Interpreting EU Studies
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Abstract
The study of the European Union is at present characterized by a significant number of theories and approaches. The current analytical ecumenism, however, has not been without its exclusions, namely interpretivism. Interpretivism is a distinct position in the philosophy of social science that asserts to understand and explain social life we must account for the beliefs and preferences of the people we study. The purpose of this article is to assess the contribution the interpretive approach could make to EU studies. To do so, it defines interpretivism, explains its philosophical groundings, evaluates the main currents of EU research from an interpretivist perspective, explains interpretivism’s explanatory concepts, illustrates how those concepts can be usefully applied to the study of the EU, defends interpretivism against some common criticisms and outlines the beginning of an interpretivist research agenda for EU studies.

Key words
European Union, EU studies, interpretivism, philosophy of social science, methodology

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Introduction

At the turn of the millennium, a number of influential scholars called for analytical ecumenism in the study of the European Union (Checkel and Moravcsik, 2001; Jupille et al., 2003; Moravcsik, 1999; Pollack, 2005). In the views of these authors, metatheoretical battles had been fought to a standstill and to allow philosophical unknowables to discipline actual research would, in their view, arbitrarily cut researchers off from making important empirical and theoretical insights. It was argued that EU scholars could attain maximum analytical leverage by comparing – perhaps even combining – various approaches in their research (e.g. Schimmelfennig, 2001).

EU studies is at present characterized by a large number of theories and approaches, including intergovernmentalism, constructivism, the new institutionalism, comparative politics, governance theory and Europeanization theory. The current analytical ecumenism, however, has not been without its exclusions, namely interpretivism.

Interpretivism is a distinct position in the philosophy of social science that asserts to understand and explain social life we must account for the beliefs and preferences of the people we study. Scholars have already established the fruitfulness of interpretivist theory in the study of domestic governance and policy (Bevir and Rhodes, 2004; Booth, 2010; Edwards, 2011; Wood et al., 2008; Yanow, 2007), British foreign policy (Bevir et al., 2013) as well as role theory in International Relations (Wehner and Thies 2014). Until recently, however, the interpretive approach has not had much impact on the study of the EU. That work which exists or is forthcoming has focused on particular issues like the legitimation of EU authority (McNamara, 2015), Britain’s European policy (Bevir et al., 2015) or the study of European governance [NB]. What has been missing to date is a general statement on the contribution that an interpretivist approach could make to the study of the EU. This article seeks to fill that gap.
Within the overarching purpose of specifying an ‘interpretivist EU studies,’ the article has five narrower aims. Section one defines interpretivism’s philosophical foundations. Section two outlines the fundamental differences between the interpretivist approach and major research traditions in EU studies. Section three details the analytical concepts that it uses in the study of politics. Section four illustrates the usefulness of interpretivism by drawing on my research on the EU and the constitutionalization of democracy. Section five responds to a number of common criticisms that have impeded the advancement of the interpretivist approach. The conclusion outlines the general pay-offs that adopting an interpretivist approach would have for EU studies.

In sum, the interpretivist approach has largely been neglected by EU studies. That neglect is partly due to a misunderstanding of what it is, the criticisms that it is susceptible to, and how it can be successfully employed. In addressing these issues, this article underscores the contribution an interpretivist research agenda could make to the study of the EU.

I. Philosophical grounds

In this section I define interpretivism and discuss its philosophical foundations. In completing this task, I hope to dispel a general fear that interpretivism is an exotic species of social inquiry that is difficult to understand or accept (NB).

Interpretivism is a tradition in the philosophy of social science associated with such figures as Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Hans Gadamer, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Max Weber and Charles Taylor. My own understanding draws heavily from the work of Mark Bevir and his collaborators (Bevir, 1999; Bevir, 2011; Bevir and Rhodes, 2004, pp. 17–44). Though sometimes understood as a method, interpretivism is best understood as a philosophical position about the form of understanding and explanation appropriate to the study of human activity. Thus although
interpretivists typically engage in qualitative empirical research, interpretivism is compatible with quantitative methods as well.

Interpretivism takes as the central objects of interest the beliefs and preferences of those it studies. Frequently this is described in shorthand as a focus on meaning (Yanow, 2007, p. 111). Interpretivists assert that people can only engage in an activity – whether that activity is the play Hamilton or democracy – if they hold certain beliefs. Thus, we ‘understand and explain practices and actions adequately only by reference to the beliefs and desires of the relevant actors’ (Bevir and Rhodes, 2004, p. 18). This imperative applies equally to understanding the performance of actors on a stage as it does to the study of political activity. To understand and explain political activity, one must provide an account of the relevant beliefs and preferences of the people studied.

