Should (American) Institutionalists Read (French) Sociologists? The Example of EU Studies

Frédéric Mérand, Department of Political Science, Université de Montréal
frederic.merand@umontreal.ca

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Abstract: Focusing on European Union studies, this article deals with agreements and disagreements between the new institutionalism and Bourdieu-inspired political sociology. My objective is to suggest concrete ways to integrate the sociological *acquis* into the neo-institutionalist literature. To do so I first show how the importance given by new institutionalists to rules and norms gives way to a broader theory of fields in French sociology. I then propose to add conflict and domination (dominant in political sociology) to the institutionalist toolbox of mechanisms of institutional change, such as unanticipated consequences, entrepreneurship, social innovation, and isomorphism. Finally I argue that it would be sound for neo-institutionalists to go beyond the abstract dichotomy between the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness by adopting a more generic conception of practice, tested by fieldwork.
This paper discusses two important theoretical approaches that have flourished in EU studies since the 1990s. In France and in some other European countries, a new generation of political sociologists inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu has tried, bottom-up style, to go beyond intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism by focusing on the actors of European integration, their practices, strategies, and social representations (Lequesne and Smith 1997, Guiraudon 2007, Georgakakis 2002, Deloye 2006). In the United States and the English-speaking academic community more generally, institutionalism has made a comeback in EU studies. Focusing on the rules and norms that shape European integration, this “new” institutionalism also purports to go beyond classical *sui generis* theories (Pierson 1996, Bulmer 1998, Jupille and Caporaso 1999, Sandholtz and Stone Sweet 1998, Pollack 2004).

In discussing these two approaches, my aim is to evaluate whether, to what extent, and more importantly how a Bourdieu-inspired political sociological perspective can be fruitfully integrated into institutional analysis. Political sociology and the new institutionalism share a set of ontological and epistemological postures based on a critique of statocentricism and functionalist logics. Both approaches borrow freely from the classical sociology of Durkheim and Weber to show the importance of norms and rules in explaining social behavior. They have also developed converging research programs, for example on the functioning of the Council of Ministers or the role of transnational firms. And yet there is little dialogue between the two. Institutionalists rarely quote living political sociologists, while sociologists have a tendency to distinguish themselves from what they see as an overly positivist stance in institutional theory.

Should we translate French sociologists for the benefit of American institutionalists? That is the somewhat mischievous question asked in this paper. I put forward a positive answer, but with certain caveats. These caveats are: a tendency on the part of political sociologists to overestimate the originality of their approach vis-à-vis institutionalism; a conceptual language inspired from Bourdieu that is not always as clear as it could be; and an unwarranted focus on case studies at the expense of comparison and generalization. That said, the lexicon of French political sociology could prove particularly useful to institutional theory because, while paying attention to constitutive processes, rules and norms, it also emphasizes actors and power structures, two factors that are unduly neglected by institutionalists. Political sociology also proposes a methodology, based on the study of practice, that in my view should be given greater importance in institutional theory.

Before I move on, a few words of caution are in order. “Institutionalism” and “political sociology” are broad categories. In this paper, I use “institutionalism” and “new institutionalism” interchangeably. The new institutionalism refers to a patchwork of theoretical traditions that share an emphasis on social rules and norms. In EU studies, my definition of institutionalism would include the work of rational-choice institutionalists, historical institutionalists, and most constructivists who draw from
sociological institutionalism. With regards to political sociology, I refer to a fairly coherent body of literature that mostly draws on Bourdieu’s sociology. I am conscious of the fact that there are many political sociologists outside France who have read Bourdieu, and that many French academics do not recognize themselves in Bourdieu’s work. But I will the term “French” for short, and also to distinguish this particular kind of political sociology from British or German social theory.

This being clarified, I will proceed as follows. First I will show that the importance that institutionalists give to rules and norms is subsumed in political sociology by a broader theory of fields. Then I will address the issue of social change. While institutionalists and political sociologists agree that institutions tend to reproduce themselves, the role of preferences, identities and conflict in this process remains a bone of contention. Third I will argue that institutionalists would benefit from replacing their abstract dichotomy between the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness by a generic conception of practices, tested by fieldwork. I will conclude by proposing a number of concrete ways to integrate the sociological acquis into mainstream institutionalism.

From institutional rules to field theory

In this first section I describe how institutionalists and political sociologists position themselves vis-à-vis their unit of analysis. In both approaches, formal and informal rules are a key, meso-level concept to understand every sphere of human activity, be it the art world, education, or environmental governance. Institutionalists, however, prefer to study these rules in terms of social institutions (marriage, the market, the judicial system, lobbying) while for political sociologists, these rules must be situated in a field of social interaction with its own social representations, power structures, and actors.

