Abstract

This article examines the importance of action-theoretical considerations in European studies. By returning to the concept of “usage” of the European Union, we argue for a more systematically sociological consideration of strategic action in the study of European transformations. The recent turns towards constructivism and comparative political sociology allow analyzing the rationality of political actors without falling in the trap of overly reductionist rational choice assumptions. Concentrating on intentional action helps to reveal the importance of three aspects of the multi-level polity: (1) informal and non-constraining procedures, (2) the effects of ways in which actors move in between the different levels of the European political system, and (3) the ambiguous and often surprising coalitions that come together despite often considerable disagreement over their final goals.
1. Introduction

European studies have been slow to engage in a sociological turn. Long time dominated by international relations theory and later approaches from comparative politics, European integration theory had to wait for the rise of constructivist analysis in international studies to become a common object of sociological inquiry. In France, the evolution of disciplinary engagement with the European Union (EU) went in the opposite direction. Irondelle has noted the “hegemonic” influence of sociology over political science and argues that even French international relations theory is really international political sociology (Irondelle 2006). As a consequence, EU studies in France have been quite resistant to formalized, econometric or legal analyses, which have been quite influential elsewhere.

Yet the theoretical background is rarely explicit or justified in French approaches, contrary to other countries, where the analytical perspective is often qualified as either rationalists or constructivists (Jupille, Caporaso et Checkel 2003; Pollack 2005; Checkel 2007). One could argue with regard to their interest in sociological mechanisms for analysing change, that most French contributions to European studies would fall under the label “constructivist”. However, few French authors would categorize their work as part of this approach, which they feel consists of a great degree of simplification and a superficial theoretical analysis that does not reflect adequately the wealth of insights of classical sociology (Favell 2006; Guiraudon et Favell forthcoming).

Unfortunately, this opposition remains implicit for most authors and impedes a full-fledged dialogue between international debates and the sociological contributions produced elsewhere.

One of the issues that could gain from such a dialogue, and the one we would like to concentrate in this article, is the study of individual action and its role in the transformation of the European political system. With its emphasis on the micro-foundations of personal motivations, trajectories and behaviour, French studies are well equipped to contribute to the

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1 A French version of this article is forthcoming in Politique européenne, No. 25, Spring 2008. We would like to thank Sabine Saurugger, Julien Weisbein and Olivier Rozenberg for their careful reading and helpful critiques.

2 The work of Renaud Dehousse at the intersection of law and public policy analysis is a rare exception.

3 Notable exceptions include the work of Martial Foucault on European defence and certain quantitative analyses of electoral behaviour. Still, no French research has ever been published in the journal European Union Politics, which many consider the most important journal for formal approaches in EU studies (Irondelle, 2006).

4 The distinction between national traditions is necessarily simplified. “French author” refers loosely to scholars that have either received their doctoral training in France or work in France and dedicate part of their scientific production to a French-speaking audience.
ontological debate between rationalists and constructivists (see Kauppi et Rask Madsen forthcoming). Our ambition is to draw attention to studies of intentional action in the European Union, focusing in particular on the notion of “usage” that we have developed as a contribution to the studies of Europeanization (Jacquot et Woll 2003; 2004), and to argue for a more nuanced perspective on strategic action in European studies.

For many, strategic action belongs to the realm of rational choice theory, not sociology. We argue that such an opposition is restrictive, as is the much criticized opposition between rationalism and constructivism (Adler 2002; Fearon et Wendt 2002). Acknowledging rationality does not require the assumption that objectives are exogenously determined. Focusing on the social context of intentional action reveals the constitution and effects of strategic behaviour that would be obscured by a categorical opposition between different action motives. It is therefore quite important to study the social construction of rational or strategic behaviour.