Two premises justify an interpretive approach. The first premise is that humans act according to beliefs and preferences that are their own (Taylor, 1987, pp. 40–47; Blakely, 2013). For instance, in the 1990s democracy promotion moved up on the EU’s external agenda (Pridham, 2005). EU leaders might have decided to promote democracy in third-states because they believed it was a morally preferable system of government or a means of stabilizing conflict-prone societies or both. But whatever substance we give to our explanations of the EU’s democratic turn in the 1990s, we must do so by reference to the beliefs and preferences of relevant EU actors because humans are agents who act according to beliefs and preferences that are their own.

The second premise of an interpretive approach is that the beliefs and preferences of actors cannot be reduced to social facts (Quine, 1961). If they could be, then we would be justified in treating beliefs and preferences as mere intervening variables whose final cause lay elsewhere. However, the impossibility of pure experience – the idea that beliefs and preferences are determined by mere facts of existence – means that the beliefs and preferences of actors cannot be, for instance, determined by their social position or membership in a particular group. Knowledge of the world
and desires are always mediated by language and ideas (Bevir et al., 2013, p. 166). An official’s institutional position or citizen’s party membership do not in themselves explain their beliefs and actions. Rather, we must grasp the beliefs and desires that they hold in order to adequately understand and explain the actions those beliefs bear upon.

In sum, the fact that humans act according to beliefs and preferences that are their own and because their ideas are not reducible to their social position or other objective characteristics means that social inquiry should be principally concerned with interpreting the actions of others. To interpret well is to grasp the relevant beliefs and preferences that are the basis for why others act as they do.

Many researchers of the EU would accept that human action is explained by reference to beliefs and preferences, but nonetheless insist that their theories can be modeled on the natural sciences (Davison, 1998, pp. 53–54, 57). They might claim, for instance, that the delegation of sovereignty to the EU caused member state leaders to propose changes to enhance the organization’s democratic character (Rittberger, 2003; 2005). The fact that political authority was reorganized at the level of the EU, so the theory goes, forced leaders to propose new democratic reforms. We can classify these types of explanations as ‘naturalistic’ because like theories of the natural world that ascribe cause and effect to natural facts such theories argue that EU democracy was the result of certain social facts, like the location of political authority.

Given what has already been said about interpretivism and what it entails for the study of human action, it should be clear why naturalistic explanations cannot be accepted. Explanations based on non-ideational factors like the allocation of decision-making authority attempt to bypass the beliefs and preferences of relevant of actors. After all, the statement that the delegation or pooling of sovereignty caused leaders to improve the EU’s democratic credentials makes no reference to the ideas that EU actors actually held. If the ideas of actors enter they story, they are
epiphenomenal of some deeper social reality. It is alleged that they were in some sense forced to act due to structures that were beyond them. The empirical inadequacy of these explanations follows from their philosophical inadequacy. More generally, ‘when we try to explain the link between preferences, beliefs and actions, there is no causal necessity equivalent to that characteristic of explanations in the natural sciences’ (Bevir and Rhodes, 2004, p. 20). Explanations that posit a causal necessity violate our understanding of humans as agents who act according to beliefs and preferences that are their own. This idea of causality borrowed from the natural sciences is thus inappropriate for the human sciences.

However, because we cannot adopt a naturalistic model of explanation that refers to social facts to explain human action – like the structure of authority – it does not mean we cannot explain. The rejection of naturalism is not the rejection of explanation. Rather we should adopt a form of explanation that is appropriate for the study of human actions, practices and institutions. That form of explanation is humanistic. We account for human artifacts by ‘pointing to the conditional and volitional links between the relevant beliefs, preferences, intentions and actions’ (Bevir and Rhodes, 2004, p. 20). Explanation of social phenomena should be humanistic in the sense that it acknowledges and draws upon our understanding of humans as agents. Therefore, explanations potentially worthy of our acceptance must substantively point to the beliefs and preferences of actors, rather than social facts. Before I delineate the concepts that can be used in interpretivist explanations of EU politics and policy-making, let me relate what has been stated so far about interpretivism’s philosophical grounds to prominent strands of research in EU studies.

II. The interpretivist critique of EU studies

‘No science can be more secure than the unconscious metaphysics which it tacitly presupposes.’

Alfred North Whitehead (quoted in Wendt 1999)
EU studies has not been unconscious about its metaphysics. That said, it has not been very interpretivist. In fact, major schools of research are committed to developing theoretical models of EU integration or policymaking based on the existence of certain social conditions, structures or actor rationalities. In doing so, they adopt a naturalistic form of explanation, positing the existence of certain social facts to explain an observed outcome.