Before going any further, it is useful to explain briefly the roots of American institutionalism. There are two “old” institutionalisms. The first institutionalism was a subfield of public law concerned with the comparative study of political institutions. The second, more social-scientific, emerged in the 1950s, notably with Philip Selznick who, in TVA and the Grassroots, showed that the strategic use of an organization by key actors and the presence of various, competing institutional interests could lead to a subversion of the goals of the organization. These two old institutionalisms were marginalized in the 1960s and 1970s, when the focus of political science shifted to social structures and the issue of power. After a few years of behaviorist and Marxist hegemony, institutionalism resurfaced in the 1980s when social scientists rediscovered the autonomous role of institutions. By and large, however, political scientists (Evans, Skocpol, Rueschemeyer 1985, Steinmo, Thelen, Longstreth 1992), economists (North 1990) and sociologists (Meyer and Rowan 1977, DiMaggio and Powell 1991) adopted different ontological positions, theoretical propositions, and concepts.

The compartmentalization of institutional theory is systematized by Peter Hall and Rosemary Taylor (1996), who propose a typology that distinguishes rational-choice, historical and sociological institutionalism. While I will make use of that distinction, it
seems to me that institutional theory is more coherent than this typology may lead us to think. Many institutionalists, whether they adhere to a utilitarian or an idealist ontology, define institutions as a set of shared representations, social practices, norms and informal and formal rules that shape human interaction (Immergut 1998). Whether they are rationally established or arbitrary, the rules of the game are taken for granted by individuals and should be put front and center of any political analysis. Even if sociological institutionalists criticize the utilitarian perspective of rational-choice institutionalists, for whom institutions are like cost-benefit matrices, most theorists are agreed that actors build rule systems that subsequently constrain and enable their action.

Neo-institutionalists quickly made headways in comparative politics and international relations theory. It is not surprising that they also became fascinated with the EU’s strongly codified polity, shot through with mysterious committees, opaque procedures and undecipherable acronyms. As Mark Pollack (2004: 137) explains, “the EU is undoubtedly the most densely institutionalized international organization in the world, with a profusion of intergovernmental and supranational institutions and a growing body of primary and secondary legislation, the acquis communautaire.” The institutionalist turn had a major impact in EU studies through the study of Europeanization. In Transforming Europe, Cowles, Risse and Caporaso (2001) synthesized this body of research on the “emergence and the development at the European level of a distinct political system, a set of political institutions that formalizes and routinizes interactions among actors, and of policy networks specializing in the creation of authoritative European rules.” Beyond the (too) many definitions of Europeanization that exist (Featherstone and Radaelli 2003, Olsen 2002), we generally find a sort of macro-institutionalism that insists on “institutional pressures” (linked for example to a gap between European governance and the domestic political system) that force member states to adapt to European rules. The literature on multilevel governance also shows the complexification of national strategies generated by the EU’s dense institutional system, wherein domestic and supranational rules are enmeshed (Marks and Hooghe 2000).

Europeanization and multilevel governance theories rely on a broad and oecumenical definition of institutions. The concept of rules is not specifically defined and little attention is paid to how they are created or the nature of their impact. If we set these two research programs aside, institutionalism in EU studies can be more or less presented along the three variants identified by Hall and Taylor.

For rational-choice institutionalists, institutions are created by individuals or groups who seek to maximize their utility by establishing formal and durable rules. This perspective brings together authors like George Tsebelis, Mark Pollack, Andrew Moravcsik or Fritz Scharpf, for whom institutions are the product of individual preferences. Given the resources that they have at their disposal, individuals will create institutions if and only if they can benefit from them. In particular, institutions serve to reduce transaction costs incurred by the absence of coordination mechanism. Once established, institutions become payoff matrices; they specify the costs and benefits of
choosing a course of action and thus, *mutatis mutandis*, it can be said that they explain social behavior. Under normal conditions, institutions that are not efficient will be easily modified by the actors who perceive their suboptimality and would benefit from different rules. For rationalists, institution-making is a matter of choosing the most efficient rules possible. This hypothesis is nuanced, however, by those who underline the importance of veto players in blocking European institutions (Tsebelis 2002, Scharpf 1997). I will return to this point later.

While they share this utilitarian ontology, historical institutionalists add a time perspective. While they adopt a broader definition of institutions (they include norms, which rationalists would not necessarily do), preferences remain the starting point of any analysis. In the EU context, the most important preferences are those of states but also of interest groups which pursue their objectives in an instrumental (albeit not necessarily maximizing) manner. As in rational-choice theory, institutions are intermediary variables between individual preferences and political outcomes. But they take on a life of their own, up to the point where they can hinder the preferences of the actors who have created these institutions or continue to live under them. Bounded rationality prevents actors from designing rules that are perfectly in synch with their preferences. Individuals are stuck in institutional frameworks that develop autonomously because they locked in at some point in the past and generate unanticipated consequences. Individuals must adapt to institutions, which tend to perpetuate themselves, rather than the opposite. What historical institutionalists call path dependence makes the institution more constraining than rationalists would care to admit. Under certain conditions, the institution may even become an independent variable in its own right, that is, one which affects outcomes. The degree of institutionalization, and thus the strength of institutional effects, is generally assumed to be greater than in rational-choice theory.

Some historical institutionalists have used the concepts of lock-in, unanticipated consequences and path dependence to redefine the Haasian notion of spilllover, which they strip of its functionalist underpinnings. For Stone Sweet, Fligstein and Sandholtz (2001), European institutions serve to diminish transaction costs. They feed off the demand of private and public actors for ever more rules to strengthen their organizational capacity. In responding to this demand, the Commission benefits from an information asymmetry which allows it to promote further economic, legal and political integration. Even when the treaties do not provide for an EU competence, interest groups that are affected by transaction costs are likely to demand European rules, for example by going to the Court of Justice. This opens the door for Community intervention, which will in turn generate more transactions.