Our article divides in two parts. We begin by situating our approach in the recent evolution of European studies: the move away from treating the EU as a *sui generis* case and the sociological turn in comparative, and particularly French, public policy studies. A second part presents the concept of “usage” as an example of a strategic action approach and highlights its insights, in particular (1) the importance of informal and non-constraining procedures, (2) the effects of ways in which actors move around in between the different levels of the European political system, and (3) the ambiguous and often surprising coalitions that come together despite often considerable disagreement over their final goals. The conclusion summarizes the lessons of this research agenda.

2. The European Union as a « normal » object of sociological inquiry

The analysis of strategic action in the European Union is part of a twin evolution in European studies: the move away from treating the multi-level polity as a *sui generis* phenomenon and the turn towards sociological perspectives in its analysis. We review both this “normalization”

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and the “sociological turn” briefly before presenting the concept of usage that we have
developed to study intentional action of a variety of actors over the multiple policy levels.

2. 1. The normalisation of EU studies

Theory-building on European integration has concentrated since the 1960s on international
cooperation within Europe before turning to the analysis of policy-making within this new
polity (Caporaso 1996; Risse-Kappen 1996). With the increased importance of comparative
politics came a call for the “normalization” of EU studies: the characteristics of European
policy-making are more effectively studied by comparing it to other political systems rather
than treating it as a unique case (Hix 1994; Hassenteufel et Surel 2000). Paradoxically, it is by
treating the EU as a normal case that one can distinguish the specificities of the European
policy process. Our objective in the study of strategic action is to show multi-level logics that
policy actors need to take into account.

2. 1. 1. The specificity of European integration

It is not surprising the European cooperation was initially considered as something quite
particular and that it drew first and foremost the attention of scholars working in the field of
international relations. The opposition between fonctionnalism (Lindberg et Scheingold
1970), or neo-functionalism (Sandholtz et Stone Sweet 1998; Fligstein, Sandholtz et Stone
Sweet 2001), that developed out of the work of Ernst Haas (1958), and an
intergovernmental current (Hoffmann 1995) that Andrew Moravcsik (1993; 1998) most
forcefully defended as liberal intergovernmentalism, all tried to understand how states could
agree to engage in such an innovate type of international regime. In the 1990s, this debate was
repeatedly critized as a sterile opposition of approaches that are in fact quite compatible (see
for example Peterson et Bromberg 1999). Moreover, scholars became interested in analyzing
the rapid increase in activities, the extension of Community competences, the nature of
policy-making and successive enlargement rather than engaging in macro-theoretical battles.
By the end of the decade, comparativists scholars had become quite active contributors to the
study of the European political system and relegated the macro-theories of international
relations to the background (Hix 1994; Lequesne et Smith 1997).
The contributions that gained prominence during these years concentrated on the specificity of European governance in a multi-level polity (Kohler-Koch, Eising, 1999; Hooghe, Marks, 2001; Jachtenfuchs, 2001) or as a regulatory state (Majone, 1996). The interconnectedness of the different political levels created a new “European public policy space” (Muller, 1995), where both the institutional logic of this new political space and the nature of multi-level public policies became objects of study in and of themselves. At the heart of this new perspective was no longer the question of international cooperation, but the European policy process and the ways in which the existence of an additional level of policy-making transformed policy-making and politics at the national level.

2. 1. 2. Europeanization

Within few years, these questions turned into a cottage industry under the label of « Europeanization ». Yet despite the relatively separation of Europeanization studies from more general social science debates, the new questions that were asked about European integration actually opened the possibility of studying European politics with the tools of mainstream policy analysis and comparative politics. Scholars began to study the effects of European integration on member states, either on a country by country basis (Ladrech, 1994; Falkner, 2001; Lavdas, 1997), or by concentrating in a comparative manner on the evolution of political conflict (e.g. Tarrow, 1995; Marks, Steenbergen, 2003), the transformation of political institutions (Goetz, Hix, 2001; Anderson, 2002), or the changing nature of public policies.

