
International Relations Theory and European Integration*

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Abstract

The explicit effort to theorize about the process of European integration began within the field of international relations (IR), where neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism long remained the dominant schools of thought. With the relaunching of the integration process in the 1980s and 1990s, however, IR scholars have begun to approach the study of the European Union using more general, and generalizable, theoretical approaches. This article examines the recent debate among realists, liberals, rational-choice institutionalists, and constructivists regarding the nature of the integration process and the EU as an international organization. Although originally posed as competing theories, I argue, realist, liberal and institutionalist approaches show signs of convergence around a single rationalist model, with constructivism remaining as the primary rival, but less developed, approach to the study of European integration.

Introduction

The explicit effort to theorize about the process of European integration began within the political science sub-field of international relations (IR), and the

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field of integration theory was, until recently, dominated largely by American students of international relations such as Ernst Haas, Leon Lindberg and Stanley Hoffmann. During the first few decades of the integration process, the literature was essentially divided between neofunctionalists (who theorized integration as a gradual and self-sustaining process) and intergovernmentalists (who emphasized the persistent gate-keeping role of national governments). Although originally intended as general theories of economic and political integration, however, both neofunctionalism and its intergovernmentalist critique were limited in practice to the analysis of the European case, and had little impact on the larger study of international relations.¹

With the relaunching of the integration process in the 1980s and 1990s, however, students of international relations have begun to approach the study of the European Union using more general, and generalizable, theoretical approaches. The bulk of this article therefore examines the recent debate among realists, liberals, rational-choice institutionalists, and constructivists in IR theory as to the nature of the integration process and the EU as an international organization. Although originally posed as competing theories, I argue, realist, liberal and institutionalist approaches in IR show signs of convergence around a single rationalist model which assumes fixed preferences and rational behaviour among all actors in the EU (including individuals as well as member governments and supranational organizations) and examines the ways in which member governments adopt institutions which subsequently constrain and channel their behaviour. This rationalist approach is now the dominant approach to the study of European integration in international relations theory, I argue, with constructivism remaining as the primary rival, but less developed, approach to the study of European integration.

I. The Emergence of a Rationalist Research Programme

Realist Approaches

Realist theory, with its emphasis on material power and the resilience of the state, provided the theoretical underpinnings of the intergovernmentalist critiques of neofunctionalism in the 1960s and 1970s. With the exception of Hoffmann (1966, 1995), however, few realist scholars have made any significant effort to predict or explain the subsequent course of European integration or the operation of the EU as an institution. Neorealist theorists have been even more explicit in their dismissal of international institutions such as the EU,

¹ A thorough discussion of the neofunctionalist/intergovernmentalist debate is beyond the scope of this article, which deals primarily with IR theorizing about European integration in the 1990s. For representative works and commentaries, see Haas, 1958; Hoffmann, 1966; Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970; Pentland, 1973; Haas, 1976; and Taylor, 1983.

which are generally considered to be epiphenomenal reflections of the underlying distribution of material power in the international system. Thus, for example, in his seminal statement of neorealist theory, Kenneth Waltz (1979, pp. 70–1) attributed the (uneven) progress of European integration to the fact that the United States had emerged after World War II as the guarantor of West European security, leaving the Member States of the European Community free to pursue integration without concerns about security threats from their European partners. Similarly – and entirely consistent with the underlying assumptions of neorealist theory – John Mearsheimer predicted in 1990 that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent return of a multi-polar international system would lead to an increase in concerns about security and relative gains among EU Member States, and place a significant check on the future course of European integration (Mearsheimer, 1990).

In contradiction to Mearsheimer's lucid and testable prediction, however, European integration has continued its uneven but impressive course throughout the 1990s, including the creation of a European Union and a single currency in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, and the subsequent deepening of integration in the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty which extended the use of qualified majority voting and the delegation of powers to supranational institutions. These developments presented a puzzle to neorealists, according to Joseph Grieco, the neorealist who has devoted the greatest intellectual attention to the study of the European Union. One neorealist response to the relaunching of European integration, according to Grieco, would be to posit the resurgence of the EU during the 1980s as Europe balancing the emerging economic threat from the United States and Japan. However, as Grieco acknowledges (1996, p. 286), the timing of the Maastricht Treaty also coincides with the end of the Cold War, the unification of Germany, and the rise of concern about German economic hegemony among the other Member States of the Union. In this view, the insistence upon Economic and Monetary Union by France and Italy appears not as balancing behaviour, but rather as bandwagoning with a potentially hegemonic Germany, which poses a challenge to both traditional realist and neorealist theories.