In this sense, institutionalization is an endogenous process characterized by feedback loops that shapes the preferences of actors and redirects their strategies towards a European space of governance. Stone Sweet et al distinguish themselves from rational-choice institutionalists, for whom preferences are stable, exogenous, and channeled through the institutional framework. As Sandholtz (1993: 3) writes, “states define their interests differently as members of the EU than they would if they were not
members.” Rather than simply assessing costs and benefits, the stake is for actors to define, interpret and implement the rules of the supranational space.

Whether rational-choice or historical, institutionalism is not very different from regime theory in international relations, which also emphasizes that the creation of international rules, norms and procedures facilitates the convergence of expectations. The institution is a means of managing interdependence. But a conceptual shift occurs when institutional rules shape the social interaction that constitutes a transnational space, like in Stone Sweet et al’s work. This brings us to the much thicker conception of institutions propounded by sociological institutionalists. For them, preferences are an endogenous variable that is constructed in the long run by institutions. Institutions, for their part, are not prone to change. As Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell (1991: 11) write, “institutions do not simply limit options: they establish the criteria by which people discover their preferences.” This criticism of the rational-choice perspective is shared by historical institutionalists to a large extent. But sociological institutionalists reject the rational actor model and stress that social action is underpinned by normative and cultural (i.e., intersubjective) factors. For John Meyer, one of the school’s founders, even formal institutions like organizations embody myths, rituals, and ceremonies rather than rationality or power relations. These symbolic elements encapsulate the integration of the individual in the social collective, and thus his/her identity. Individuals are constrained by their cognitive frameworks and follow scripts that crystallized in the cultural environment. The degree of institutionalization is at its highest because the “taken-for-grantedness” of institutions is pervasive. Thus the institutional constraints that individuals face have more to do with cognition and culture than with payoffs matrices (as in historical institutionalism). Here the influence of Durkheim is quite apparent.

In EU studies, the tenets of sociological institutionalism have been mostly espoused by card-carrying constructivists (Checkel 2001, Risse 2004). The issue of identity occupies a central place in this literature, which has focused on the symbolic dimension of enlargement (Sedelmeier 2005), the creation of a European citizenship (Wiener 1998), or the EU’s normative power (Sjursen 2006). The EU is portrayed as a set of founding norms whose diffusion will determine the EU’s institutional impact. In other words, for constructivists, the question is not so much whether European rules have forced member states to adapt but, rather, what is the EU’s normative constraint and how is it incorporated in identities?

In sociological institutionalism, the creation of norms is not explained by reference to their efficiency (as in rational choice theory) but by the quest for legitimacy (Manners 2007, Jepperson 1991). Individuals build their identity by embracing norms; put differently, collective adherence to norms implies that a collective identity is being forged. At the end of the day, this adherence to norms is poorly theorized by sociological institutionalists, who invoke the social mechanisms of socialization and social learning without probing them into much detail (Checkel 2005). The same conceptual framework explains the creation of a European identity in certain domains (e.g., human rights) and the diversity of national preferences in others (e.g., conceptions
of the market). European identity exists insofar as European norms have been imposed, whatever these may be. Conversely, Marcussen et al. (1999) explain that roadblocks in the way of Europeanization have to do with the endurance and incompatibility of certain national identities vis-à-vis the role of the state. Without a clearer theoretical specification of how identities form, the risk of tautology is real.

There is, I think, another way of bringing the sociological tradition back into institutionalism. Neil Fligstein, one of the few US-based Europeanists who actually works in a sociology department, has developed a sociological perspective on European integration that does not focus on norms and identities but on social relations between organized groups. The European space, says Fligstein, is made up of fields wherein actors look to each other and struggle around specific stakes. More specifically, Fligstein and Stone Sweet (2002: 1211) define fields as being constituted of: “(1) organizations that try to structure their environment; (2) a set of rules that constrain and enable action; (3) strategic actors endowed with social skills who work from these organizations to develop forms of cooperation between the different groups of actors.” Institutionalization is then defined as “the stabilization of social interactions between these actors that allows the field to reproduce itself.”

In Euroclash, Fligstein (2008) argues that growing cooperation among Europeans is based on the multiplication of transnational arenas in which organized groups (firms, governments, interest groups) interact. An elite European society is emerging from the formation of horizontal links that cross national borders. These arenas (or fields) are consolidating in various domains such as high-tech industry or football because EU institutions have, often unintentionally, created opportunities for enhanced social interaction. The arenas that are the most Europeanized are those where actors have perceived and seized these opportunities because they had political, social and economic resources to invest. Fligstein adds an important element, which is that of power, the strategies to obtain it, and its unequal distribution. As in classical institutionalism (e.g., Selznick), power relations are key to understanding the institutional environment (as Selznick would call it) or the organizational field (as Fligstein calls it). Indeed, a European-level field of interaction exists only insofar as certain actors have perceived an opportunity to strengthen their position.

