see Immergut 1992 and Pierson 1994. Thicker conceptualizations are found in Hattam 1993 and Goldstein 1993. Consistent with my near/long-term distinction, the analysis in Immergut and Pierson is contemporary, while that in Hattam and Goldstein spans decades.

6 Students of organization theory should recognize these arguments: they have roots in sociological work on organizations. See DiMaggio and Powell 1991 passim; Dobbin 1994; March and Olsen 1998.

7 Elsewhere, these claims are documented in some detail. See Checkel 2000, where I review work on integration by proponents of multi-level governance, historical institutionalists, supranational institutionalists, neo-functionalists, intergovernmentalists, rational choice theorists and neo-realists.

8 For detailed overviews of the epistemological, ontological and methodological emphases in the work of modernist constructivists, see Adler 1997b; Checkel 1998; Ruggie 1998: 35–6.

9 Levy 1994 is an excellent introduction to the learning literature.
These hypotheses derive from a number of sources. See DiMaggio and Powell 1991 *passim*; Haas 1990, 1992; Hall 1993; Risse-Kappen 1996b; Checkel 1997a: chs 1, 5.

Johnson 1993 provides an excellent and balanced discussion of the theoretically incomplete role accorded communication in rational choice analyses.


Also see the excellent discussion in Zürn 1997: 300–2.

Checkel 1999b: 94–6 provides full documentation for the claims advanced in this and the following paragraphs.


Mattli and Slaughter 1998 provide a detailed review and critique of the literature on the Court of Justice. On constructivist definitions of norms, see Katzenstein 1996a: ch. 2.

On entrepreneurs and the role, more generally, of individual agency in processes of norm development, see Nadelmann 1990; Finnmere 1996a; Florini 1996; Finnmere and Sikkink 1998.

The epistemic and ideational branches of constructivism are especially helpful here. See Haas 1992; Checkel 1997a: ch. 1.

Checkel 1997a: chs 5, 6.

Keck and Sikkink 1998: ch. 1 *passim*; Risse and Sikkink 1999, for example. See Checkel 1999a: 3–8, for a full discussion of these two diffusion pathways.

Stein 1994; Risse–Kappen 1995b; Robert Herman, ‘Identity, norms and national security: the Soviet foreign policy revolution and the end of the Cold War’, in Katzenstein 1996a: ch. 8, for example.

For details, see Checkel 1999b: 87–91.

For extensive documentation of these points, see Checkel 1999b: 96–107, where I also consider alternative explanations for the results presented here.

See Weber 1994; Risse–Kappen 1995a: ch. 1; Adler and Barnett 1996: 97 *passim*.

The issue and actor expansion noted here has already begun. See Hooghe and Marks 1996, and, more generally, the entire literature on multi–level governance. Indeed, the June 1997 Amsterdam Treaty, by incorporating the social policy articles of Maastricht directly into the Treaty on European Union, codified the access of various non-state actors to EU decision-making in that area (Obradovic 1997). On the growing interest in seeing the EU move to a soft law, standard-setting role, see Lionel Barber, ‘A punctured image’, Financial Times, 15 June 1998; and George Parker, ‘Foreign Secretary urges curb on Brussels’, Financial Times, 14 August 1998.


Kohler–Koch and Knodt 1997. Similarly, Conzelmann 1998: part IV *passim*, while making a convincing empirical case for national–level policy learning in the EU, fails to explicate testable scope conditions for when such dynamics are more or less probable.

Fligstein 1998 *passim*. See also Öhrgaard 1997; Cram 1997, where the authors, like Fligstein, stress constitutive processes at the European level, but fail to specify the conditions and mechanisms through which they occur.

Rometusch and Wessels 1996: preface, chs 1–2, 14 – quote at p. 36.

See Beyers and Dierickx 1997, 1998. More recently, Beyers has addressed the possibility
of socialization in Council working groups; unfortunately, his operational measure of it – the number of years an individual participated in such a setting – continues to bracket the interaction context in the group itself. See Beyers 1998. Hooghe 1998: 5–6, 8–9 offers a similar measure of socialization – in this case, for individuals working in the Commission. Not surprisingly, her important study thus suffers from the same bracketing problem as noted for Beyers.

33 Joerges and Neyer 1997b: 617. Useful introductions to the comitology system are Pedler and Schaefer 1996; Dogan 1997.

34 While several students of comitology have hinted at the importance of such factors for generating learning dynamics, to my knowledge they have not been operationalized and empirically tested. See Pedler and Schaefer 1996: 47; and, especially, Joerges and Neyer 1997a: 291–2, 1997b: 618.

35 Haas 1958: 16.


37 On the rational choice foundations of neo-functionalism, see Burley and Mattli 1993: 54–5. An excellent review and comparison of the neo-functionalist, integration and constructivist literatures, one which reinforces the points made in the preceding paragraphs, is Pollack 1998 passim.

38 On the need to explore this interface in the context of debates over European integration, see Hix 1998: 55–6. More generally, see Checkel 1997b.

39 For the quote, see Caporaso 1998a: 7.