The notion “Europeanization” has been used in a variety of ways and has often been critiqued for its lack of definitional and analytical rigor (Radaelli, 2000; Olsen, 2002). Authors who adopt the label most often aim to classify and theorize the mechanisms by which the existence of a European policy space transforms policy-making at the national level (see Knill, Lehmkuhl, 1999; Fligstein, 2000). In this perspective, the “misfit” model, which argues that change corresponds to the lack of agreement between European policy proposals and national traditions, has long been most influential (Green Cowles, Caporaso, Risse, 2001; Börzel, Risse 2000). However, several authors have criticized its focus on institutional contraints, where policy actors are reduced to “mediating” factors, and on top-down pressures as analytically distinct from bottom-up movements (Jacquot, Woll, 2004b; Bruno, Jacquot, Mandin, 2007) and led to a move towards work on Europeanization that concentrates more on
the interactive effects of formal and informal politics at both the national and the European level (Radaelli, 2004a, 191; Radaelli, 2001; Featherstone, Radaelli, 2003; Palier, Surel et al., 2007, 39).

To move beyond the misfit model to study not just institutional constraints, but also informal politics and the cognitive dimension of multi-level policy-making allows to understand instances of deliberate policy changes in the absence of adaptive pressures, or, in the words of Bastien Irondelle, or Europeanization “without Europe” (Irondelle, 2003). The European Union acts here as a vector of change by providing new references and policy frames, which national policy actors use strategically. It therefore becomes crucial to understand what motivates these different strategies and to study the action of individual participants in the policy process.

2. 1. 3. Distinctiveness of the EU despite normalization

Using an action-theoretical focus for the study of European transformations helps to understand changes at the national level that are not simple responses to European rules, in other words to expand beyond Europeanization as a variant of compliance studies. Understanding changes as the result of multiple interactions between national and European politics helps to see that the actors at the heart of these processes use European opportunities strategically, but are also transformed by them in the process (Guiraudon, 2003; Jacquot, 2006a). It is therefore important to avoid adopting rigid categories that suppose stable identities for policy participants, i.e. conceiving of them as either national or EU actors.

However, studying the EU with the same tools and categories as national politics does not imply that the two levels are in fact identical. European policies are in fact “unlike others,” (Dehousse, 1994; 2005). Situated at the Community level, they follow different political objectives and result from distinct elaboration and decision procedures. The sui generis nature of European politics highlighted in previous studies remains an important element of contemporary approaches, but can be studied most effectively with traditional tools, because they enable us to highlight and analyze unique constellations.
2.2. The sociological turn in European studies

The great variety of sociological approaches to EU studies goes much beyond the scope of this article. We would simply like to concentrate on the usefulness of action-theoretical considerations, which draw many of their insights from sociology and have become increasingly important to the study of political action, both at the national level and within the EU. In France, we find this current in the sociology of public action, “la sociologie de l’action publique”; at the international level, it corresponds to a reconsideration of rationality as the basis of action in the constructivist literature on the EU (see Saurugger forthcoming).

2.2.1. A sociological perspective on public policy-making

In France, public policy analysis set itself apart from legal and administrative studies by adopting a sociological perspective on the State. Scholars expanded the subjects they considered as part of political intervention, redefined the limits of actor constellations that became part of their analysis and turned to new theoretical tools to analyze their activities. According to Jacques Commaille, it became urgent to move beyond the traditional objects of political science, and to abandon the notion of a hierarchical state with a single centre of authority that simply exerted downward pressure on its citizens.

If we consider public action as the result of multiple social interactions that happen not only at the highest level of the State, but that are likely to be fragmented, complex and flexible, then sociology is a well-equipped to observe and make sense of these processes of collective action and mobilisation. When the whole of relations between the State and civil society is made up primarily of reciprocal and horizontal relations, it makes little sense to analyze it in terms of a dichotomy between State and society and as a top-down process (Commaille, 2004, 417-418).

