

Workshop proposal, ECPR Joint Sessions, Mainz 2013

What we talk about when we talk about Europe - methodologies of European Studies

Subject area: Methodology; ontology, research methods; constructivism; critical theory, interdisciplinary dialogue

Abstract

Due to the increasingly complex character of overlapping institutional, legal, economic and social spheres, and the interdisciplinary and evolving field of perspectives, European Studies constitutes a particularly challenging, and at the same time exciting terrain for reflecting upon the conduct of inquiry in social sciences. To systematically explore these analytical strategies, and to foster an awareness of the implications of these methodologies within European Studies and beyond is an essential dimension of conducting research on EU affairs. This is important as more often than not the question of underlying *methodology* in EU Studies is being conflated with a certain fetishism of *methods*. Within the (sub)disciplinary confines of the EU Studies sphere, methods are too often discussed with exclusive regard to their explanatory power, validity or parsimony, without critical reflection of how specific analytical strategies are intimately linked with particular views of social reality. This means that there is little regard of the *politics* of knowledge production as a crucial aspect of the way in which knowledge is produced and reproduced. It is these fundamental methodological choices underwriting EU Studies research that constitute the focus of this workshop.

This workshop seeks to contribute to this debate by providing a platform for discussing questions of research design and concomitant research strategies. Rather than focusing on epistemological concerns, which is often the case in the discussion about positivist and interpretive approaches (generally reproduced in the spurious distinction between 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' research), the primary focus will be on the *ontological* grounds of 'what we talk about when we talk about Europe'. The workshop aims to cut across disciplinary boundaries to develop analytical strategies that can capture the dynamic social reality of European Union. Instead of a reconciliation of different methodologies, the objective here is to survey and critically reflect on the analytical principles underlying current research in EU Studies at distinct locations of the methodological spectrum.

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1. Outline

Social science research involves fundamental choices that shape, inform and limit the production of knowledge. Due to the increasingly complex character of overlapping institutional, legal, economic and social spheres, and the interdisciplinary and evolving field of perspectives, European Studies here constitutes a particularly challenging, and at the same time exciting terrain for reflecting upon the conduct of inquiry into this social reality. As Jupelle argues (2005: 209), the 'intrinsic importance of methodology is elevated in the field of EU studies.' To systematically explore these analytical strategies, and to foster an awareness of the implications of these methodologies within European Studies and beyond is an essential dimension of conducting research on EU affairs (Rosamond 2006; 2008). And yet more often than not the question of underlying *methodology* in EU Studies is being conflated with a certain fetishism of *methods*. One does not have to be a post-positivist to understand that 'social science methodology does not concern mere technique; it concerns the relationship between thinking and researching' (Ragin 1987:165). Within the (sub)disciplinary confines of the EU Studies sphere, methods are too often discussed with exclusive regard to their explanatory power, validity or parsimony, without critical reflection of how specific analytical strategies are intimately linked with particular views of social reality. It is these fundamental methodological choices underwriting EU Studies research that constitute the focus of this workshop.

While there have been important recent advances in critical reflection on the production of knowledge and the conduct of inquiry in other fields of social science (e.g. Jackson 2011; Glynnos and Howarth 2011), until fairly recently there has been a rather resounding silence with regard to a sustained and critical discussion about methodologies within European Studies. The (meta)theoretical debates dominating the field have mainly taken place between rationalist/positivist and constructivist/interpretive perspectives (e.g. Checkel and Moravcsik 2001), and have more often than not reproduced dichotomies, or worse, led to a situation where 'metatheoretical confusion [...] has been rampant in EU studies' (Jupille 2005: 220). Of particular importance, we would insist, is here to understand the *political* nature of social science inquiry, as well as the contextual nature of knowledge (Manners 2006: 78). The bridge-building exercises and dialogue between rationalist and constructivist approaches, important as they have been to the development of EU Studies, have further served to obscure the exciting spectrum of approaches outside of comparative politics and/or International Relations, and tend to verge uncomfortably between empiricism and an overly abstract conceptualisation of EU affairs.