In response to this challenge, Grieco posits a 'neorealist voice opportunities hypothesis' which, he argues, is consistent with the core hypotheses of neorealist theory, and generates new insights into the 'institutional rule trajectory' of the European Union. Specifically, Grieco draws on the earlier work of Albert Hirschman regarding the possibilities for 'voice', i.e. the expression of dissatisfaction with existing institutions. When negotiating new international institutions, Grieco argues, 'states – and especially relatively weak but still necessary partners – will seek to ensure that any cooperative arrangement they construct will include effective voice opportunities', which

are defined in turn as 'institutional characteristics whereby the views of partners (including relatively weaker partners) are not just expressed but reliably have a material impact on the operations of the collaborative arrangement' (Grieco, 1996, pp. 288–9). Where such voice opportunities are absent, Grieco hypothesizes that states will attempt to renegotiate the terms of the institutional arrangement, and may reduce or withdraw their commitment to the organization if such attempts fail. In empirical terms, Grieco argues that the French and Italian entrepreneurship in favour of Economic and Monetary Union can be explained not simply by the functionalist desire by all of the Member States to commit credibly to their joint aim of monetary stability, but rather (or also) by their eagerness to secure a *voice* through their representatives in the new European Central Bank.

More recently, Michael Mosser (2000) has built upon Grieco's insight to examine the ways in which small and weak states 'engineer influence' through international institutions. Despite the standard neorealist view that small states in the international system are faced with no choice other than to balance their more powerful neighbours, Mosser argues that – under certain conditions, including the ability to 'get in on the ground floor' of institutional choice – small states can bind large states into institutional rules that provide systematic voice opportunities for small states, while at the same time establishing norms against the use of certain types of power (such as the use or threat of force). In the case of the EU, Mosser analyses the use of EU institutions by the Benelux countries, which were present at the creation and have steadfastly resisted any change to institutions that provide them with systematic over-representation in the Council – as witnessed most strikingly in the tense final negotiations of the Treaty of Nice in December 2000.

Taken together, the work of Grieco and Mosser focuses our attention on how small states can participate in the design and amendment of international institutions so as to provide themselves with opportunities for voice, while at the same time binding large states into institutional rules and norms that limit their ability to exploit material power resources. However, as Legro and Moravcsik (1999, pp. 41–3) point out, nothing in Grieco's voice opportunities hypothesis is distinctive to realist theory, with its emphasis on the conflictual nature of international relations, the importance of relative gains, and the ultimate recourse to the use of force – none of which is explicitly mentioned in Grieco's analysis. Indeed, Grieco's basic assumptions of international anarchy, the central role of states, and actor rationality are consistent with neoliberal institutionalism, as well as with liberal intergovernmentalism and rational-choice institutionalism, each of which offers more detailed and explicit hypotheses about the determinants of European integration and the

workings of EU institutions. It is to these two schools, therefore, that we now turn.

Liberal Intergovernmentalism – and its Critics

Liberal theories of international relations are generally rationalist, as are neorealist theories, yet they generally adopt different assumptions about the preferences of states (particularly regarding the respective importance of absolute and relative gains and the importance of security in states' calculations of their interests), and about the implications of anarchy for the prospect of international co-operation and international institutions. With regard to the progress and future of European integration, liberals generally argue that, even if the origins of the EU can be attributed to the effects of bipolarity and American hegemony in the West, the future of the EU after the Cold War is unlikely to be as bleak as neorealists argue. Simplifying a large literature, liberals argue that peace is likely to be maintained in post-Cold War Europe because of the rise of democratic governments in those countries (the so-called 'democratic peace'), or because of the rise of interdependence among European countries which makes war unprofitable among the members of the EU.

