Neo-functionalism – spilling over to gender studies

Heather MacRae

1. Introduction

Neo-functionalism enjoys the unique distinction of being one of two classic, founding theories of European integration. Together with its “rival” intergovernmentalism (see van der Vleuten in this volume), these theories form the core of the “grand debate” of integration theories. It is a debate which has shaped European studies from the 1960s onwards, and continues to form the basis of numerous related approaches and theories. Not surprisingly, the “grand debate” of European integration has been completely devoid of any gender awareness. Yet, in this contribution I argue that neo-functionalism could allow for the incorporation of a more gendered approach without compromising or contradicting its basic premises. However, while this would add an interesting nuance to neo-functionalism, it is questionable whether the merging of neo-functionalism and gender studies can offer much for feminists seeking to apply a gendered perspective to the study of the processes of integration. While there is room to gender neo-functionalism, some of the variations and offshoots of neo-functionalism, having already incorporated a more nuanced approach, likely provide more fertile soil for the investigation of EU integration from a gender perspective.

While most scholars agree on the historic importance of neo-functionalism to the overall evolution of theories of integration, few continue to ascribe to it in its original and “pure” form. In fact, many scholars now view neo-functionalism as obsolete; a theoretical dinosaur “frequently represented as a theory of EU studies past with comparatively little to say to EU studies present” (Rosamund 2005: 238). In this chapter I take issue with this assessment, highlighting instead, that neo-functionalism could be modified through a feminist lens. At the very least, we must recognize the value of neo-functionalism for its importance as a foundational theory, which has opened the door to more complex and gender aware theories including supranationalism, multi-level governance and constructivism (Sandholz and Stone-Sweet 1998; Schmitter 2004; Haas 2004). In these modified versions, neo-functionalism continues to have insights about European integration and the processes shaping integration. The chapter begins with an historical analysis of neo-functionalism, and an explanation of its core beliefs, including spillover and the role of
social forces. In the third part of the chapter, I address the modifications made to neo-functionalism as it fell in and out of favor in an attempt to adapt to the changing realities of the process of integration. It is through this evolutionary process, that in the early 1990s, supranationalism and eventually multi-level governance (see Abels in this volume) emerged as successors to neo-functionalism. The fourth section highlights how neo-functionalism could be open to gender approaches but suggests that these successor approaches may offer more fertile ground for a feminist analysis. To demonstrate the potential of this synthesis, the fourth and final section of the chapter offers a brief analysis of how a gender-aware supranationalism can offer new avenues to explore the evolution policy in the European Union. The chapter concludes with the observation that although few feminists openly subscribe to neo-functionalism or even supranationalist approaches, there is in fact, ample room for cross-fertilization. It is as such that it can offer valuable insights into the EU present.

2. Historical Roots and Central Premises of Neo-functionalism

Neo-functionalism has gradually evolved and shifted over time. As such, the theory has come to mean different things to different people and it is difficult to definitively say exactly what the theory stands for (Niemann and Schmitter 2009). What we can say is that the neo-functionalist story begins with Ernst Haas and his 1958 seminal work, *The Uniting of Europe*. In this work, Haas attempts to explain the importance of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), and then the European Economic Community (EEC) as a new form of organization in Europe. He furthermore seeks to understand how and why integration, once begun, continues to evolve and deepen, seemingly taking on a life of its own. For Haas, the new cooperation in Europe, as evidenced in the regional organizations, necessitated a departure from the realist approaches which dominated international relations at the time. His theory placed an emphasis on supranational cooperation, the role of elites in creating a new consensus and finally, a progressive understanding of coordination which saw cooperation gradually spilling over from one area to another.

Several other theorists, including for example, Leon Lindberg (1963) and Philippe Schmitter (1970), were also influential to the early formulation of neo-functionalism. There were some differences among these theorists and although they converge around the concept of neo-
functionalism, there is some variation in their understandings of integration and the factors contributing to the process of integration. For example, Haas defines integration as:

the process whereby actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities toward a new centre, who institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national states. The end result of a process of political integration is a new political community superimposed over the pre-existing ones” (Haas 1968, 16?).