Without acknowledging it, Fligstein is very close to the French conception of rules and norms. The notion of field is used in French political sociology, albeit in a somewhat narrower sense inspired by Bourdieu. Virginie Guiraudon (2000) shows the value added of a Bourdieusian vocabulary. She defines the field as a “set of differentiated practices that structure struggles of positions among the actors who inhabit it.” Compared to Fligstein’s definition, this perspective zeroes in on social and political actors, their trajectories (e.g., a move from the domestic to the European level) and the conflictual relations that they may have with each other.

Guiraudon’s work is interesting because it sketches out what a fruitful dialogue between political sociology and institutionalism could look like. Joining Bourdieusian field theory with March and Olsen’s institutionalist “garbage can” model, she shows in one of her articles (2003) how domestic actors working in interior ministries have tried
to outsmart their adversaries in the domestic political field (magistrates and other
government departments) by way of promoting a European-level migration control
policy. This led them to seek out European problems with a view to proposing
predefined solutions, thus creating a European field that responds to no clearly
identifiable institutional gap other than strengthening their influence on the policy
agenda. The professional trajectory of these actors has also led them to impress upon the
European policy some characteristics derived from their professional habitus (their
cultural unconscious, so to speak).

The use of a Bourdieusian perspective enables Guiraudon to avoid three pitfalls
that are commonplace in institutional theory: (1) the rational-choice argument according
to which institutions are created to solve interdependence problems; (2) the path
dependence argument according to which migration control would constitute a
“natural” outcome in the European integration process; and (3) the sociological-
institutionalist argument according to which a common cognitive frame is part and
parcel of the development of an institution. By contrast, a “political sociological” view of
institutions emphasizes that institutions are built through political, murky, and
contested processes.

By using the field rather than institution imagery, it is easier to study how
European fields are erected on already existing domestic fields, which they can either
strengthen or undermine. For example, some domestic actors will use their participation
in the European field to bolster their position in the national field of power. This is
allegedly the case with national judges, who have used the potentialities of Europe’s
quasi-constitutional order to strengthen their position vis-à-vis their own government
(Weiler 1999, Vauchez 2007). Conversely, the creation of a European field can be
detrimental to actors who held a privileged position in the national field but cannot
quite make the European field work to their advantage. An illustration is provided by
trade unions, which have been so far incapable of organizing themselves effectively on a
European level, even though their influence on national governments is threatened by
single market rules (Martin and Ross 1999, Wagner 2005). In this perspective,
participating in a European field is largely instrumental and does not necessarily lead to
transferring one’s loyalty to Brussels. Further, groups that are excluded from the
European arena may be led to conceive of the European project in a negative light.
These two observations, which derive from power structures, draw a conflictual image
of European integration that distinguishes political sociology from sociological
institutionalism.

We can tap into French sociology’s agonistic notion of field to develop two
additional criticisms of sociological institutionalism. First, norm socialization, which
constitutes the basis of the sociological-institutionalist framework, cannot be abstracted
from “the ways in which (political) roles and a relatively structured space of positions
are constructed and objectified... A director general working from the Commission is
very different from a Permanent Representative, and both are very different from an
MEP” (Georgakakis 2004: 4-5). The key issue here is to uncover who “carries” norms
and in what social structure they evolve. Second, there is “a gap ... between the
categories of understanding produced in European institutions and the things produced in the national context.” Even if social representations and structures are co-constitutive, they are not necessarily tightly coupled. Actors have historical trajectories that continue to shape their social representations long after they have left the social field in which these representations were generated. Rather than taking Europeanization as a point of departure, it is useful to study European and domestic fields in parallel, as well as their interpenetration. That is how we will be able to discern the emergence of social dispositions that are genuinely European, but also confirm the endurance of “national habituses.”

It looks as though Bourdieu’s sociology offers a concept, the field, that institutionalists can not only accommodate but also draw insight from. It is no coincidence that institutionalists sometimes use analogous terms, such as arena, domain, or sector, which demonstrate the importance of actors and their interaction in the production and reproduction of rules. But unlike institutional theory, Bourdieu’s theory is systematically relational because the field is constituted by the position of actors vis-à-vis each other, without which the rules of the game are meaningless. While not perfect, this first provides a somewhat better solution to the agent-structure debate. Even though they acknowledge the co-constitution of agent and structure, institutionalists have a tendency to dichotomize them for analytical purposes. The structure sets the rules wherein individuals are more or less free to make decisions (agency). In my view, it is more fruitful to conceptualize the agent-structure debate as the incorporation of the rules of the game in a set of dispositions that are, to use one of Bourdieu’s favorite expressions, simultaneously “structured and structuring.” Rules are not “out there” but always related to a position in the field, which gives meaning to the perception and manipulation of rules. In addition, the emphasis on fields adds a conflictual dimension that is often missing in institutionalist approaches. As Martin (2003) argues, Bourdieu defines the field as “organized striving” while institutionalists define it as “interdependency.” Beginning with the unequally endowed positions of actors in the field rather than the rules they have to play by uncovers power dynamics that institutionalists tend to conceal.