The idea of a fragmented and non-hierarchical policy-process applies evidently quite well to policy-making in the European Union, with its polycentric structure and experimental approach to political intervention, which the literature on “new modes of governance” has highlighted. At the supranational level, the distinction between public and private actors becomes more subtle, the “institutional polycentrism” has given rise to multiple independent
agencies and policy authorities and political intervention is in many cases not hierarchical but flexible, based on horizontal learning mechanisms, coordination and diffusion. Within this new multi-level governance sphere, understanding what orients individual behaviour and choices in the absence of constraint is as important as studying the formal institutional logic, if we want to obtain a complete picture of the policy process. ⁶

The sociological perspective on public action therefore facilitated French studies of the role of actors and their role in the European transformations at the micro-level. Romain Pasquier and his co-authors have called for a “bottom-level” perspective on European studies, that concentrates on local actors and the ways in which they seize and interpret European rules and opportunities (Pasquier, 2002; Pasquier, Weisbein, 2004; Baisnée, Pasquier, 2007). Others have studies collective action and the constitution of transnational networks, with a focus on the sociology of social movements and political engagement (Guiraudon, 2000; Chabanet, 2001; Weisbein, 2001; Balme, Chabanet, Wright, 2002; Weisbein, 2003). European citizenship and the identification of citizens with European ideals has been central to several authors’ work and becomes a major question in the wake of the French no vote at the referendum on 29 May 2005 (Duchesne, Frognier, 2002; Strudel, 2002; Sauger, Brouard, Grossman, 2007). More generally speaking, in the shadow of a polycentric system with diffuse authority, European public and private actors, be they part of the political elite or regular citizens, have been central to the analysis of change in the political system of the European Union (Georgakakis, 2002; Joana, Smith, 2002; Costa, Magnette, 2007). Analytically, this focus comes with a reliance on the conceptual tools of political sociology (see Smith, 2004; Baisnée, Pasquier 2007, 17).

2. 2. 2. Reconsidering rationality

This « sociological turn » draws attention to individual actors within social and political surroundings and their intentions and action capacities. In the institutionalist literature, intentional action is commonly analyzed either from the perspective of rational choice theory as cost-benefit calculations or from a sociological perspective as appropriate behaviour (March and Olson 1989). In the first case, interests are given and actors pursue them

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⁶ Constraints here are understood as formal or legal constraints, in line with traditional policy-focused studies. From a sociological perspective, informal constraints are, of course, equally important and constitute part of a sociological perspectives on the EU (voir, par exemple, Fligstein et Stone Sweet, 2002).
strategically, in the second, they can evolve in response to the institutional setting (Jupille, Caporaso, 1999).

This theoretical opposition divides scholars on European integration. Scholars within the rationalist champ tend to study formal and informal rules to deduce the incentive structures actors face. The assumption that interests are uniform and coherent once rules are stable allows the modelling of interactions and illustrates the implicit or explicit positivism of many studies in this tradition. In the other champs, scholars concentrate on the malleability of identities and preferences and study the effect of European institutions – in the broadest sense – on these two dimensions. The principal method of inquiry is qualitative analysis to trace the multiple and reciprocal interactions between actors and political institutions (Jupille, Caporaso, Checkel, 2003). The general division corresponds to the rationalist-constructivist divide in the international relations literature.

However, many authors have criticized the debate between rationalism and constructivism as a false opposition (Adler, 2002; Fearon, Wendt, 2002). Rational choice approaches merely make one simple assumption: when faced with several options, an actor will chose which ever option allows her to obtain the most advantageous final outcome. Constructivists insist on the fact that preferences are social phenomena and as such should not be held constant. Therefore, it is not the “optimization” hypotheses that poses a problem to the constructivists, it is the idea that whatever the individual value is given exogenously and does not change. For Jon Elster, “thin” rationality only requires that an action be coherent with the objectives of the individual, whatever they may be (Elster, 1986). For more general modelling, however, it becomes necessary to make assumptions about the ends which the actor values, traditionally material welfare. This “thick” rationality, which contains an assumption by the analyst about the goals of the actor studied, is at the heart of the sociological critique. For them, interests are context dependant and multifaceted and cannot be resumed as a pure material cost-benefit calculation. It is thus the materialism that underlies many rational choice explanations that should be situated in opposition to constructivism, not rationalism in and of itself.