For some researchers, the aspiration to develop theoretical models based on the existence of certain social facts is a welcome finding, indicating that the field is becoming a progressive, normal science (Pollack, 2005, pp. 366–368, 390–391). Indeed, Andrew Moravcsik (1999, pp. 670–671) has argued that for EU studies to be a progressive science, scholars should develop mid-range theories and state ‘distinctive testable hypotheses’ which ‘specify concrete causal mechanisms’ understood in terms of the process and conditions under which certain behaviors are expected.

In this section, I argue that the aims and typical characteristics of these mid-range theories are incompatible with our understanding of humans as agents who act according to beliefs and preferences that are their own. Because they are incompatible we have two options. We can either modify our understanding of humans. To do so, we would need to state why the interpretivist view presented above is invalid and why the proposed alternative is justified. The other option – the one advocated for here – is to replace naturalist theories of the EU with an interpretivist approach. Key components of such an approach are outlined in the subsequent section.

I focus my attention here on research produced by IR scholars, comparativists and governance researchers. This focus is not without its omissions. However, these strands of research are frequently cited as defining the field of EU studies (Cini, 2006; Jørgensen et al., 2006; Pollack, 2005; Wiener and Diez, 2004).
International Relations

International Relations scholars typically focus on the causes and direction of the process of European integration (Pollack, 2005, p. 359). Since the 1990s, various types of rationalism and constructivism have become dominate, reflecting a wider trend in International Relations. Despite significant differences each approach posits the existence of certain rationalities and social structures that determine actors’ behavior.

Rationalist theories of European integration can be divided into two main types: liberal intergovernmentalism and rationalist institutionalism. Andrew Moravcsik has been the primary champion of liberal intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik, 1997; Moravcsik, 1998). Moravcsik argues that European integration is best explained according to a model that emphasizes EU member state preferences, relative bargaining power and credible commitments. Moravcsik’s theoretical model is ‘rationalist’ in the sense that state leaders act according to a ‘logic of consequences,’ attempting to reach agreements that minimize the costs and maximize the benefits for themselves and the national populations that they represent.

Whereas liberal intergovernmentalism focuses on the preferences of member state, bargaining power and the expected effects of different institutional designs for establishing credible commitments amongst states, rationalist institutionalists have directed their attention to the constraining and enabling effects of formal institutional rules (Garrett and Tsebelis, 1996; Pierson, 1996; Scharpf, 1988; Scharpf, 2002; Schimmelfennig, 2015). Liberal intergovernmentalists and rational institutionalists differ in whether they treat EU institutions as dependent or independent variables in their explanations. Rational institutionalists argue that formal rules influence or constrain the behavior of actors by increasing or lowering the costs and benefits of certain courses of action.

In sum, rationalist research on the EU conceives of EU actors as behaving according to a logic of consequences constrained by an outside environment that imposes costs and benefits to
different pathways of actions. This strand of research is naturalist in that it poses certain psychological (utility maximization) and social structures (formal institutional rules) as deterministic of actors’ behavior.

Whereas rational choice institutionalism explains the establishment and effects of the European Union in terms of the preference optimizing behavior of state leaders and the constituencies they represent, modernist constructivists (Smith, 1999) and sociological institutionalists emphasize the way formal rules and informal norms on the one hand and actors’ identities and preferences on the other are mutually constitutive.

Constructivists who address the construction of the EU study the communicative and discursive practices of EU actors. They do so because they believe that in order to understand and explain the behavior of actors, we must understand how they make sense of the world and the meanings they attach to their activities (Risse, 2004, p. 164). Studying what actors say or what is written provides observers access to the meanings that explain why EU actors have created the EU that they have. Thus constructivist research overlaps with interpretivist premises about the need to account for the beliefs and preferences of actors. However, constructivists tend to overlay this claim with explanations that rely upon the existence of quasi-structures (Banchoff, 1999; Joerges and Neyer, 1997; Schmidt, 2007; Risse-Kappen, 1996, pp. 68–72). For instance, researchers who study discourses frequently claim that ideas can take on a life of their own, driving state behavior (Banchoff, 1999) or trapping officials into policy positions that they disagree with (Schmidt, 2007).