Just to give an example, when German defence planners are investing so much energy in European defense structures, they are not simply using opportunities offered by the EU’s material and symbolic incentive structure. They are also pushing shrewdly against most of the political elite for a curtailment of conscription in their country, which they know will prove incompatible with European defence’s ambitions. And they are also positioning themselves vis-à-vis the other European armed forces that they would like to see as their peers and competitors, namely the British and the French, with a view to convincing themselves and others that the Bundeswehr forms one of Europe’s top three militaries. Being in a different position in the European field, but also in their own domestic political field, the Czech military staff behaves differently. For them, playing the ESDP card has less to do with trying to prove that you are one of the big powers than with finding a niche (e.g. biowarfare) where you demonstrate your usefulness to big actors. And in contrast to Germany, putting a European label is not
necessarily the surest way of effecting military reforms domestically. Again, rules make sense only in the context of the field, whether European or domestic.

**Institutional reproduction and change**

Even if, as I argued, institutionalists and sociologists can agree on their unit of analysis (field, institutional arena, policy domain, sector, etc.), there is bound to be disagreement when it comes to institutional change. Institutionalists themselves are deeply divided over this issue: while some institutionalists argue that institutions are rationally designed by actors, others focus on the relative autonomy of institutions vis-à-vis individual preferences. Sociological institutionalists, for their part, believe that specific social mechanisms can alter individual preferences and the shape of institutions but in the very long run. To a large extent, this is a matter of the degree of institutionalization: sociological institutionalists tend to see lots of it while rational-choice theorists do not (Jepperson 1991). Paradoxically, although they believe in the social construction of interests, sociological institutionalists are in some ways very distant from contemporary sociology (not only French) since they pay relatively little attention to domination and conflict, focusing instead on collective identity and the peaceful diffusion of norms.

A great deal of the so-called institutionalist literature on the EU is close to rational-choice theory. It often engages in formal modelling (see, for example, Garrett and Tsebelis’s (1997) work on the European Parliament’s conditional agenda setting power). But rational-choice institutionalists have also conducted empirical research to explain the process of European integration. Andrew Moravcsik (1998) draws from Robert Putnam’s two-level game metaphor to demonstrate the role of trade preferences in choosing constraining supranational institutions. Governments want these institutions to be rigid and constraining if and when both parties require credible commitments. Using the principal-agent model, Pollack (2003) explains under which conditions supranational institutions may escape the control of member states, eventually going against their preferences in the short run. In the same vein, Anne-Marie Burley and Walter Mattli (1993) highlight the autonomy of the European Court of Justice and its self-interested strategies in the constitutionalization of the EU.

For rational-choice institutionalists, institutions reflect the intentions of their creators and are, in principle, malleable. New “punctuated equilibria” may appear from time to time and shape institutional development in the long run. But the institutional framework remains ultimately a matter of choice – that is, unless veto players choose to block institutional change, rendering the institutional articulation of new preferences more difficult. Like the institutionalization of credible mutual commitments, the joint decision trap identified by Scharpf (1997) explains institutional rigidity. But these are abnormal conditions. Change, when it occurs, is always brought about by actors who pursue their own interests.

The question of institutional change is addressed more straightforwardly by historical institutionalists, who are less interested in the state of the institution than in the process of institutionalization. Paul Pierson (1996), for example, shows how in the
case of social policy EU institutions have been able to go beyond the initial preferences of member states. Governments are constrained by an institutional system that follows its own logic. Pierson identifies six time-dependent mechanisms that increase the gap between national government preferences and the concrete development of the EU. First, he accepts the principal-agent assumption that European institutions are partly autonomous and have their own interests. This autonomy is evident at the agenda-setting and regulation stages, where the Commission enjoys formal competences. Second, governments like other actors have limited time horizons. This implies that they make decisions that can be beneficial to them in the short term but constrain their successors in the long term, thus limiting future options. Third, the scarcity of information and issue density increase the probability that EU decisions have unanticipated consequences. Fourth, governments, especially in democratic regimes where ruling coalitions are not stable, tend to change their minds: preferences are not eternal and may be altered by EU developments endogenously. Fifth, there are institutional barriers to reshaping institutions. Even when government preferences change, it is not certain that EU institutions will be able to adapt, notably due to the joint decision trap which fosters inertia. Finally, European states have invested so much in the creation of the EU, to which they have adapted their institutions, laws, practices and expectations, that the exit option becomes too costly. In other words, the institutionalization of cooperation exhibits increasing returns. The threat of exit is little credible, which decreases the possibility for national influence on the institutional framework. As a result, institutional forms tend to lock in.

All of these factors explain why European integration is subject to path dependence. Armstrong and Bulmer (1998) have used this approach to explain the institutional effects generated by the Community framework in the launching and development of the Single Market program. In France, Jabko (2005) has also used the concept of path dependence. He has shown how France’s position during the 2002-03 European Convention was in large part shaped by institutional variables. The characteristics of the French state, for example, bestow a predominant and idiosyncratic role to the president of the Republic. The format of the European Convention fostered deliberation at the expense of a more conspicuous defense of national interests, thus making the outcome of negotiation more difficult to predict. Finally, Jabko notes that the legacy of European integration has imposed social representations and “traditional” alliances (such as the “Franco-German axis”) that would have been politically costly to renege on. These factors and others illustrate the insufficiency of an interpretation based solely on preferences and pure rationality, and validate instead the temporal concern of historical institutionalists.