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The work of Geoffrey Garret or George Tsebelis are typical illustrations of this current, as are most articles published in the journal *European Union Politics*, which one could consider as the flagship journal of rationalist approaches to European studies.
This goes to the heart of our argument: acting strategically in pursuit of a goal is not incompatible with a sociological perspective. In her previous work, Cornelia Woll has stressed that firms are behaving very rationally when they try to influence global trade negotiations once they have defined their objectives. However, the elaboration of their political goals depends crucially on their social embeddedness and the political interactions and cannot be reduced to a simple cost-benefit calculation. Woll (2008) therefore refers to “constructed rationality”. Making a profit in world markets is not a priority for firms that receive financial aid, but becomes crucial once European competition policy impedes the continuation of preferential treatment. Within less than ten years, the lobbying behaviour of large European and American service companies changed profoundly, but it is no less rational today than it was at the beginning. Only the final objectives – political support vs. profitability – have changed in response to evolutions in the social context firm had to act in.

Such preference evolution rarely happens in a social vacuum, it is most often the result of a conflict of interest. Both Patrick Le Galès and Susanne Schmidt have shown in their respective analyses that reiterate confrontations between national and supranational actors can transform stakes and thus affect policy preferences (Le Galès 2001; Schmidt 2000; see also Woll 2005). The actors that contribute to shape the rules of the game – in these cases the actors within the supranational institutions – can thus induce a change in their goals pursued by their opponents.

With this idea in mind, Nicolas Jabko has criticized constructivists for their underestimation of strategic calculations on the part of political actors, especially when they design policy frames. The politics of ideas, dear to constructivists, is often portrayed as an area without conflict (cf. Muller, 2005). The agreement on monetary union in Europe, for example, appears as a natural consequence of the decline of Keynesianism (McNamara, 1998). In reality, however, new concepts are used strategically by actors that try to create new policy coalitions (Palier, 2005). Analyzing the ways in which the European Commission moved to advance European integration, Jabko shows that ambiguous concepts, such as a “common market” help to bring together a very unlikely group of supporters for a new political project. However, as strategically as these actors might employ new ideas, they cannot control all of the consequences of their choices and will eventually be transformed by the ones that are most effective. Labelling his approach “strategic constructivism”, Jabko insists on a necessary

In sum, analyzing intentional action is not incompatible with a sociological perspective that pays attention to the origins of the goals an actor pursues and the feedback effects a strategy can have on the identity and the preferences of the actor. The sociological turn has highlighted that institutions and social interactions shape and constrain the participants of the European policy process. But we need to go beyond this observation. To understand the evolution of European politics, we also need to take into account the strategies actors employ within their different settings to move around the constraints they face.

3. The usage of Europe: strategies at the heart of political work

We start from the premise that the political work of individual actors is central to understanding the orientation of political intervention in the European Union. Studying the ways in which actors make use of Europe helps to understand the nature of this work: how do they seize opportunities and work around constraints, and how do they interpret and transform both? Working on usage is thus first and foremost an approach which defines analytical priorities and should not be understood as a new theory or model.\(^8\) We begin by reviewing the notion of usage and then turn to its utility in recent studies of European politics.

3. 1. The political usages of Europe

The ambition of the concept of political usage is to draw attention to the cognitive and strategic dynamics of European transformations in order to balance institutionalist approaches which tend to deal with individual actors as simple transmission belts. Institutional contexts need to be interpreted and actors do not give automatic responses to political pressure: they can choose and learn and thus develop agency independent of structural conditions. By focusing on this agency; the notion of usages draws our attention to ways in which actors engage with, interpret, appropriate or ignore the dynamics of European integration. Their behaviour is therefore central to the ways in which national political systems respond to

\(^8\) Concentrating on political action, our approach shares a number of assumptions with what Renate Mayntz and Fritz Scharpf have called actor-centered institutionalism (Mayntz, Scharpf, 1995) and draws from divers currants of action theory in the more general sociological literature (see Weisbein 2008).
supranational politics (and vice versa). European transformations are the result of the political work of a series of political actors, which employ European constraints and opportunities to their advantage.