A second focus of constructivist research is how the EU contributes to identity formation amongst EU actors, influencing their preferences and actions (Checkel, 2005; Christiansen et al., 1999, p. 529). By constructing actors’ identities and preferences, EU institutions are said to contribute to a ‘logic of appropriateness,’ where policy makers judge the right course of action according to its fit with the relevant institutional setting. Liesbet Hooghe (2005), Jeffrey Lewis
(2003) and others (Checkel, 2005, p. 811) have attempted to specify the scope conditions and mechanisms through which such socialization should be expected to be more or less successful. The discussion of the ‘constitutive effects of norms’ (Risse, 2004, pp. 162–164) or ‘causal effects’ of ‘institutional and normative environments’ (Lewis, 2003, pp. 99, 106) are indicative of a persistent naturalism.

Comparativist research

Beginning in the mid-1990s an increasing number of comparativists returned to the study of the EU due to its allegedly increasing similarity with national polities (Hix, 1994; Hix, 2006; Hooghe and Marks, 2008; Kreppel, 2012). For these researchers theoretical models and analytical tools developed for the study of politics within states became a promising option for the study of the politics within the EU. Comparative analyses have been applied to the study of such topics as the organization and functioning of the European Parliament (Hix et al., 2007), the completion of the internal market (Garrett and Tsebelis, 1996; Sandholtz and Zysman, 1989), the influence of different actors in the legislative process (McElroy, 2006; Moser, 1996; Tsebelis, 1994), the independence and influence of the European Court of Justice (Conant, 2006), identity and public opinion (Marcussen et al., 1999; Sides and Citrin, 2007; Vries and Edwards, 2009), and interest organization and representation (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). As Mark Pollack notes, given the subdisciplinary roots of comparativist research on the EU (American and comparative politics), it tends to be rationalist and positivist in nature, employing the language and models of rational choice theory while aiming to systematically test theory-drive explanations of EU policymaking.

The governance school
The governance school forms a third major approach to the study of the EU (NB; Eising and Kohler-Koch, 1999; Kohler-Koch and Rittberger, 2006; Kohler-Koch and Rittberger, 2009; Pollack, 2005, pp. 379–390). For these researchers, the idea of governance signals the arrival of a new type of political system in Europe, one that is distinct from conceptualizing the EU as either an international organization (the International Relation’s view) or a domestic political system (the comparativist view).

While scholars of EU governance find common agreement about what the EU is not, like the use of the term ‘governance’ in other areas of study, ‘EU governance’ or more commonly ‘European governance’ is an ‘umbrella concept’ (Rhodes, 1996) covering a number of distinct positions (NB). Four different varieties of governance research stand out: multi-level governance (Marks et al., 1996; Hooghe and Marks, 2008; Kohler-Koch and Rittberger, 2009, pp. 7–8; Bolleyer et al., 2014), network governance (Börzel, 1998; Braun, 2009; Dür, 2008; Eising and Kohler-Koch, 1999; Jordan and Schout, 2006; Peterson, 2004), regulatory governance (Majone, 1994; 1996; 1999) and experimentalist governance (Marks et al., 1996; Hooghe and Marks, 2008; Kohler-Koch and Rittberger, 2009, pp. 7–8; Bolleyer et al., 2014). Despite significant differences, these theories explain the rise of European governance as the outcome of certain conditions or structures and assert that the essential properties of European governance explain a novel pattern of rule or state formation.

For instance, in their early work on multi-level governance Marks, Hooghe and Blank (1996) claimed that growing interdependence amongst public actors at different territorial levels had led to a decline in the autonomy of national governments over policy-making. More recently, researchers have argued that the EU has been transformed into a system of experimentalist governance due to two scope conditions: strategic uncertainty and a polyarchic distribution of power in the EU (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2007, pp. 13–14; Zeitlin, 2011, pp. 5–10). Whether citing interdependence, as theorists of multi-level governance do, or strategic uncertainty and the polyarchic distribution of
power, as theorists of experimentalism do, research on European governance typically claims that some observed pattern of outcomes can be reduced to the existence of certain social facts.

Many theories, one metatheory

In a certain respect, contemporary EU studies exhibits significant variation. In terms of explanatory models, methodological choices, substantive focus and empirical findings, EU studies is as varied as ever. Nonetheless, EU studies continues to reflect the dominance of naturalism as a form of explanation. While making references to beliefs, these approaches take as their central object of study economic interdependence, the international distribution of power, societal interests and bargaining power, past institutional decisions, social identities, social discourses, the organization of policy networks, and actor rationalities. From the perspective of interpretivism, however, the reification of actor agency and social structures leads EU scholars to no longer be engaged in what could properly be understood as social explanation. Given our understanding of humans as agents, scholars should turn to understanding and explaining the actual beliefs and preference of EU actors and not reified social structures or rationalities.