As I wrote in the previous section, Wayne Sandholtz and Alec Stone Sweet have tried to give institutional microfoundations to neofunctionalism. These microfoundations are largely predicated on path dependence. In European Integration and Supranational Governance (1998), these authors present European integration as a process of multiple, overlapping institutionalization processes. “Institutions, they write, are systems of rules and institutionalization is the process by which these rules are created,
implemented and interpreted by those who live under them.” The creation of supranational rules (primary and secondary legislation, case law) subsequent to the Treaty of Rome has led to an expansion and densification of transnational transactions, especially in the economic domain. These exchanges have encouraged participants to bring pressure on supranational institutions, which then strengthened existing supranational rules and produced new rules that bind European states and societies together.

As with Pierson’s model, institutionalization here follows its own logic. Caporaso and Stone Sweet (1998) observe for instance that there has been a sui generis constitutionalization of European treaties. But this strong form of institutionalization is carried out by interest groups that are often at the periphery of EU institutions. As supranational activity develops, the downsides of domestic governance become more apparent: the growing transaction costs that economic actors experience explain their demand for more Europeanization. The higher the level of transactions between member states, the higher transaction costs become. The economic sectors that are most affected by the existence of trade barriers should be the first to be subject to constraining European rules. This creates a positive feedback loop in these sectors, but not necessarily in others. Stone Sweet et al.’s institutionalism is comparative insofar as it predicts various degrees of institutionalization depending on the volume of transactions.

To explain institutional reproduction, Stone Sweet et al. draw from rational-choice (principal-agent model) and historical (lock in, path dependence) institutionalisms. But to analyze institutional change, they resort to sociological institutionalism (Stone Sweet et al. 2001). Four mechanisms of change are identified: the irruption of an external shock that forces actors to reconsider their adherence to rules; social innovation resulting from learning processes or struggles within the field; isomorphism, that is, the diffusion of modes of behavior throughout the European field, by coercion, mimicry or norm promotion; and entrepreneurship, or the use by certain individuals of their social skills to effect cooperation with other actors or redefine dominant social representations.

By and large, these mechanisms of change have to do with the diffusion of norms of behavior, either through entrepreneurship or isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Through communication, deliberation or socialization, political entrepreneurs can spread norms that will be internalized by individuals and become part of their preferences. These mechanisms are triggered by a destabilization of institutions, often resulting from a crisis (an external shock). We are much closer here to sociological institutionalism because institutions are not rationally designed: they produce legitimacy but not efficiency. The challenge for actors is not to find the optimal institution but rather to shape cognitive frames that correspond to dominant or ascending social representations.

In EU studies, sociological institutionalism has been mostly used as a theoretical resource by constructivists who, like Martha Finnemore (1996) who imported sociological institutionalism in International Relations theory, have developed a theory of European integration based on the diffusion of norms and the construction of
identities. In addition to isomorphism, social innovation and entrepreneurship, otherness and cognitive resource mobilization are sometimes invoked. These identities are said to be constructed intersubjectively, without offering a real explanation of the social determinants of this social construction. It is unlikely that French sociologists would buy into this interpretation of the sociological tradition. Sociological institutionalists often have a rather positive conception of norms that puts them closer to Durkheim than to Bourdieu. In its most extreme form, their methodology relies on disincarnated discourse analysis (Marcussen et al. 1999, Diez 2001, Larsen 1997). In this world characterized by equanimity, it is tempting to neglect the importance given by Durkheim to social structures and by Bourdieu to the interested strategies of agents who carry social representations. It is thus worth asking whether sociological institutionalism would “benefit from paying more attention to the ways in which frames of meaning, scripts and symbols emerge not only through interpretive but also conflictual processes” (Hall and Taylor 1996: 954).

Far from denying the role of social representations, like rituals, French political sociology emphasizes actors, their strategies and power relations in explaining change. Political sociology’s strongly agonistic dimension contrasts with institutionalism’s almost mechanistic posture. This agonistic persuasion is evident in the work of the Strasbourg school, whose members place domination front and center in their empirical analyses of the EU. As the Strasbourg school, but also Fligstein have shown, the social strata who are most likely to play a part in European fields are also those who buy into the self-serving liberal discourse promoted by the Commission. Fieldwork conducted among students at the College of Europe, members of the European Parliament, Commission directors-general, senior officials in the Council Secretariat, or Permanent Representatives shows that Europeanization is also the making of a European elite (Schnabel 1998, Kauppi 2005, Georgakakis and de Lasalle 2007, Mangenot 2004, Chatzistavrou 2004).

The question of social and institutional change is an old one in sociology. Durkheim proposed a “morphological” explanation while Marx preferred an economic one. Since then, social movement theory has stressed the importance of resource mobilization, political opportunities, and coalition strategies. Historical and sociological institutionalists bring important elements to the table by identifying the conditions under which change can operate: the irruption of an external shock, unanticipated consequences from pre-existing institutional frameworks, and entrepreneurship. Political sociology, for its part, adds a crucial factor: structures of conflicts and strategies of domination in the creation and transformation of social fields.