In contrast, Lindberg’s understanding of integration is a less definitive and more “cautious” one (Niemann and Schmitter, 2009). Where Haas sees a new political community as the “endpoint” – however vague and ill defined – of the process of integration, Lindberg (1963) makes no such assumption. Instead, he implies that the process is ongoing and ever changing. There is no actual “goal” to which the process ascribes. In a similarly cautious vein, Lindberg predicts that there will be a less fundamental shift in loyalties from the national to the supranational level, arguing that the elite political actors will shift only their “expectations and political activities” but not their loyalties to “a new centre” (1963: 6). It is interesting to note, that Haas himself quickly downplayed both of these ideas (Haas 1960; see also Niemann and Schmitter 2009; Ruggie et al. 2005). Despite some differences in scope, there is agreement that integration will bring about some degree of realignment of political and economic actors from the national to the supranational.

The theory attempts to answer two central questions. First, why does integration take place in Europe? In this sense, neo-functionalists seek to understand both the big picture and the day-to-day events comprising the European project. Second, neo-functionalism asks how integration progresses? What (or who) are the forces driving the process? With this question evolved a rather natural inclination to attempt – usually unsuccessfully – to predict when and where integration would proceed. Three ideas are central to the theory:

1) elites will support the project of integration and express this support by shifting some portion of their activities to the supranational level;
2) supranational institutions are important, relevant and actors in their own right;
3) integration in one area will “spill-over” into other related areas, resulting in a snowballing of integration across fields and policy domains.
These three points (elite socialization, supranationalization and spillover) form the three main hypotheses of neo-functionalism and set out the theory as the diametric opposite of intergovernmentalism. Where intergovernmentalism focused on the importance of states as rational and unified actors, Haas, Lindberg and their followers saw a community of multiple, diverse and changing actors who are not bound to the domestic sphere but who may choose to act on the supranational arena. Let us consider these key points before moving on to some of the later incarnations of neo-functionalism and a consideration of how well these theories can meld with gender approaches.

The first two premises, that of elite socialization and the supranational organization of politics, are based on the assumption that states are not the primary (or only) drivers of the integration process. Rather, the supranational actors and institutions themselves, as well as interest groups also play potentially important roles. This is perhaps the most fundamental distinction between intergovernmentalism and neo-functionalism. Intergovernmentalism argues that nation states are the most important (or even only) actor in the international sphere and that these actors are essentially unified and rational. There is little if any room for organized interest or even specific non-state actors to shape the process of integration. While Haas and other neofunctionalists generally agree with the notion of the rational actor, for the most part, they reject the understanding of states as the only actors of relevance to the international stage. Even if member states remain important, so too are the supranational institutions. Moreover, these institutions must be understood as more than the sum of their parts, but as actors in their own right. In this way, early neo-functionalism leaves room for organized interests, individuals and the European institutions to contribute to and even shape and direct the process. Lindberg (1963, PAGE MISSING) notes that, “central institutions are required in order to represent the common interests which have brought the Member States together, and in order to accommodate such conflicts of interest as will inevitably arise”. In other words, the central institutions are specifically designed to make collective decisions and to mediate among the member states. He furthermore suggests a need to “focus … on the extent to which the Community institutions are enabled to deal directly with fields of activity, rather than merely influencing the actions of individual governments in respect of these fields” (Lindberg 1963, PAGE MISSING). Hence, these new institutions were expected to take play an active day-to-day role in governing. They act on their own and in their own interests.
For Haas, it is important not only that non-state actors are players on the international stage, but that these supranational institutions begin to take on a position of alternate political affinity and legitimacy. Returning to his definition of integration, he stresses that actors are “persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities toward a new centre” (Haas 1958, 16). Haas was referring mostly to political elites, national political leaders and high-positioned individuals. He believed that as these individuals and groups began to look towards the supranational level to accomplish necessary tasks of governance, the supranational would naturally gain in legitimacy. It would then become the natural place to look to in order to accomplish future tasks. Thus, the transfer of allegiances is an essential and self-fulfilling part of neo-functionalists assumptions about integration as a process. In a similar vein, Lindberg assumed that non-political actors such as business elites would transfer their allegiances to the supranational arena. Encouraging elites to bargain and negotiate at the European level contributed to the creation of a so-called “permissive consensus” among the general public (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Neo-functionalists saw this as a temporary state of affairs, expecting that, sometime in the future, individual loyalties and expectations would also shift to the European level. In fact, this has happened, at best, in a limited manner. Hooghe and Marks see instead that the permissive consensus has morphed into a “constraining dissensus” requiring elites to consider public reaction to Europeanization in order to avoid dissent.