III. Interpretivism’s explanatory concepts

The previous section demonstrated that the study of the EU remains wedded to a loose positivism rooted in a naturalist mode of explanation. As previously mentioned, the rejection of naturalism does not entail the rejection of explanation. What remains to be detailed are interpretivism’s explanatory concepts and how they differ from their positivist counterparts. In this section, therefore, I explain the two key explanatory concepts central to an interpretivist approach: traditions and dilemmas (Bevir et al., 2013, pp. 166–167; Bevir and Rhodes, 2004, pp. 31–36).
**On traditions**

Different forms of social explanation revolve around two ideas: social context and agency (Bevir and Rhodes, 2004, pp. 32–35). Those that invoke social context in their explanations frequently do so to show how structures, discourses or paradigms determined the behavior of social actors. Those that invoke agency often do so to demonstrate how the actions of individuals brought about social change. However, given interpretivism’s understanding of agency, social contexts cannot determine or strictly speaking limit the actions of individuals. Because individuals inhabiting the same social contexts can hold different empirical and normative theories about the world and act according to reasons that make sense to them, contexts cannot have the determinative or limiting role they are often given. How should we then account for the importance of social context in such a way so as not to violate our understanding of human agency?

The claim that individuals possess agency does not mean their agency is not marked by certain social influences. But rather than think of social influence in terms of determinative structures, discourses or paradigms, social context is better conceptualized as a tradition, understood as the beliefs and practices actors are socialized into and the background against which they reason and act. Traditions are initial influences on people that shape their behavior if they do not modify their beliefs. We identify a relevant tradition as the background to the beliefs and action we wish to explain by establishing its coherence and tracing the relevant historical connections. ‘The explanatory value of traditions lies in the way in which they show how individuals inherited beliefs and practices from their communities’ (Bevir and Rhodes, 2004, p. 34). Whether the traditions we invoke in our explanations are judged to be objective will depend on the coherence they have with the object of inquiry and the demonstrated historical connections to the belief or practice under investigation.
On dilemmas

Locating human artifacts in their relevant traditions is one aspect of an interpretivist explanation. The analysis of traditions demonstrates the historical influences on present beliefs and practices. But given our understanding of human agency, social inheritances cannot determine or limit future beliefs or actions. Because people are endowed with a capacity for creativity they can change their beliefs and thus also their actions. EU scholars can use the concept of dilemma to explain such change. A dilemma is a new belief that calls into question an individual’s existing beliefs and traditions and the practices that they inform. Suppose for instance that an actor holds an empirical theory of democracy that stresses its social prerequisites. She might view democratization as the result of a society achieving a certain level of socioeconomic development. That actor may subsequently notice that a number of states have begun democratic transitions that did not appear to manifest the expected level of development. As a result, the actor may then alter her theory of democratization in more or less significant ways to establish a new coherence for her beliefs. Change occurs when an individual modifies her existing beliefs and practices in order to accommodate the new belief. For the interpretivist, therefore, identification of dilemmas is a central element in explaining change.

A dilemma can be moral, empirical or theoretical in nature. Dilemmas, however, should not be equated with ‘objective pressures in the world’ (Bevir and Rhodes, 2004, p. 36). They can rise from new experiences or theoretical or moral reflection. Individuals modify their beliefs and actions in response to ideas they think are true. We explain changes in individual and collective beliefs and actions by reference to ideas they actually hold irrespective of the apparent truth-value. We can understand people’s solutions to dilemmas by reference to the character of the dilemma – factual, theoretical, moral – and their existing beliefs. Although there is no singular or correct response to a dilemma and individuals may accommodate new beliefs within their existing beliefs in a number of
ways, they will have to modify their existing beliefs to maintain a relative coherence between the beliefs that they hold. A focus on dilemmas and knowledge of actors' existing beliefs allows us to account for why they modify their beliefs and actions in the way that they do. By knowing an actor’s existing beliefs we can understand what problem a dilemma posed for her and the relevant actions she engaged in. By understanding the character of the dilemma we can explain why the actor responded as she did.

The concepts of tradition and dilemma are the analytical lenses an interpretivist can deploy to explain peoples’ beliefs and actions. Tradition draws attention to the historical inheritance that affects current beliefs. Dilemma draws attention to how actors change their webs of belief and thus their actions in response to the introduction of a new belief that is incongruent with their previous beliefs.