**Logic of consequences, logic of appropriateness or logic of practice?**

The famous distinction made by March and Olsen (1989) between rational-choice theory’s logic of consequences and sociology’s logic of appropriateness has been widely discussed. I would argue that this ontological question unites institutionalists and sociologists as much as it divides them. Indeed, while rational-choice and historical
institutionalists share a consequentalist ontology, French sociologists do not necessarily buy into the logic of appropriateness adopted by sociological institutionalists and other constructivists. For political sociologists, the question is not whether actors know what they are doing or are propelled by norms of behavior; the question, rather, is what constitutes the right and the wrong way of pursuing one’s strategies in the social field. This only a study of practices can tell.

With their logic of consequences, rational-choice institutionalists accept the utilitarian assumption that institutions are created by states in order to reduce transaction costs. The debate is whether and to what extent governments remain the only actors in the institutional framework or, conversely, are in competition with other actors, such as the Commission, regional entities or even private actors, which makes institutional control more difficult. Likewise, historical institutionalists believe that the institution is a payoffs matrix that shapes decisions according to a cost-benefit calculation. They would add the proviso that rationality is bounded and preferences can be altered through constant interaction with European institutions. But the strategies developed to attain these new objectives remain instrumental. It is not impossible that governments will integrate cultural or social elements in their preferences, but action is always goal-oriented.

By contrast, the logic of appropriateness forces us to pay attention to norms, that is, to social conformity. The rational-choice ontology is rejected. Institutions are construed in a broader, thicker sense, as any sort of norm (human rights, coordination reflex, liberalism) that constitutes European identity. Actors, however, are not central to the analysis, except insofar as they can become norm entrepreneurs (Checkel 2005). To be sure, sociological institutionalism is a relationalism of sorts: society is constituted of spaces wherein cultural processes are effective through emulation or constraint, that is, in the context of a social relation. But it is ideas or identities that are in relation, not actors. Despite its critical ambitions, this institutionalism gives little importance to power relations and postulates, rather than demonstrates, the socialization of individuals to European norms.

Compared to these abstract, somewhat reified logics, political sociology is distinctive in that it goes beyond Brussels institutions, developing instead a bottom-up approach focused on practices. While institutionalists study institutionalization processes “from afar,” Guiraudon (2000) argues that sociology construes the EU “in situ and in action.” She argues that political sociologists must make greater use of fieldwork, even ethnography, a methodology rarely used by institutionalists. The study of practices allows one to observe competition and power struggles (rather than only cooperation and coordination). If the EU is a resource and a power stake, it is worthwhile to ask ourselves “who are the political and social actors who mobilize at the European level and who are those who remain at the margins of this transnational space.” The answer is likely to be different depending on the field under study because each field has its own logic, “principles of vision and division,” and stakes.

The scope and purpose of European integration is thus narrowed down to an empirical question. The making of a “fragmented sociopolitical space,” conceptualized
through fieldwork, is illustrated in Andy Smith’s *Le gouvernement de l’Union européenne* (2004). Like the institutionalists he engages with, Smith underscores the interpenetration of economic, social and political processes. He proposes a cognitive and cultural reading of the European space that pays attention to actors, whose roles and capabilities remain diverse. He looks at the ways in which actors appropriate the EU projects of which they are supposed to be the objects, with a view to better understanding how the EU’s legitimacy (or lack thereof) is constructed in practices. These practices, in his view, are linked to processes of politicization and depoliticization. “The governance of the EU, concludes Smith (2004: 5), is the product of intense ideological and institutional struggles which imply the instrumentalization of EU treaties and law, without necessarily being determined by them.” Again, conflict, i.e., “ideological and institutional struggles,” are key to analyzing practices.

I will conclude this section by noting that even French authors who do not openly claim Bourdieu’s legacy distinguish themselves by the importance they give to the social bases of European integration, i.e., practices. Patrick Le Galès, for instance, has developed a research program on the opportunities opened up by the EU in terms of travel, trade, education, consumption, and careers; he looks at the social conditions that allow some, but not others, to benefit from these opportunities. Pasquier and Weisbein (2004), for their part, have embedded the study of European governance in local practices. Studying “Europe as it is being done” (Baisnée and Pasquier 2007), as a concrete instantiation of social practices, through ethnographic work, is a way to go beyond the ontological reifications that often make little sense for the actors themselves.

**Towards a “really” sociological institutionalism?**

To sum up, the potential theoretical contribution of French political sociology to neo-institutionalism is manifold. Here I would like to briefly identify five contributions that could easily be integrated in an institutionalist framework.

Political sociology’s first contribution is to bring actors back in processes of institutionalization. Actors play an important role in rational-choice institutionalism but they are treated as a disincarnated *homo oeconomicus* who reacts to market signals. They are neglected by historical institutionalists who focus on self-reinforcement mechanisms or structural forces, while sociological institutionalists often portray actors as cultural dopes who embody norms or collective identities. By establishing a clear link between socialization and strategic behavior, notably with the concept of habitus, French political sociology puts forward a more nuanced and, I believe, ultimately more useful perspective in the agent-structure debate.