This transfer of loyalties is closely linked with the concept of elite socialization. For example, if one were to apply a neo-functionalist lens to a study of the European Parliament, one might note that the members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are elected in elections at the individual member state level. While one might thus expect that they are largely driven by national interests and visions, closer examination would reveal that these MEPs, once elected are expected to shed their national identities and are regrouped into multi-national political parties. Thus, it is their political and economic positions, and not their nationalities which define the individual actors in the European Parliament. A member of the German Green party cooperates with members of the Green party from Sweden; Christian Democrats from the Netherlands ally with Conservatives from the United Kingdom and nationalist right-wing parties from Latvia and elsewhere. Given this organization, neo-functionalism would suggest that MEPs become more European in their perspectives and positions, and that their national allegiances begin to fade.
This, for neo-functionalists is one reason that integration proceeds. Moreover, as Stroby-Jensen points out (2004), through their working practices, these MEPs may become socialized to a European perspective, which takes over and colors their positions on other matters. This is what Haas and other neo-functionalists have referred to as “elite socialization”, involving a gradual shift in the perspectives, loyalties and beliefs of individual actors. Interestingly, during the 1960s when neo-functionalism enjoyed the peak of its popularity, the MEPs were not actually elected but appointed from among the members of the national parliaments. Given the divided loyalties of these early MEPs, it is likely that most claims for further integration would have directed to the Commission, rather than the parliament, thus perpetuating the elite dominance of integration.

Likely most well-known of neo-functionalisms hypotheses is the concept of spillover. In its most basic form, spillover refers to a phenomenon whereby integration in a particular area spreads to other related policy areas and perpetuates the process. Haas noticed that, as integration progressed, it sometimes spread and expanded through a form of policy feedback. Thus, through the effects of spillover, integration naturally and automatically transfers from one policy area to another in order to maximize efficiency.

Two types of spillover were initially important to neo-functionalists: functional and political. Additional forms and nuancing of the concept, for example through cultural spillover (Tranholm-Mikkelsen 1991), exogenous spillover (Niemann 2006) were added to the repertoire. If we examine some of these various forms of spillover, it can offer some important insights into which process, actors and concepts neo-functionalists consider to be most important. With Haas’ technical or functional spillover the automaticity of integration is brought to the fore as actors agree to increased integration in order to facilitate success. Political spillover comes out of this process, as political and institutional actors are subsequently empowered by member state governments delegating further powers to the supranational levels. This, in turn was believed to affect the political loyalties of these supranational actors. Essentially, because the supranational institutions were empowered to act in a specific area, interest groups, political and business elites and other domestic actors began to direct their attention to the European level of decision making, facilitating the process of integration. Additionally, neo-functionalism looked primarily to the Commission as the body directing and encouraging spillover effects. Tranholm-Mikkelsen (19991) anticipated that the Commission would help to form European-wide interest groups and consolidate interests from national level elites into groups of potential allies to cooperate against
the national governments. This form of spillover, which was facilitated and assisted by the Commission and was thus far more conscious and less automatic than the other forms, was dubbed “cultivated spillover”. It is this form of spillover that we can see, for example in the creation and support for the European Women’s Lobby (EWL), a cross-national umbrella organizing bringing national women’s groups together at the European level. The organization, though politically independent, relies to a degree on Commission funding and support. It is a good example of how the Commission can consciously work to transfer political activity to the supranational level. The centrality of spillover, not only to the original theorizing but to the variations of neo-functionalism helps to underline the importance of non-state actors in the approach and shows the theory to be quite open to (even dependent upon) to interest group mobilization. While this is not without its difficulties, as we shall investigate in the subsequent sections, it does leave room for the mobilization of feminist and gender actors to influence the processes.