For our purposes, the most important and influential liberal theory of European integration is Andrew Moravcsik's 'liberal intergovernmentalism' (LI), as laid out in a series of articles during the first half of the 1990s (Moravcsik, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995). Moravcsik's theory has been widely read and cited, and requires little elaboration here. Put simply, liberal intergovernmentalism is a two-step, sequential model of preference formation (for which Moravcsik draws on liberal theories of IR and international political economy) and international bargaining (drawn from bargaining theory and from Putnam's two-level games analysis). In the first stage of the model, national chiefs of government (or COGs) aggregate the interests of their domestic constituencies, as well as their own interests, and articulate national preferences toward European integration. In the second stage, national governments bring their preferences to the intergovernmental bargaining table in Brussels, where agreements reflect the relative power of each Member State and where supranational organizations such as the European Commission exert little or no causal influence.

Although often mischaracterized as neorealist by his critics, Moravcsik's theory represents a two-fold departure from neorealism, insofar as national preferences are assumed to be domestically generated and not derived from a state's security concerns in the international system, and insofar as bargaining power is determined by the relative intensity of preferences and not by military or other material power capabilities. In empirical terms, Moravcsik argues that major intergovernmental bargains, such as the Single European Act or the

Maastricht Treaty, were not driven by supranational entrepreneurs, unintended spillovers from earlier integration, or transnational coalitions of business groups, but rather by a gradual process of preference convergence among the most powerful Member States, which then struck central bargains amongst themselves and offered side-payments to smaller, reluctant Member States. The institutions adopted in such bargains, finally, *do* serve to provide Member States with information and reduce transactions costs, but they *do not* lead to the transfer of authority or loyalty from nation-states to a new centre, as neofunctionalists had predicted. Rather, Moravcsik argued, European integration actually *strengthens* national executives *vis-à-vis* their domestic constituencies, since COGs enjoy a privileged place at the Brussels bargaining table from which domestic interests are generally excluded.

During the 1990s, liberal intergovernmentalism came to occupy a strange but central place within the literature on European integration. Indeed, few scholars other than Moravcsik have explicitly identified themselves as liberal intergovernmentalists, while nearly all American and European students of the EU defined themselves as being *against* one or other aspect of liberal intergovernmentalism. Oversimplifying a complex literature, the response of international relations scholars was three-fold:

First, Moravcsik's model of national preference formation has been criticized by a number of scholars who may be inelegantly lumped together under the rubric of 'reflectivist', 'constructivist', or 'sociological institutionalist' approaches. Drawing on the theoretical work of Wendt (1999) and Ruggie (1998), these authors argue that 'membership matters' in altering the preferences and even the identities of national elites involved in the process of European integration (Sandholtz, 1993, 1996; Risse, 1996; Lewis, 1998). Liberal intergovernmentalism, they argue, employs a model of preference formation which ignores the endogenous effects of EU membership, thereby ignoring one of the fundamental features of the integration process.

A second group of scholars, who can be assembled under the rubric of institutionalist theory, have generally accepted Moravcsik's assumptions about national preferences, but have disputed his parsimonious model of intergovernmental bargaining, arguing that existing EU institutions shape and constrain intergovernmental policy-making in ways not captured by liberal intergovernmentalism. Pierson's (1996) historical institutionalist approach, for example, focuses on the ways in which integrative decisions become 'locked in' and difficult for member governments to change, even when gaps open in Member State control over policy outcomes. Similarly, various rational-choice institutionalists have argued that the EU legislative process cannot be understood as a strictly intergovernmental process, but is instead shaped by EU institutions that allow for qualified majority voting, for 'condi-

tional agenda setting' by the Commission and the European Parliament, and for an independent causal role for the EU's supranational agents.