2. Relation to existing research

Methodological debates within EU studies have been advanced mainly between rationalist and constructivist perspectives, with much effort being devoted to bridging fundamental divides and reconciling conflicting metatheoretical points of departure in the name of reaching a middle ground for EU studies (Checkel and Moravcsik 2001; Checkel 2007; Jupille et al. 2003). More recently, scholars have started to explore questions of methodology in EU Studies, and the implications thereof for studying European Union (e.g. Jupille 2005; Pahr 2005; Exadaktylos and Radaelli 2009; Lynggaard, Manners and Löfgren forthcoming). This increased attention to research design is encouraging, and a welcome contribution to the maturation of an academic field that is still all too often by 'research by default', without critical reflection on the fundamental choices that

scholars are taking. This is well argued in Manners' critique of the normalising tendencies in EU studies, in particular with regard to the dominance of rational choice, comparative politics and positivism (Manners 2007: 90).

This workshop seeks to contribute to this debate by providing a platform for discussing questions of research design and concomitant research strategies. Rather than focusing on epistemological concerns, which is often the case in the discussion about positivist and interpretive approaches (generally reproduced in the false distinction between 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' research), the primary focus will be on the *ontological* grounds of 'what we talk about when we talk about Europe'. Moving beyond the rationalist/constructivist dichotomy, the workshop aims to cut across disciplinary boundaries to develop analytical strategies that can capture the new reality of the European Union. Instead of a *reconciliation* of different methodologies, the objective here is to survey and critically reflect on analytical principles from a variety of approaches at distinct locations of the methodological spectrum.

3. Academic rationale for the workshop

There has been no shortage of Joint Session workshops dealing with a variety of specific methods (whether qualitative, statistical/formal or innovative approaches such as FuzzySet QCA). We however see considerable merit in organising a workshop bringing together a range of scholars reflecting the *methodological diversity* in EU studies who might or might not be using similar methods and techniques. How do these methodological choices play out in actual research practice? Which limitations and problems are encountered, and how can they be overcome?

The main objectives of the workshop are to

- Map methodologies of European Studies, and how they relate to distinctive metatheoretical paradigms.
- Reflect on how different methodological choices create a particular view of what constitutes Europe, and the European Union.
- Discuss implications of these methodologies for research methods, and explore (in)compatibilities across the spectrum of contributions to the workshop.
- Formulate avenues to stimulate a sustained inclusion of methodological discussion in broader EU studies context, most importantly also teaching at graduate and undergraduate level.
- Consider the ways in which scientific knowledge is produced, and how it relates to other types of knowledge within EU studies.

4. Likely participants, papers and outcome

To facilitate debate and reflection across and within different methodologies and analytical frameworks, we invite a wide spectrum of approaches and perspectives, including (but by no means limited to) sociological

and discursive institutionalism, political sociology, ethnographic and anthropological approaches, critical political economy, deliberative theories, genealogical and governmentality perspectives, critical realism, method of abstraction, discourse theory, everyday paradigms, historical scholarship and cultural studies.

We invite papers that reflect upon the *methodologies* of these perspectives and approaches. To this aim, and to ensure that there is sufficient basis for discussion during the workshop, we expect papers to include an *extended research design* discussion next to a theoretical and empirical section. Participants would be asked to reflect on the methodological choices on which their work is based, and to make explicit how these translate into concrete research strategies.

As such, we would welcome papers that engage with the objectives of the workshop, and also speak to some of the following key questions and issues in the context of 'talking about Europe'.

- How can we conceptualise different types of knowledge production (for example feminist knowledge (Hawkesworth 2010)?
- The inseparability of methods and methodologies, or of techniques and theory (for example using “the extended case method” (Burawoy 1998)
- How can we discern and critically engage with the ideological content of the knowledge being produced? For example, how can we engage with Bloch’s practice of ideological criticism as a methodology of hope (Bloch 1986)?

6. Biographical note

Laura Horn is Associate Professor in the Department of Society and Globalisation, University of Roskilde (Denmark). Her research is focusing on EU economic governance from a critical political economy perspective. She has published articles in *New Political Economy*, the *European Law Journal* and *Competition & Change*. Her monograph *Regulating Corporate Governance in the EU* has come out in 2011 in the Palgrave International Political Economy Series.

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