Initially, Haas conceived of spillover as uni-directional and “positive” as integration in one policy area contributed to the further integration of other policy fields. Events of the late 1960s and 1970s, however, brought sharp criticism of this assumption. The Empty Chair Crisis of 1965 and the ensuing Luxembourg Compromise, along with a general slowing down of the integration project through the 1970s seemed to refute the basic premise that integration would be an ongoing and progressive project where economic integration would lead to increased policy competencies at the European level. In addition, several examples of states using the European arena to promote national goals and agenda, contradicted neo-functionalism’s core assumptions about the progressive transfer of authority and perspective to the European level. Integration did not seem to be self-perpetuating, and integration in one area appeared to occasionally also lead to a reduction in integration. This was a central critique of the intergovernmentalist school of thought, which gained increased salience as integration as a process appeared to be stalled in the 1970s. In an effort to further refine these concepts, Philippe Schmitter conceptualized numerous forms of actor responses to integration. Among these, “spill-around” and “spill-back” offered alternate explanations of how the integration process might proceed (Schmitter 1971, 846). Simply conceived, spillback suggested that integration could lead to a retreat rather than a perpetuation of the process of integration. Spill-around saw an increase in the scope of integration, but not in the institutional structures surrounding the area, instead consciously
“holding the level of authority constant or within the zone of indifference” (ibid.). Again, this nuancing of the theory, though not fully adopted by all advocates of neo-functionalism, help us to understand the centrality of the supranational, the non-state actors and the role of rules and values in shaping the process of integration. In short, it brought social pluralism front and centre, shifting focus and attention away from the national level structures and elites (McGowan 2007).

3. The revival of neo-functionalism

Despite attempts to nuance and clarify neo-functionalism in the early 1970s, it was generally abandoned about a decade later. By the early 1980s, few theorists considered neo-functionalism to be a relevant and predictive approach (Sandholtz and Stone Sweet 2012). As early as 1975, Haas himself had acknowledged neo-functionalism’s inability to explain the processes of integration, referring to his theory as “obsolete”. But, even as he dismissed his own theory, his analysis showed that integration had, in fact increased in scope and depth in some fields, while declining on others (Sandholtz and Stone Sweet 2012). However, external pressures including globalization were, in Haas’ view, so powerful and game changing, that neo-functionalism could not remain a relevant means of theorizing the EU. And so, the theory was generally abandoned through the latter part of the 1970s and early 1980s. And yet, by 1989, scholars noted the resilience of the European institutions, even in the force of globalization and those external pressures which Haas had predicted would require “global” solutions. If anything, the European project had strengthened in the face of globalization. With revisions, many of the basic premises and logics of neo-functionalism were still applicable to the process of integration, and supranationalism emerged as a credible alternative to the now dominant liberal intergovernmentalism (see van der Vleuten in this volume).

Surpanationalists, including Wayne Sandholtz and Alec Stone Sweet as well as John Zysman and Neil Fligstein, have advanced supranationalism as a clear alternative to the state-dominated liberal intergovernmentalist approach. In a nutshell, supranationalism takes its cue from neo-functionalism and builds on many of the premises and concepts laid down a few decades previously. These authors were somewhat more skeptical of the automaticity of integration, although they give the member state governments more credit and power than the

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1 Although they do not explicitly aim to reformulate neo-functionalism, Sandholtz and Zysman (1989) is often considered to be the first to “revive” neo-functionalism. Their analysis of specific aspects of market integration was based on neo-functionalism and suggested that integration was entering a new, as yet undefined era.
early neo-functionalists had, viewing the states as one of a multitude of actors in the process of integration. While important, understanding the process of integration and governance at the European level required an understanding of all the players and actors and their interaction with one another. These authors argued that as transnational interactions increased, a supranational society of actors would emerge. These actors would use the supranational level as a means of avoiding constraints at the national levels. For example, in the case of merger control or telecommunication, the variation of rules in the individual member states could lead to additional transaction costs. The emergence of a new supranational society would generate norms, values and even identity at the European level, eventually contributing to a process of Europeanization (Bache et al. 2011).