Moving to the question of motives, one of the strengths of political sociology lies in its refusal to impose an ontology on actors. This ontological agnosticism avoids the double trap of the rational actor vs. the cultural dope by focusing our attention on the interested but socially conditioned strategies of individuals and groups. My impression is that the French address this question somewhat less candidly than do most institutionalists. Criticizing the interest/idea dichotomy which, 80 years after the death
of Max Weber, still dominates institutional theory, Smith (2004: 38) writes: “This reductionist perspective on ideas leads authors to neglect the prior issue of problem perception (decoding) and the importance of interpretive acts for the construction of action strategies (recoding)... In short, neo-institutionalist approaches do not analyze the sociological conditions of the institutional construction of preferences.” It seems to me that the concepts of habitus and illusio derived from Bourdieusian sociology can be used to situate the actor in his/her social context without equating the two.

A third tenet of French political sociology that is largely absent from institutionalist approaches is the importance given to power structures, and even relations of domination. This shift from the institution in and of itself to the institution as a vector of power is interesting for two reasons. First, it can be mobilized as a critique of the “constituted knowledge” that often pollutes theoretical debates on European integration, which leads one to adopt theoretical positions that are in synch with one’s political position (e.g. in the debate opposing neofunctionalists to intergovernmentalists). It is useful to remind ourselves that our theoretical positions often barely conceal our political and academic positions (Cohen 2007, Dezalay 2007). Second, political sociology brings power struggles back in the analysis, which dovetails with the old institutionalism à la Selznick, for whom political conflict was a key element in the functioning of institutions. It is not the weak who create institutional fields, but the strong or the astute. And these fields are not level playing fields but fields whose rules favor incumbents and put down challengers. Put differently, studying who writes the rules is as important as studying who follows the rules.

As Smith (2000: 665) writes, “one of the characteristics of French political science is the attention it pays to processes of socialization and domination that take place in and between the institutions that constitute society.” This is, in my view, one of its main strengths vis-à-vis institutionalism. Borrowing from Bourdieu’s theory, French sociologists have given a great deal of importance of the social structures of European integration. These social structures can be observed, for example, in the career trajectories of Eurocrats. But, as Didier Bigo’s (1996) study of European police cooperation or Andy Smith’s (1998) sociology of winemakers demonstrate, one needs to go way beyond Brussels. One should mention here the research conducted by European sociologists like Adrian Favell (2008) or Juan Diez Medrano (2007), who have studied the social determinants of European “identity” through ethnography, and have uncovered the important empirical distinction between the Europeanization of national societies and the creation of a European society.

The role of actors, their motives, and their unequal resources are made visible by another peculiarity of French political sociology: the fact that it relies a great deal on extensive fieldwork. This aspect of the French approach is in my opinion remarkable. Rather than limiting themselves to crafting sophisticated research designs with a view to testing alternative hypotheses, fieldwork leads one to confronting empirical reality head-on, in an inductive manner. The contrast between French and Anglo-American approaches to similar objects is striking: between Buchet de Neuilly’s (2005) fine-grained ethnography and Smith’s (2004) exhaustive but aerial vision of CFSP bodies, or between
Robert’s (2007) detailed analysis of DG Employment and Pierson’s (1996) systematic but slightly superficial perspective on social policy, that is, between inductive and hypothetico-deductive approaches, there should be obvious complementarities.

Finally, one of the main virtues of France’s brand of empirical sociology is to discard once and for all the pseudo sociological discussions on European identity. Conceptually blurry, impossible to operationalize, “reminiscent of the ‘bad old days’ of Parsonian political science” (Favell 2005), the debate on European identity is presented as social theory’s turf in EU studies. If we are not careful, business firms will be analyzed as the realm of hard-headed rational choice while NGOs will be analyzed as the preserve of intersubjectivity. I think that this division of labor will lead to an impasse, both for sociologists and for political scientists. Rather than conceptualizing identity as an ideational abstraction, embedded in discourse, identity (like interest) should be understood as a contingent, relational, polysemic product of social practices (Brubaker 1996). Here contemporary sociologists (not only French) must alert their political science colleagues to the dangers of an unsophisticated discussion of identity.

Conclusion

Using EU studies as an example, I have shown that (American) institutionalism and (French) political sociology have a lot in common but also a lot to learn from each other. From a Europeanist perspective, the main strength that they share is that they allow us to move beyond the sterile and *sui generis* debate between neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism by focusing on field-specific rules. Even though some authors buy into one of the grand narratives of European integration (e.g. Moravcsik’s intergovernmentalism, Sandholtz’s neofunctionalism, or Bourdieu’s famous Euroskepticism), the theoretical frameworks they use are in principle flexible enough to accommodate various hypotheses than can be generalized beyond the European case. Moreover, despite differences in vocabulary, several assumptions and postures are complementary. On some level, it is perhaps a minor point that the concept of field can subsume the interpretation of rules in a more robust, relational theory of social structure. But it is with this concept that political sociology sheds light on patterns of conflict and domination, than can be assumed to be as common as patterns of cooperation in the making and remaking of rules. And it is also with this concept that one can go beyond the abstract dichotomy between the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness by adopting a more generic conception of practice, tested by fieldwork.

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