IV. Applying interpretive concepts to the study of the EU

While interpretivist analyses have been marginal to the study of the EU, they have not been entirely absent (Burgess, 2000; Featherstone, 1994; McNamara, 2015; Schrag Sternberg, 2013). And one can find interpretivist elements in otherwise anti-interpretivist research (Majone, 1996). Research that has not been self-consciously interpretivist, often mixes interpretivist and positivist forms of explanation (Parsons, 2003). In this section I illustrate how the concepts of tradition and dilemma can be used to study the EU by drawing on my research on the constitutionalization of democracy in the EU (NB).

From the Treaty on European Union (1992) to the Treaty of Lisbon (2007), democracy became a central element in the constitutionalization of the EU. This occurred in two primary respects. First, the controversy over the ratification of the TEU, or Maastricht Treaty, led to a series of treaty reforms to address the EU’s ‘democratic deficit.’ These reforms culminated in the Lisbon
Treaty (LT). Second, in anticipation of the eastward enlargement at the end of the Cold War, the EU made the transfer of democratic forms of rule to non-member states a key component of its membership policy. It is now the case that only democratic countries can be members in the democratic Union. How can we explain these developments from an interpretivist perspective?

Democracy and the Lisbon Treaty

In the wake of the controversial ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, the European Council, European Parliament (EP) and the European Commission (Commission) became preoccupied with the problem of how to stem the apparent rising tide of public skepticism toward the EU. They feared that if something was not done to placate public opinion, the historical achievements of the Union would be threatened and future plans blocked. The institutions concluded that a central cause of the decline in public support for the EU was the organization’s inadequate democratic character. The EU’s faulty democratic legitimacy, in their view, was a primary cause of its social illegitimacy. In this context, the institutions viewed deepening democracy as a means to address the dilemma of public opinion and ultimately to shore up the European project.

The institutions, however, did not agree on what changes would improve the democratic character of the Union. Each institution proposed changes according to a different model of EU democracy. How should we account for these differences? Research on the views of the institutions demonstrates that disagreements over how to make the EU more democratic arose in part because the European Council, the Parliament and the Commission drew on different ‘governance traditions’ or notions about how the EU could be governed legitimately. Respectively, these traditions were nationalism, federalism and technocracy. The democratic reforms they proposed reflected the influence of these conflicting traditions and the final text of the Lisbon Treaty included proposals and combinations of proposals put forward by each of the institutions. Thus, for instance,
changes in the European Council’s procedures and working methods to ensure effective leadership by member states reflected the European Council’s view that the EU should be a democratic union of states. The extension of the Community method of decision-making to new areas and concomitant decline in intergovernmental decisionmaking, reflected the Commission’s view that the EU should be a system of representative governance. And the elimination of the distinction compulsory and non-compulsory spending and the extensions of its control over the budget reflected the Parliament’s view that the EU should be a system of federal parliamentary government. Because the Lisbon Treaty incorporated democratic reforms proposed by the European Council, the Commission and the Parliament, EU democracy under the Lisbon Treaty is a composite of concepts, combining nationalist, federalist and technocratic interpretations of democracy.

In sum, my research on the democratic reform of the EU points to the dilemma of public opinion and the traditions of nationalism, federalism and technocracy to explain the variable character of democracy under the Treaty of Lisbon.

Membership conditionality

In 1993 at the Copenhagen Summit of the European Council, member state leaders formally declared that EU membership was henceforth only open to countries judged to be sufficiently democratic. It was thought at the time that by explicitly linking membership and its attendant benefits to domestic political reforms, the EU would be able to promote democracy in applicant states. The promise of membership would serve as a powerful incentive for leaders to implement domestic democratic reforms.

While such a policy may seem obvious, even natural for an organization that is entirely composed of democratic states, I demonstrate that between the early 1960s – when the issue of democracy and membership was first raised – and 1993 when the Copenhagen Criteria were
announced, the ideas that Community actors held about national democracy underwent important changes. One important change was the value attached to democracy. Whereas in the earlier period actors stressed its contribution to political legitimacy, in the latter period actors focused on the contribution democracy could make to regional security and welfare.

I explain the shift in the values attached to democracy by demonstrating the influence of ideas developed by the Copenhagen School of International Relations. Beginning in the mid-1980s this collection of scholars advanced the thesis that the spread of democracy would decrease the likelihood of renewed ideological conflict and ease ethnonationalist tensions in central and eastern Europe, thereby protecting western Europe from potential spillover effects. Democracy would also serve as a building block for robust regional cooperation. More generally, spreading democracy to authoritarian or post-authoritarian states was viewed as a means to ensure regional security and economic well-being.

In sum, this research on EU membership and democracy reveals that member states responded to the economic and security dilemmas posed by central and eastern European states by drawing on a new tradition in IR theory that portrayed democracy as an antidote to the threats western Europe faced. The EU’s policy of membership conditionality can be explained on the basis of these security dilemmas and traditions.