The definition we have given for what we have labelled usages of Europe are “practices and political interactions which adjust and redefine themselves by seizing the European Union as a set of opportunities, be they institutional, ideological, political or organisational,” (Jacquot, Woll, 2004b, 9). By seizing, circumventing and inventing new political conditions, an increasing number of very diverse actors thus contribute to the mechanisms of change of national politics. European politics have opened up the possibility of a new political game, which appear like an opportunity to some and like a threat to others depending on their respective action capacities.

The concept of usage studies the different dimensions of this political work to understand how actors employ their social and institutional position to follow their interests or worldviews in a given context. Usage refers both to a strategy and to an everyday practice, a continual dynamic of interaction. In that sense, usages, just like etiquette analyzed by Norbert Elias (1974), transmit values and produce social results such as domination, because they situate and stabilize power relations. But making use of something also implies voluntary action and thus indented meaning according to Max Weber. Complex strategies follow a given objective, even if they are in reality only “more or less explicit and more or less constructed,” (Muller, Surel, 1998, 31). As a result, conscious and voluntary action does not mean that the final outcome is identical to the initial objective, since the effects of an action are often not entirely predictable or controllable. As strategic as usage may be initially, in the long run, it entails cognitive and/or normative adaptation by actors and their political environment, which in turn affects their subsequent behaviour and positioning. Cognitive and strategic dynamics therefore have to be considered simultaneously and need to be understood as mutually reinforcing.

To study political work, it is necessary to distinguish usage and opportunities (both resources and constraints) provided by the European system. “Opportunities are a necessary, but not sufficient condition of usage: they are the contextual element that usage is based on,” (Jacquot, Woll, 2004b, 7). Identifying resources or constraints is necessary for studying how
actors transform them into political practice. It is this transformation which constitutes usage; which leads us to state that there is “no [European] impact without usage.”

We have categorized usages according to their functionality and distinguish three main types. Cognitive usage refers to the understanding and interpretation of a political subject and is most common in when issues are being defined or need to be discussed, so that ideas serve as persuasion mechanism. Like the “market” analyzed by Nicolas Jabko, one can think in particular of political slogans – “subsidiarity”, “the knowledge economy”, “social inclusion” – which help to aggregate interests and build coalition of heterogeneous actors. Strategic usages refer to the pursuit of clearly defined goals by trying to influence policy decision or one’s room for manoeuvre, be it by increasing one’s access to the policy process or the number of political tools available. It is the most common of all types and occurs typically in the middle of the political process, once all stakes are clearly defined. Legitimating usage mix cognitive and strategic elements and occur when political decisions need to be communicated and justified. Actors rely on the image of “Europe” to communicate implicit content or employ related discursive figures such as “the European interest”, “European constraints”, “the application of the Maastricht criteria” to legitimate political choices.

Each of these three categories can be associated with the elements that are typically used in its pursuit, the actors that most commonly engage in it and political work pursued, which the following table summarizes.

**Table 1. Characteristics of the different types of usage**

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<th>Elements used</th>
<th>Type of actors</th>
<th>Political work</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cognitive usage</strong></td>
<td>- Ideas</td>
<td>- Political entrepreneurs</td>
<td>- Arguementation</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Advocacy coalitions</td>
<td>- Framing of political action</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Public policy networks</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Strategic usage</strong></td>
<td>- Institutions</td>
<td>- Institutional actors</td>
<td>- Resource mobilisation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Instruments</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Financing</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Legitimating usage</strong></td>
<td>- Public space</td>
<td>- Politicians</td>
<td>- Justification</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Discursive references</td>
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<td>- Deliberation</td>
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Source: JACQUOT, WOLL, 2004b, 23.