A third group of scholars reject LI entirely, opting for models of EU *governance* informed by comparative and American politics. Thus, for example, Gary Marks and his colleagues have argued that the EU should be understood as a system of 'multi-level governance', in which member governments, while still of importance, have become one among many subnational and supranational actors in a complex and unique system of governance (Hooghe and Marks, 1995, 1999; Marks and McAdam, 1996; Marks *et al.*, 1996a, b). Other scholars have drawn on the comparative politics literature to examine the workings of policy networks in the EU (Peterson, 1995a, b; Peterson and Bomberg, 1999), or to compare the EU to federal systems such as the United States which combine territorial and non-territorial principles of representation (Sbragia, 1994; Leibfried and Pierson, 1995), while social movement theorists have noted the rise of transnational social movements within the European Union (Tarrow, 1998; Imig and Tarrow, 2000). The culmination of this literature is arguably the governance approach to the European Union, ably described in this issue by Markus Jachtenfuchs, and criticized at length by Simon Hix (1998a). In the remainder of this article, I therefore concentrate on the two other approaches identified above, namely the new institutionalism in rational choice (which challenges Moravcsik's model of intergovernmental bargaining) and the constructivist or sociological institutionalist school (which challenges the rationalist model of preference formation).

Rational-choice Institutionalism

The new institutionalism(s) in political science did not, of course, originate in the field of EU studies, but reflected a gradual and diverse reintroduction of institutions into a large body of theories (such as behaviouralism, pluralism, Marxism, and neorealism) in which institutions were either absent or epiphenomenal. By contrast with these institution-free accounts of politics, which dominated American political science between the 1950s and the 1970s, three primary 'institutionalisms' developed during the course of the 1980s and early 1990s, each with a distinct definition of institutions and a distinct account of how they 'matter' in the study of politics. In rational-choice theory, scholars like William Riker and Kenneth Shepsle discovered that institutions, defined as the formal rules of the game, could induce an equilibrium outcome in games that would otherwise be subject to indeterminate 'cycling' among unstable decisions; and subsequent work attempted to model these institutions and their effects formally on the outcomes of collective choices, particularly in American politics. By contrast, sociological institutionalists defined institutions

much more broadly to include informal norms as well as formal rules, and they argued that such institutions ‘constitute’ actors, shaping the way in which we view the world, and a ‘logic of appropriateness’ for human behaviour. These scholars, together with their constructivist counterparts in IR theory, examined the process by which institutional norms are diffused and legitimized among actors in both domestic and international politics. Historical institutionalists, finally, took up a position in between the two camps, focusing on the effects of institutions *over time*, in particular the ways in which a given set of institutions, once established, can become subject to increasing returns or lock-in effects, constraining the behaviour of the actors who established them (Hall and Taylor, 1996).

Not surprisingly, all three of Hall and Taylor’s new institutionalisms have been adopted by students of European integration – with results that have been reviewed extensively elsewhere (see, e.g., Pollack, 1996; Jupille and Caporaso, 1999; Aspinwall and Schneider, 1999; Dowding, 2000). Interestingly for my purposes here, the initial applications of rational-choice institutionalism were a reaction against both neofunctionalism (which was rejected for its lack of microfoundations) and liberal intergovernmentalism (which was rejected for its minimalist account of EU institutions). Within this literature, scholars such as Geoffrey Garrett and George Tsebelis have established the general lines of rational-choice inquiry in the EU, as well as formally modelling the roles of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) and European Parliament, respectively.² Simplifying considerably, we can say that some of the earliest rational-choice work on the EU focused on the judicial process and the independence of the ECJ, while later work examined the questions of supra-national delegation and agency, as well as the EU legislative process and the agenda-setting role of the European Parliament.

In his early work on the EU, Garrett focused on the European Court of Justice, drawing on principal–agent (P–A) analysis to argue that the Court, as an agent of the EU’s member governments, was bound to follow the wishes of the most powerful Member States. These Member States, Garrett argued, had established the ECJ as a means to solve problems of incomplete contracting and monitoring compliance with EU obligations, and they rationally accepted ECJ jurisprudence, even when rulings went against them, because of their longer-term interest in the enforcement of EU law (Garrett, 1992). In such a setting, Garrett and Weingast (1993) argued, the ECJ might identify ‘constructed focal points’ among multiple equilibrium outcomes, but the Court was unlikely to rule against the preferences of powerful EU Member States, as

²This analysis omits discussion of Fritz Scharpf’s seminal (1988) article on ‘joint decision traps’ in the European Community, which was arguably the first rigorous application of rational-choice analysis to the EU, but was not followed up by subsequent work in the rational-choice tradition.