Supranationalism is important here as a stepping stone or bridge to bring the basic premises and observations of neo-functionalism back into the mainstream. From here, these concepts have been modified and adapted and form the foundation of a wide variety of approaches, many of which are discussed in the chapters of this text. For example, Multilevel governance (see Abels in this volume), Europeanization approaches (see Liebert in this volume), institutionalisms (see Kenny and Haastrup in this volume) and social constructivism (see Lombardo in this volume), have all continued to build on aspects of these basic premises in order to generate more nuanced, more robust and more specified approaches to particular questions arising through the process of integration. Interestingly, as we have noted elsewhere (see Abels and MacRae in this volume), feminist scholars and gender approaches have remained almost entirely silent in this discussion. And yet, despite their silence and at times even rejection of both neo-functionalism and supranationalism as not having much to say about gender, both of these grand theories offer substantial space for the incorporation of gender and the adoption of a feminist lens on the process of integration.

4. Neo-functionalism and Gender Approaches

It has likely not escaped the notice of the reader that, up to this point in the neo-functionalist story, the dialogue has been exclusively male. There has been no conversation between the (masculine) mainstream and gender approaches, either around neo-functionalism or other approaches. The theorization around European integration has been almost exclusively undertaken by men. Not only has the mainstream been unreceptive of feminist approaches, as we
have noted elsewhere in this volume, feminist scholars have also not engaged with the process of theorization and theory building in the context of European integration. In this section, I advance a critique of neo-functionalism from a feminist perspective with the aim of highlighting that despite the constraints resulting from a lack of gender awareness in early neo-functionalist thought, there is the potential for a fruitful dialogue between feminists and neo-functionalism. Both neo-functionalism and supranationalisms are, themselves “stretchy” concepts which offer sufficient leeway to incorporate a feminist perspective without fundamentally contradicting the basic theoretical premises. Nonetheless, there are, to my knowledge, no examples of feminist or gender scholars openly acknowledge that they apply a neo-functionalist approach in their analysis. However, as early as 1996, Hoskyns noted the general compatibility of neo-functionalism with gendered approaches (1996: 208). Although she dismisses using neofunctionalism as the driving theory behind her research, Hoskyns does recognize a value of neo-functionalism in its focus on supranational legislation and rights, something which has driven much of the practical policy change around women’s rights in Germany (Abels 2012). However, numerous feminist scholars have undertaken research using a social constructivist, multi-level governance of feminist institutionalist lens (see the contributions by Abels; Lombardo; and Kenny and Haastu in this volume). Although these theories are a few steps removed from the original neo-functionalism, it is not difficult to see many of the core principals of the theory incorporated into the analyses. In other words, without adopting the approach, aspects of neo-functionalism and supranational approaches have been “covertly” brought into feminist analyses. In the section below, I focus primarily on bringing gender into neo-functionalism. However, this is largely a theory-building exercise and a means of demonstrating the potential for dialogue among rather distinct theoretical strands. Given the current state of integration theory, a convergence of gender approaches and some variant of supranationalism or multi-level governance is far more likely.

Three main points are worth developing in more detail. First, there are, in my view no fundamental contradictions between neo-functionalism and gender approaches, as both are fluid enough to allow for some convergence without compromising the internal integrity of the approaches. Secondly, a gendered approach could help to fill some of the “holes” in neo-functionalist thought, actually rendering the theory more rigorous and applicable. However, the end result, that is a feminist neo-functionalism, may in fact more closely resemble an
institutionalist or multi-level governance approach than its neo-functional parent. Gender and neo-functionalism are, in many ways compatible approaches, and neo-functionalism could be enriched by a gender awareness. However, it is less clear whether the resulting feminist neo-functionalism would offer any added value over more recent offshoots of integration studies. Elite socialization, transnationalism and spillover are, as we noted above, at the core of neo-functionalism. All three are compatible with a gendered approach. Let us consider each briefly in turn.