The motivations behind these different usages can be of three kinds. The first is a *logic of influence*: actors try to shape the content or the orientation of national or supranational stakes. The second is a *positioning logic*: here the goal is to improve one’s institutional position in
the policy process. Finally, the third is a *justification logic*, where actors try to obtain the support of other actors or the general public for decisions that are already taken.

Methodologically, our approach follows the suggestion of Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen (2005) to study the processes of profound and gradual change where causes are both exogenous and endogenous. For these two authors, the key to this type of analysis lies in the role of actors and the recognition that there is always a gap between ideal motives and the concrete application of a social norm. This gap is constituted by usages, the room for manoeuvre left open to individual actors. For Streeck and Thelen, studying changes implies, first, to understand the difference between, for example, an opera as it appears in a repertoire and its artistic performance. Second, this analytical distinction allows identifying the nature of the gap, which results from political work. In this way, we can confront the materiality of political action at the micro level.

### 3. 2. A heuristic concept?

Studying usages reveals how the redefinition of borderlines – geographical, sectoral or between the public and the private – has enabled actors to reinvent their role in the political game, be it in the definition of policy stakes and solutions or in the implementation process (Radaelli, Franchino, 2004). However, not all actors are able to make use of Europe in the same way. Usage is by no means an automatic response to new options, as Rozenberg (2004) has shown. Rather the concept of usage has helped to think differently about the central mechanisms of European transformation (Radaelli, 2004b). If Europe has an impact depending on what kind of usage is made of it, the central questions become: “Who can make what type of usage of Europe? Put differently, which actors are most likely and able to shape the ‘impact’ of Europe? Which tools are available and most important?” (Jacquot, Woll, 2004c, 295).

By asking these questions, the analysis of usage draws attention to three specific dimensions: (1) the dynamics of informal and non-constraining procedures, (2) the movement of actors between the different policy levels and (3) the importance of networks and coalition which form despite among actors with fundamentally different goals. All three aspects are either underestimated or ignored in analyses that concentrate on only the institutional setting.
First, while formal procedures are important, informal procedures provide immediate resources that can help actors to increase their room for manoeuvre. One of the most illustrative examples is the open method of coordination, an experimental form of intergovernmental policy coordination, which has been used by certain actors as a lever to bring about reform initiatives at the national level (Dehousse, 2004). Concerning pensions, the open method of coordination has become a resource for the economic and financial actors who sought to modernize the retirement system by developing employment of the elderly, cutting down early retirement options and increasing the privately financed part of pensions (Bruno, Jacquot, Mandin, 2007). In his study of defence policy, Bastien Irondelle (2003) shows that European references became crucial for reformers of the French military in 1996, even though defence not very integrated at the European level. What might appear like a mere alibi of French elites to gather support for an unpopular reform triggers a complex process of change. Irondelle shows that the references to Europe becomes a profound discursive change within the French military, which increasingly included European imperatives in its objectives and thus moved away from French exceptionalism, which had long characterized the defence domain. This reorientation was a crucial step towards considerable European defence integration launched in Saint Malo in 1998. The same mechanisms of resources seized in informal procedures thus operated in both examples.

Although the concept of usage is particularly relevant for non-constraining policy processes, all processes, even hard law leave open a room for manoeuvre and thus requires the mediation of actors. As Pierre Lascoumes (1990) has underlined, formal rules have only « indicative value » and only gain their meaning through the intervention of different actors. Moreover, it is not their a priori “degree of coercion” that matters, but the usage which is made of them, their concrete implementation and the meaning that actors attach to them. Several authors have shown that the liberalisation of service sectors has resulted from the strategic usage of competition policy instruments, which were applied in contexts that previously fell outside of European intervention (Schmidt, 1998; Woll, 2005). Similarly, Emiliano Grossman has shown how private banks have been able to appeal to European competition rules to modify the status of German public banks (Grossman, 2006).