Burley and Mattli (1993) had suggested in a famous article drawing on neofunctionalist theory. Although Garrett's early work overestimated the control mechanisms available to powerful Member States and the ease of sanctioning an activist Court – resulting in a wave of critiques and empirical studies suggesting considerable judicial discretion (Mattli and Slaughter, 1995; Stone Sweet and Caporaso, 1998; Stone Sweet and Brunell, 1998a, b) – the approach has proved useful in the study of the Court, and rational-choice models of judicial policy-making have become more complex, and have been subjected to greater empirical testing in response to critics (see, e.g., Garrett, 1995; Garrett *et al.*, 1998; Kilroy, 1995; and the review in Mattli and Slaughter, 1998).

Related to this ECJ debate, another group of scholars have focused on the delegation of power to, and agency and agenda-setting by, supranational organizations such as the Commission. These studies generally begin by asking why and under what conditions a group of (Member State) *principals* might delegate powers to (supranational) *agents*, and they go on to examine the central question of principal–agent analysis: what if an agent – such as the European Commission, the Court of Justice, or the European Central Bank – behaves in ways that diverge from the preferences of the principals? The answer to this question in P–A analysis lies in the administrative procedures which the principals may establish to define *ex ante* the scope of agency activities, as well as the procedures which allow for *ex post* overseeing and sanctioning of errant agents. Applied to the European Union, principal–agent analysis therefore leads to the hypothesis that agency autonomy is likely to vary across issue-areas and over time, as a function of the preferences of the Member States, the distribution of information between principals and agents, and the decision rules governing the application of sanctions or the adoption of new legislation (Pollack, 1997; Tsebelis and Garrett, 2001).

Much of this literature on delegation and agency focuses on the rather arcane question of comitology, the committees of Member State representatives established to supervise the Commission in its implementation of EU law. Although often depicted by legal scholars as the site of technocratic deliberation, in which the aim is collective problem-solving rather than control over the Commission bureaucracy (Joerges and Neyer, 1997), comitology committees actually come in seven different variants with distinct voting rules. These have been shown in formal models to place varying degrees of constraint upon the Commission in its activities (Steunenberg *et al.*, 1996, 1997). In recent empirical studies, moreover, Dogan (1997) and Franchino (2000) demonstrate that the EU's Council of Ministers adopts systematically distinct committee structures across issue-areas, suggesting that comitology is indeed employed consciously as a control mechanism by Member States. Direct studies of

Commission agency, however, have been plagued by the phenomenon of rational anticipation, whereby an agent such as the Commission anticipates the reactions of its principals, and adjusts its behaviour to avoid the costly imposition of sanctions. If this is so, then agency behaviour that seems at first glance autonomous may in fact be subtly influenced by the preferences of the principals, even in the absence of any overt sanctions. Thus, although there is no shortage of empirical studies asserting an independent causal role for the Commission (see, e.g., the essays in Nugent, 1997), many of these studies are guilty of selecting on the dependent variable for most likely cases of Commission influence. Few make any attempt to identify the *conditions* for Commission influence, and even fewer attempt to deal systematically with the consequences of the 'law of anticipated reactions'. Schmidt (1997) and Pollack (1998) have undertaken preliminary efforts to test principal-agent hypotheses through the use of comparative case studies and process-tracing, but these cases do not constitute a representative sample of Commission activity, and the findings remain tentative.

A third and final strand within the rational-choice literature on the EU has attempted to model the EU legislative process, including both the relative voting power of Member States in the Council of Ministers, as well as the variable agenda-setting powers of the Commission and the European Parliament under different legislative procedures. As Dowding (2000) points out, this literature has thus far focused on three primary questions: (1) the utility of power-index analyses for the understanding of member governments' influence in the Council of Ministers (see, e.g., Garrett and Tsebelis, 1996, and the special issue of the *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 1999, Vol. 11, No. 3); (2) the conditions for the EP's agenda-setting powers under the cooperation procedure (see, e.g., Tsebelis, 1994; Moser, 1996a, b; Tsebelis, 1996); and (3) Tsebelis' controversial claim, based on a formal model, that the European Parliament has *lost* agenda-setting power in the transition from the cooperation procedure to the Maastricht version of co-decision (Tsebelis, 1997; Tsebelis and Garrett, 1997a, b; Crombez, 1997; Moser, 1997; Scully, 1997a, b, c, d). By and large, each of these debates has focused on the proper specification of the formal models in question, rather than on the empirical support for the models, with the result that these debates have been effectively 'tuned out' or disregarded by the majority of qualitatively oriented non-modellers in EU studies. In the past two years, however, several studies have appeared using both qualitative and quantitative methods to test the various models (Kreppel, 1999; Tsebelis and Kalandrakis, 1999; Tsebelis *et al.*, 1999), and the recent creation of two major databases of EP votes should increase the