Haas and his followers argued that, among elite actors, the integration project would involve a transfer of loyalties and activity from the national to the supranational. This transfer would, to some degree, contribute to the development of a European set of values and norms. On one hand, the focus on the supranational, and on non-state actors is paramount to a feminist analysis. However, although the space may be there to adopt a feminist perspective, for the most part, neo-functionalism and supranationalism have developed in a way which not only ignores, but actually excludes women and gender concerns. Neo-functionalism in practice, has privileged political and economic elites, and supranational level bureaucrats. These individuals remain overwhelmingly male. Neo-functionalism, has not typically taken any notice of those actors which are importance to feminists. Women’s organizations, informal social movements and individual women working in the bureaucracy have not been visible in neo-functionalist analyses, even though there is room for this within the framework of the theory. As Catherine Hoskyns has noted, although it is reassuring that neo-functionalism contains a social aspect, the theory disconnects the social from the economic and political. Because of its largely technocratic and bureaucratic approach to integration, economic and social concerns are considered separately. Moreover, the economic is prioritized as a area of “high politics” whereas the social falls into the sphere of “low politics”. In this sense, neo-functionalism and its rival theory intergovernmentalism share a tendency to assume that the main preferences driving actors are economic (Hooghe and Marks 2009). Since, for gender analyses the interconnections between social, political and economic are paramount, this may act as a big barrier to gendering neo-functionalism (Hoskyns 2004). There is nothing specific to neo-functionalism which requires this separation. Rather, the manner in which it has been applied and has evolved over the years have contributed to a particular intellectual inertia, where theoretical norms and values are constructed through practice.
Elsewhere, I have argued that the “gender project” at the European level is a form of supranational “myth” which helps to generate loyalty to and legitimacy for the European project (MacRae 2010). Although feminists have not engaged actively with integration theory, there is a good deal of literature around gender in the EU, and the European Union has developed a strong and nuanced set of gender policies (Locher 2012). Over the past several decades, a particular understanding of equality between men and women has been incorporated into the identity of the EU and its institutions, entrenched in Treaties and primary legislation and repeatedly called upon by the European actors. The European Commission, in particular uses its track record as a supporter of gender policies as a tool to highlight the importance of supranational policy-making and gain support for its integration project (MacRae 2010). This gradual development of gender norms and values, support for the “European” ideal of gender equality is an excellent example of what Haas and his followers would describe as elite socialization. As the project progresses, the elites at national and European levels, begin to “speak the same language” and support similar norms and values.

Despite offering space for non-state actors, neo-functionalism does not “encourage” the incorporation of gender. It is possible to conduct a gender analysis in a manner which is largely consistent with the core beliefs of neo-functionalism. Hoskyns traces the debates and negotiations surrounding the eventual agreement of the equal pay directive. In her analysis, she considers the role of individual women in the trade unions, Commission and other bodies. She demonstrates how individual women, working at the national level were influential in shaping “feminist” positions on behalf of their governments (Hoskyns 1996, 87). These negotiations eventually led to the adoption of the 1974 equal pay directive and, gradually to a European wide understanding that equal pay was a right of men and women.

Haas’ transnationalism is similarly a useful, though problematic tool in understanding many of the dynamics of the European gender project. Neo-functionalism places a high analytic value on the supranational institutions. In this sense, it leaves space for example, to consider the role of the European Women’s Lobby (EWL) in shaping and transforming legislation at the European level. A transnational lobby organization comprising national women’s organizations from all member states, the EWL is uniquely placed to comment on pending legislation and lobby the European institutions for more gender aware policy. However, neo-functionalism makes no attempt to problematize the origins of these transnational bodies, nor their relationships to one
another and to the formal EU bodies or even the manner in which some groups can gain access while others do not. As Birgit Locher and Elisabeth Prügl (2009, 5) note, neo-functionalism, as well as supranationalism and multi-level approaches, generally fail “to account for the dominance of some groups over others [and] conceal… hierarchies among institutional levels and actors”. Applying a gendered lens to neo-functionalism would encourage the researcher to ask about the power dimensions inherent within these structures to consider how different preferences are reconciled within the institution and to what extent does this create or reinforce a hierarchy within and among the organizations?

In their 2001 analysis of the EWL and its role in the negotiation of the Amsterdam Treaty, Barbara Helfferich and Felix Kolb (2001) highlight these supranational organizations and their interactions. Although they do not claim to advance a neo-functionalist analysis, but rather one based in the literature of social movements, Helfferich and Kolb’s work is compatible with the neo-functionalist accounts and could help to demonstrate how a more nuanced and concentrated focus on the power structures within the organizations and across the boundaries of organizations could offer a more detailed understanding of the processes of integration.