V. Responding to criticisms

The previous section illustrated how interpretivism’s concepts of tradition and dilemma can be used in the study of the EU. In this section I address four criticisms that might lead a skeptical reader to doubt the usefulness of the interpretive approach advocated for here. These four criticisms are (1) interpretivism is a species of postmodernism, (2) interpretivism leads to naïve voluntarism, (3) it posits unobservable facts and thus its theories are either undesirable, unfalsifiable or both, (4) it
rejects the possibility of generalization, and (5) embracing interpretivism means rejecting non-interpretivist research. Interpretivism has the resources to counter each of these criticisms.

One criticism might be that interpretivism is a species of postmodernism, rejecting the possibility of testing its explanations against other theories or any objective standards for evaluating their claims (Moravcsik, 1999, p. 679). The description of interpretivism given above and the illustrations provided should put to rest this worry. The interpretivist claim that we should explain political action through reconstructing actors’ beliefs and preferences assumes that any particular reconstruction could be wrong. My explanation of the EU’s policy on membership and democracy is susceptible to various sorts of counter-evidence. While I cannot develop the point at any great length here, I should state that interpretivism does entail the more modest position that theories are not susceptible either to a logic of discovery or logic of vindication. In this sense, interpretivists are anti-foundationalists about knowledge claims, not anti-rationalists who eschew standards of empirical evidence or comparison.

The criticism of voluntarism arises in response to the interpretivist rejection of social structures as an element of social explanation. This criticism can be advanced in the following way. Conventionally, social life is understood as determined by two factors: agency and social structure (e.g., Bulmer and Joseph, 2015). Interpretivism claims it can explain political life solely by reference to the beliefs and preferences of actors – i.e., agency. How then can it explain the fact that agents frequently cannot accomplish the ends that they set out to achieve? If one does not believe in social structures, then one must accept a voluntaristic view of political life. But such a view is obviously mistaken. Therefore, social structures like institutions, networks, the distribution of power or interdependence must exist and must be elements of any plausible political explanation.

Interpretivism can account for the influence of these ‘social structures’ by reference to the beliefs and preferences of people. As a result, interpretivism does not imply a voluntarist view of
social life. Take for instance the study of norms. Norms are thought to constrain actors’ behavior by establishing a standard of propriety. But norms themselves are simply beliefs about how one ought to behave in a particular circumstance. If norms constrain behavior, then it is because relevant actors hold such beliefs and are willing to discipline those who fail to comply. If one actor fails to achieve his or her ends by not abiding by the norm – say of reciprocity – then it is because other actors hold such a belief and act in ways that counter the actions of those who do not. ‘Social structures’ can and should be unpacked in terms of the beliefs, preferences and related actions of relevant actors. The rejection of structures as an element of explanation does not imply a voluntarist conception of social life because we can frequently expect actors to hold different beliefs and preferences to act in ways that disrupt the plans of others.

A third criticism addresses the unobservability of beliefs and preferences. The basic thrust of this criticism is that we cannot observe people’s beliefs and preferences only their actions and individual or social characteristics. As a result explanations should reference these objective observable features. This criticism and recommendation can be understood in two important ways. The first is that it is a lament about the level of certainty we can obtain about ideas of others and perhaps also a worry regarding the difficulty of accumulating the right sorts or amount of relevant data. To the extent that this is the worry, it is not an objection to interpretivism’s basic claim that we should account for the political lives of others by reference to their beliefs and preferences, but an acknowledgment of the challenges and inherent limits of inquiry.

There is a second way of passing this criticism. If actions and characteristics express beliefs and preferences, then we can infer the beliefs and preferences of others by observing their actions and characteristics. We can know the subjective features of those we study by closer observation of their objective features. While not denying the importance of beliefs, what is gained, it might be argued, is theoretical parsimony. The problem of this criticism has been addressed previously in
section two: beliefs and preferences cannot be read off of actions or actor characteristics. There are innumerable reasons why someone might engage in a practice. We cannot adequately understand or explain the political lives of others without accounting for the actual beliefs and preferences that constitute the practices and actions they engage in.

A fourth criticism addresses the possibility of generalization. Commenting on the debate over whether the EU forms an ‘N of 1,’ Marcus Jachtenfuchs writes, ‘[T]he real debate is not about whether the EU is unique and needs a special theory in order to explain it or whether important aspects of the EU can be explained by general theories. Instead, the debate is about which general theories are more powerful for explaining the most relevant aspects the European Union’ (2006, p. 159). As the above review demonstrated, many EU scholars attempt to relate their explanations to more general theories. In fact, Jachtenfuchs suggests that generalization itself relies upon a belief in general laws. Given interpretivism’s rejection of the idea of general laws of politics based in social or psychological structures, does this mean that interpretivism rejects generalization? Must all studies be idiosyncratic in their explanations? Is every study an ‘N of 1’?