quality and quantity of empirical tests in the years to come.³ Overlapping with these studies of the EU legislative procedure, finally, are the growing number of rational-choice analyses of decision-making *inside* the European Parliament, whose party system, committee procedures and voting behaviour have been studied by scholars in legislative studies (Tsebelis, 1995; Hix and Lord, 1997; Raunio, 1997; Scully, 1997a; Hix, 1998b, c; Kreppel and Tsebelis, 1999).

In short, the rational-choice approach to EU institutions has developed quickly over the past decade, beginning with Tsebelis and Garrett and their students in the United States, but spreading as well to rational-choice bastions in Europe such as Konstanz and the London School of Economics, where new generations of students are modelling an ever-growing array of legislative, executive and judicial procedures, and testing these models with both quantitative and qualitative evidence. From the perspective of non-rational-choice scholars, these studies may seem highly abstract, concerned more with theoretical elegance than with policy relevance, and somewhat off-putting in their claim to be doing 'real' social science. However, as Dowding (2000) points out, rational-choice scholars have made genuine progress in the past decade in both the specification of formal models and the gathering of empirical data to test them. More generally, rational-choice institutionalism holds the promise of re-examining old neofunctionalist topics like supranational agency, and doing so within a framework that provides theoretical microfoundations, testable hypotheses, and a set of assumptions broadly consistent with other rationalist approaches.

Liberal Intergovernmentalism Redefined

At this point in the story, we need to return briefly to Moravcsik, whose 1998 book, *The Choice for Europe*, elaborates on his original liberal intergovernmentalist model, while at the same time bringing that model closer to rational-choice institutionalism in terms of both core assumptions and the addition of an explicit theory of institutional choice as a third step in the model. At the level of basic assumptions, Moravcsik employs

a 'rationalist framework' of international cooperation. The term *framework* (as opposed to *theory* or *model*) is employed here to designate a set of assumptions that permit us to disaggregate a phenomenon we seek to explain – in this case, successive rounds of international negotiations – into elements each of which can be treated separately. More focused theories – each of

³ The first of these databases, collected by George Tsebelis with a grant from the National Science Foundation, is publicly available on Tsebelis' website («www.ucla.org/polsci/faculty/tsebelis»); the second is part of a larger multinational project on the 1999–2004 Parliament by the European Parliament Research Group, currently underway.

course consistent with the assumptions of the overall rationalist framework – are employed to explain each element. The elements are then aggregated to create a multicausal explanation of a large complex outcome such as a major multilateral agreement. (Moravcsik, 1998, pp. 19–20, emphasis in original)

Specifically, Moravcsik nests three complementary middle-range theories within his larger rationalist framework: a liberal theory of national preference formation, an intergovernmental theory of bargaining, and a new theory of institutional choice stressing the importance of credible commitments. The first two steps are familiar from Moravcsik's original (1993) statement of liberal intergovernmentalism, but the third is new, and most relevant in the context of the institutionalist literature discussed above.

Moravcsik begins his discussion of institutional choice by making explicit what had been implicit in his earlier works, namely that supranational organizations might enjoy greater agenda-setting powers (or other forms of influence) *outside* the five intergovernmental negotiations studied in the book:

While the formal powers of supranational officials and qualified majority voting do not extend to major treaty-amending negotiations – hence the scepticism about their influence over the bargains studied in this book – the everyday legislative process *within* the Treaty involves pooling of sovereignty in majority voting arrangements and substantial delegation directly to supranational officials. Here there is much variation. In some areas extensive powers of implementation and proposal have been delegated to central authorities. In others, qualified majority voting governs interstate decision-making. In still others, national vetoes and unanimity voting have been retained. How are the various choices of governments to delegate and pool sovereignty to be explained? (Moravcsik, 1998, p. 8, emphasis in original)