From a feminist perspective, it is problematic that neo-functionalism is missing a theory of power. As Annica Kronsell asserts, “Viewed from a feminist position it is evident that the EU affirms, shapes but also challenges gender power relations in all areas of its activities” (Kronsell 2003: 1). Gender analyses are typically concerned with questions of power and power relations. They may additionally consider how power relations are constructed within and between groups of women. Through an analysis of multiple levels of discrimination gender approaches would encourage us to consider the hierarchies within hierarchies, to investigate their origins and question how these in turn are shaped and shape interactions. However neo-functionalism considers only that there are interactions, without questioning where these come from or how they are implicated in a broader set of institutional power structures.

Spillover is perhaps the most important part of the neo-functionalist approach. Viewed through a gender lens, it is a rather problematic concept. On the one hand, the conceptualization of integration as self-perpetuating and automatic can be a rather constraining theory. It may give the impression that the actors have little agency but are rather “victims” of the process. At the most, the neo-functionalist approach might ask which (elite, male) actors were involved in events which contributed to the perpetuation of the project, but neo-functionalism does not notice how
small actions beyond the realm of the economic and political elites can contribute to larger changes.

There are certainly numerous elements missing from the neo-functionalist analysis which, from a gender perspective, are instrumental to developing an accurate understanding of the process of integration. While the gender “additions” would not fundamentally contradict the neo-functionalist premises, gender scholars may find that they are more at home in the later incarnations of the theory. For example, Burli and Mattli’s (1993) law-based supranationalism suggests that national actors may use the supranational level to bypass the national courts and advance their own interests. Several feminist scholars have suggested that the evolution of gender policy in the early years was very much driven by the European Courts (Chicowski 2003; Mazey 1988).

In fact, if we consider the evolution of gender policy as a whole, it appears that there have been several occurrences that could be well explained by the logic of spillover, indicating that, on some level, neo-functionalism might be applied to the case of gender policy in order to accurately explain the evolution of the policy area and the integration process. In the early years of the European Union (then European Economic Community), there was not real attempt to integrate a gender perspective or to recognize the men and women may be differentially influenced by the process of integration. The only reference to gender equality comes in the form of then Article 119 EEC, requiring states to ensure that there are laws in place to ensure equal pay for work of equal value. A neo-functionalist analysis allows us to consider the ways in which the cooperation in one area has gradually spread into related areas. For example, during the very early stages of economic integration in Europe, the French government stressed the importance of a provision which would require states to enact legislation stipulating that men and women must be paid equally for work of equal value. Early trade liberalization involved opening markets for goods across the member stats. The French feared that a lower paid female workforce in one member state might make those goods less expensive than French-made goods, thus giving states with a lower paid female workforce an unfair competitive advantage over France. Thus, cooperation surrounding the liberalization of trade, required cooperation on wage equality. The subsequent progression of gender equality policy has largely come about as the spillover hypothesis would predict: free movement of labour has necessitated a harmonization of social benefits including maternity and parental leaves (see in detail Hoskyns 1996; MacRae 2006).
In presenting the central ideas of neo-functionalism and showing where it might be used in a gendered way, it is easiest to view gender as a variable. In other words, I have suggested ways in which one might use neo-functionalism to consider questions of gender and women’s policy. But, in fact, this is not the same as applying a gender perspective, or incorporating neo-functionalism into a gendered approach. Gender is not a variable; it is a viewpoint (Kronsell 2005). A gendered perspective does not ask simply ask where women are in policy and institutions (add women in approach). Rather, it seeks to look at the world through a particular lens. It necessitates asking questions about power and hierarchy and revealing underlying masculinities – well-hidden and blatant – by highlighting how standard practices can serve to reproduce existing hierarchies and gendered regimes. The nature of the questions which any theory poses helps to define the parameters of its research. Gender analyses typically ask questions about power relations and hierarchies. They may also take into consideration multiple forms of discrimination and ask whether different groups on women and different groups of individuals are differentially involved or influenced by a particular policy or process. Neo-functionalism has no real perspective on power and power relations – it simply accepts that there are interactions among actors without mentioning power at all. As a result, they seldom even raise the question of who is represented or whose interests are compromised. This is its biggest shortcoming from a gender perspective. While a gender perspective might be able to infuse neo-functionalism, it remains to be seen how useful neo-functionalism is for a robust feminist agenda.