We can respond to this worry in the same way we did to the positivist claim that social explanation should conform to the same criteria as explanations in the natural sciences: the rejection of searching for general laws is not the rejection of the possibility of generalization. Rather what we must do is adopt an understanding of generalization that is consistent with our understanding of humans as agents. We must adopt a humanist account of generalization. If humans act according to beliefs that are their own, and humans are capable of creativity and thus the creation of new ideas, their actions may be idiosyncratic. However, it’s obvious that perhaps more frequently beliefs and preferences are shared across individuals. As a result, an interpretivist political science can generalize by identifying beliefs that are shared. We can distinguish this view of generalization from the positivist view by acknowledging that it is grounded in a claim about contingent empirical facts – the
existence of shared beliefs – rather than the existence of an underlying social logic inhering in social facts.

A final worry might be that to accept interpretivism requires rejecting non-interpretivist research. This is not necessarily the case. First, interpretivists can accept much of the empirical evidence generated by non-interpretivist research as evidence of various beliefs. Second, while interpretivism rejects the attempt to construct theories of the EU on the basis of the existence of social facts, it does not deny that politics and policymaking often form into discernible patterns. The theories contained in non-interpretivists research can therefore be understood as descriptions of those patterns (NB). What an interpretivist approach has the ability to add are explanations of how those patterns arose.

VI. Conclusion – An interpretivist research agenda for the EU

In their review of rationalist and constructivist research on the EU, Joseph Jupille, James Caporaso and Jeffrey Checkel suggest, ‘metatheoretical debate about institutions has run its course and must now give way to theoretical, methodological, and carefully structured empirical dialogue’ (2003, p. 8). In their view, moderates who are committed to an ‘ambitious agenda’ of midrange theory construction, careful research design, theoretical dialogue and empirical testing should seize the study of the EU. Best to remain philosophically agnostic and simply ‘get on with it.’

In the perspective argued for here, the problem with this advice is two-fold. First, philosophical commitments have implications for substantive research. We should demand intellectual coherence between our metatheory and theory. That is, our beliefs about the proper form of political understanding and explanation should not clash with the substantive understandings and explanations that we proffer. Relatedly, theoretical explanations grounded in different philosophical foundations frequently cannot be compared. The relative validity of different
explanations cannot be directly assessed if they derive from distinct normative accounts of what form explanations should take. This level of analytical ecumenism is unattainable. Second, the rationalist/constructivist research agenda they advocate leaves little room for interpretivism. But properly understood political inquiry requires accounting for the beliefs of others. Interpretivism is indispensable.

Naturally, then, one might wonder what sort of research agenda interpretivism endorses. In section three, I criticized major strands of EU research for taking as their objects of study social and psychological structures. The questions they typically ask are what are the causal factors that contribute to some observable outcome? Or, what are the conditions and mechanisms that generated some outcome? The interpretivist criticism of these approaches is that by focusing on structures or quasi-structures, scholars attempt to explain the actions of agents while bypassing their actual beliefs and preferences. By contrast, an interpretivist EU studies would re-center agency and the beliefs and preferences that shape action. This re-centering would involve producing narratives of the beliefs and desires of the actors who are the focus of research. Thus where intergovernmentalists cite state interests, the distribution of power and the expected effects of institutional choice (Moravcsik, 1998; Hyde-Price, 2006), interpretivist analyses will trace the origins of various beliefs as they bear on the actions of states and other actors (e.g., Burgess, 2000; Parsons, 2003; Jabko, 2006). Rather than debate whether economic interests or identity determine citizen attitudes toward the EU, scholars might produce localized studies of EU practices of labeling, mapping and narrating that contribute to its effective authority (e.g., McNamara, 2015). And instead of trying to explain new patterns of European governance on the basis of certain social facts, researchers might turn to tracing the emergence of social science theories, elite narratives and local traditions that are used to govern Europe (e.g., NB; Thomas, 2016).
The primary difference an interpretivist agenda would make to EU studies is not what it would study. The topics or issues largely would be the same. Like other EU scholars, interpretivists should be interested in both the ‘big bang’ events of European politics and day-to-day policymaking and its effects. The difference and interpretive approach would make to EU studies is in the questions it would raise about these topics and the explanations it would produce.
References