Moravcsik's answer to this question, moreover, bears a close resemblance to the views of a large number of rational-choice institutionalists. After rejecting two competing hypotheses which focus on ideology and technocratic expertise, respectively, Moravcsik develops a parsimonious model of institutional choice. In this model, the pooling and delegation of sovereignty serve as mechanisms to increase the credibility of Member State commitments, particularly in areas where member governments (or their successors) would have a strong temptation to defect from their previous agreements (Moravcsik, 1998, p. 9). In the empirical chapters of the book, Moravcsik seeks to support this claim, arguing that most decisions to pool or delegate sovereignty in the EU's constitutive Treaties can be understood as an effort to solve problems of incomplete contracting, monitoring and compliance.

My aim in the previous paragraphs was not to provide a comprehensive or critical review of Moravcsik's book – a task already undertaken at great length

by many of the leading scholars in the field (see, e.g., Wallace *et al.*, 1999) – but rather to suggest that Moravcsik's liberal intergovernmentalism, which was widely considered as a rival to rational-choice institutionalism only a few years ago (cf. Garrett and Tsebelis, 1996), in fact shares most of its basic assumptions, including the notion that states aggregate interests and act rationally to advance their preferences at the EU level, and that member governments rationally select institutions that are designed to maximize their utility (e.g. by allowing for credible commitments). In empirical terms, moreover, Moravcsik makes clear that his scepticism about supranational influence is limited essentially to claims about informal agenda-setting or entrepreneurship in unanimous treaty-amending decisions, and does *not* apply to the day-to-day policy-making within the treaties that is the bread and butter of rational-choice institutionalists. In other words, the primary difference between LI and a rational-choice institutionalist approach is one of empirical emphasis, with Moravcsik focusing on the intergovernmental choice of political institutions in IGCs, and institutionalists focusing primarily on the day-to-day workings of those institutions.

More generally, I would argue that liberal intergovernmentalism, rational-choice institutionalist analyses, and even Grieco's purportedly neorealist voice opportunities hypothesis are all part of an emerging rationalist research programme which is rapidly establishing itself as the dominant paradigm in European integration theory, at least in the United States. Whether we label this research programme 'liberal intergovernmentalism', 'rational-choice institutionalism', 'regime theory' or simply 'rationalism' is less important for our purposes than the fact that there exists in the United States (and increasingly in Europe) a community of scholars operating with similar basic assumptions and with few or no systematic differences in empirical findings across the 'isms'. Within this rationalist camp, we find not only Moravcsik with his tripartite grand theory, but also a large number of scholars putting forward 'middle-range theories' about delegation, legislation, political parties, regulation, judicial discretion, bureaucratic agency, and many other aspects of political life that are central to the EU as a polity, and generalizable beyond the EU to other domestic and international political systems. In any event, the differences in basic assumptions among these three approaches are minor in contrast to constructivist and sociological approaches, which question the basic assumptions underlying the rationalist approach, and indeed the very 'ontology' of such rationalist studies.

II. Constructivist Approaches

As Jeffrey Checkel (1998) has most lucidly pointed out, rational-choice institutionalists and constructivists generally agree that institutions *matter*, in the sense of exerting an independent causal influence (not reducible to other factors) in social life generally, and in international relations in particular. However, the two approaches differ fundamentally in their arguments about *how* institutions matter. Oversimplifying only slightly, rationalists generally define institutions as (formal or informal) rules of the game that provide incentives for rational actors to adopt certain strategies in pursuit of their (exogenously given) preferences. In contrast, constructivist scholars generally define institutions more broadly to include informal norms and intersubjective understandings as well as formal rules, and posit a more important and fundamental role for institutions, which *constitute* actors and shape not simply their incentives but their preferences and identities as well. In the view of such analysts, rational-choice approaches may capture some part of the effect of institutions, but they are incapable of grasping and theorizing about the more profound and important effects of institutions.