We know from feminist accounts that the very structure upon which the EU is built is gendered (for example Abels and Mushaben 2012). The masculinities present in the processes of integration color future forms of integration. The attention given to economic and labor market integration is but one example of the inherent masculinities of the process. Again, neo-functionalism, like intergovernmentalism, takes these as givens. A gendered perspective would ask why social policy is less important than economic policy in integration; how economic integration and market liberalization which appears to benefit all may actually be detrimental to specific categories of women. These are important observations that are simply lost in the un-nuanced neo-functionalist approach.

5. Prospects for the Future
Rather than trying to infuse neo-functionalism with a gender perspective, it is perhaps instructive to think of how one might draw on some aspects of neo-functionalism in order to add new ideas and perspectives to gender theories. For example, aspects of neo-functionalism have arguably been incorporated into multi-level governance approaches and constructivist approaches. We could well imagine that the idea of spillover, if infused with notions of power and unequal access could highlight how and when women’s movements have accessed the system and propelled integration. But, we need to be cautious in selecting from the various theories, knowing that there are fundamental contradictions within and among these approaches. Need to ask new questions for a gendered approach and these questions are not necessarily compatible with the grand theory put forth in neo-functionalism.

Over the years, several variations of neo-functionalism have developed. For some of these, such as Schmitter’s (2004) neo-neo-functionalism and Burli and Mattli’s (1993) legal supranationalism, it is easy to recognize and trace its theoretical beginnings to neo-functionalism. Others however, have built on neo-functionalism in such a way as to take only very small parts of Haas’ original premises. For example, the intellectual roots of multi-level governance (MLG) are more closely linked with neo-functionalism than with intergovernmentalism. MLG uses neo-functionalism’s focus on the importance of non-state actors as a spring board from which to ask an entirely different set of questions surrounding the relationships of the various different actors and the structures of power between them. Similarly, some constructivist approaches (Risse 2005) share beliefs with neo-functionalism and yet these roots are barely recognizable in contemporary constructivist work on the European Union. Rather than posing questions about why integration takes place, constructivists have honed in on Haas’s hypothesis of elite socialization, and have been led to ask questions about the construction of a European identity among elites but also among the peoples of Europe.

In both of these cases, once neo-functionalism has been redesigned and refocused, new possibilities for a gendered analysis become more apparent. However, in my view, this is not longer a gender neo-functionalism perspective as both the focus, premises and questions have shifted away from those that were once considered to be central to the original theory.

For the most part, very few feminists have engaged with neo-functionalism either in defense of its merits or by offering a strong and comprehensive critique of the theory. Perhaps this is partly because neo-functionalism, a product of the late 1950s and early 1960s is not
expected to be gender-friendly or even gender-aware. There is no doubt that Haas, Lindberg and other early neo-functionalists had no inclination whatsoever to consider gender either as an issue or as a lens through which to view politics. And yet, there are some aspects of neo-functionalism which make it more amenable to a gender perspective than many other theories. In particular, its focus on non-state actors, the importance of supranational bodies and the concept of spillover each open some opportunity for a feminist or gender analysis. However, as the discussion above highlighted, this small opening is generally only sufficient for us to apply neo-functionalism to gender policies and actors. But this is not the same as considering integration through a lens informed both by neo-functionalism and a gender perspective.

Numerous feminist scholars remind us that “gender is not a variable that can be included or excluded at whim in theoretical constructs. Rather it is a viewpoint that can alter not just the scope of theory but the concepts upon which it is based” (Weber 2001: 89, quoted in Hoskyns 2004.: 217)”. In this case, it seems that feminism can add a great deal to neo-functionalism, but as a starting point, gender scholars are perhaps best served by drawing only indirectly on neo-functionalism, via later and intellectually more complex approaches which theorize power, ideas and various levels of actors.

Discussion questions
How relevant is neo-functionalism to our current understanding of European integration?
How does a gendered neo-functionalism offer a new perspective on integration?
In what ways are contemporary approaches such as multi-level governance, variations of neo-functionalism? Are they inherently more open to gender approaches?

Key References


Further sources