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9 This is incidentally what creates the importance of the legal professions, which are charged with interpreting these rules.
10 « It would be possible to propose a classification of public policies that abandons a priori distinctions according to the degree of coercion of the legal instruments available and that relies instead on the importance and the forms of secondary norms and the practical application they produce, » (Lascoumes, 1990, 71 ; our own translation).
This creativity brings us to our second point: the movement of actors between different policy levels. As several studies have shown, within different policy fields, the interpretation of rules and their usage tend to become routinised over time (Guiraudon, 2003; Mérand, 2008). Actors which can move around between different sectors or policy levels are therefore crucial for importing new rules or re-interpreting those already in place (Delazay, Rask Madsen, 2006). In this perspective, Laure Bereni has demonstrated how the leaders of the French feminist movement have been able to employ institutional and cognitive resources at the European level to exert pressure and legitimize their demands at the national level. This « detour through Europe » was crucial for advancing their calls for equal representation in France, which national actors had previously been able to block both legally and symbolically (Bereni, 2004). Similarly, Karin Toens (2006) analyzes how opportunities at the supranational level have enabled social associations in Germany to overcome the constraints of neo-corporatist consultation procedures at the national level and employ innovative lobbying strategies (Toens, 2006). Moreover, as Rosa Sanchez Sálgado (2006) shows for civil society organisations, the usage of Europe is more than just a strategic opportunity, it also has profound feedback effects on the non-governmental actors, in particular on their identities, organization and political strategies.

Thirdly, the study of strategic action allows analysing the heterogeneous coalitions that form around different policy issues, because they draw attention to the difference between the cognitive frames employed and the motivations of political actors. Distinguishing between these two is crucial for revealing the tensions that can exist behind an apparent political agreement. To go beyond superficial agreement helps to study the power relations between different actors, even when they do not play out in open conflict (Woll, 2007).

Bruno Palier has called this phenomenon “ambiguous agreement” and shows how such heterogeneous coalitions have pushed for social policy reforms such as pensions, health care or the new law on social security financing (Palier, 2005; 2007). Sophie Jacquot (2006b) has studied the institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming as a policy instrument and shows that its acceptance depended crucially on the ambiguity of its meaning and the multitude of usages that different actors could make of it (conformist, purist, realist and opportunist usage). Nicolas Jabko (2006) in turn shows that European integration hinged on coalitions of the “strange bedfellows” that have supported the creation of a single market, the euro, the
liberalization of national energy markets or structural funds. For him, supranational and national actors employed the concept of a “market” strategically to create coalitions that included federalists, national governments eager to defend their status quo, economic liberals and those that sought to counter the pressures of globalization.

4. Conclusion

To conclude our review of the concept of usages as an illustration of sociological perspectives on strategic action, we would like to make three observations. First of all, the increasing importance of usages is linked to the recent changes in the nature of European integration. The most visible areas of harmonization and the importance of the community method increasingly exist alongside new coordination mechanism, non-binding procedures and the commitment to preserve national policy solutions. The multiplicity of new governance modes in turn requires new tools for studying the room for manoeuvre that results from these experimental approaches to understand if and how they lead to social change.

Secondly, we would like to emphasize that everything in the EU is strategic usage and that all actors have the same action capacities. However, just like the study of non-decisions, instances of non-usage give important indications about the power relations, the configuration of interests or the constraints that curtail political innovation through individual action.

Finally, at the theoretical level, the specificity of our approach lies in the sociological perspective on rational action. We are interested in the incentive systems actors face at multiple levels, but considers them to do more than produce automatic responses by reacting innovatively and creatively in many instances that we try to consider systematically. Moreover, even though the political work is often strategic and can trigger change, none of the actors oversee and control the effects of their actions entirely. As we have argued, the movement of actors and the heterogeneous coalitions they form constitute intentional actions, but have profound effects on the actors and their long term objectives. Understanding why individual initiatives succeed and fail to gather collective support, which ideas are carried within heterogeneous coalitions and which institutional conditions limit political creativity are therefore necessary parts of a research agenda concentrating on the micro-level of political change in the European Union.
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