In the field of EU studies, numerous authors (Sandholtz, 1993; Risse, 1996; Jørgensen, 1997; Wind, 1997; Matlár, 1997; Lewis, 1998) have argued that EU institutions shape not only the behaviour but also the preferences and identities of individuals and Member States within Europe. This argument has been put most forcefully by Thomas Christiansen, Knud Erik Jørgensen, and Antje Wiener in their introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of European Public Policy* on 'The Social Construction of Europe':

A significant amount of evidence suggests that, as a process, European integration has a transformative impact on the European state system and its constituent units. European integration itself has changed over the years, and it is reasonable to assume that in the process agents' identity and subsequently their interests have equally changed. While this aspect of change can be theorized within constructivist perspectives, it will remain largely invisible in approaches that neglect processes of identity formation and/or assume interests to be given exogenously. (1999, p. 529, emphasis added; see also their elaboration on p. 538)

The authors go on to argue that a constructivist perspective is based on a 'broader and deeper ontology' than rationalist approaches, and can therefore offer a basis for understanding a broader range of 'social ontologies, i.e. identity, community, and collective intentionality' (Christiansen *et al.*, p. 533).

Although taken out of the context of a skilful review of the constructivist literatures in international relations and EU studies, these quotations – and numerous others from the literature – illustrate a tendency among constructiv-

ists to *assume* the existence of certain phenomena (or ‘ontologies’) such as identity or preference change as the starting point of analysis, and consequently to reject rationalist approaches for their purported inability to predict and explain these phenomena.⁴ As it happens, Christiansen *et al.* invited critiques from both a reflectivist perspective (by Steve Smith) and a rationalist perspective (by Andrew Moravcsik). Given the thrust of this article – namely that the rationalist perspective has become the dominant one in IR approaches to the EU, and that the rationalist–constructivist divide is the most salient theoretical cleavage in the contemporary literature – Moravcsik’s critique deserves further analysis here.

Constructivist theorists, according to Moravcsik (1999, p. 670), pose an interesting and important set of questions about the effects of European integration on individuals and states, which are worthy of study. Yet, Moravcsik argues, constructivists have failed to make a significant contribution to our empirical understanding of European integration, because – despite their general acceptance of social science and the importance of empirical confirmation of theoretical claims – most constructivists have shown a ‘characteristic unwillingness ... to place their claims at any real risk of empirical disconfirmation’. The problem, according to Moravcsik, is two-fold. First, constructivists typically fail to construct ‘distinctive testable hypotheses’, opting instead for broad interpretive frameworks that can make sense of almost any possible outcome, but are therefore not subject to falsification through empirical analysis. Such a failure is *not* endemic in constructivism, according to Moravcsik, but it is a common weakness in much of the literature.

Second, even if constructivists *do* posit hypotheses that are in principle falsifiable, they generally *do not* employ methods capable of distinguishing the predicted outcome from those predicted by alternative (rationalist) hypotheses. In the absence of such methods, Moravcsik argues, constructivists cannot be certain that their ‘confirming’ evidence is not in fact spurious, and that the observed phenomena might not be explained more parsimoniously by another (presumably rationalist) theory. He therefore concludes by encouraging constructivists to focus, not on the creation of more meta-theory, but on the specification of testable hypotheses, and on the rigorous empirical testing of such hypotheses against their rationalist counterparts (Moravcsik, 1999, p. 678).

Constructivists might, of course, respond that Moravcsik privileges rationalist explanations and sets a higher empirical and methodological standard for constructivists (since, after all, rationalists typically make no effort to demonstrate that preferences are *really* exogenously given and *not* shaped by

⁴ For similar claims, and similar rejections of rationalism, see, e.g., Sandholtz (1993, p. 3); Jørgensen (1997, pp. 5–6); Wind (1997, pp. 27–31); Matlary (1997, pp. 206–7); Risse and Wiener (1999).

institutions). Many reflectivist or post-positivist analysts, moreover, dispute the very project of social science, with its claims of objectivity and of an objective, knowable world, and would reject Moravcsik's call for falsifiable hypothesis-testing as a power-laden demand that 'nonconformist' theorists play according to the rules of rationalist, American, social science. In this sense, the EU debate over constructivism bears a striking resemblance to the earlier debate in IR theory sparked off by Keohane's (1989) call for reflectivists to develop 'a clear research programme that could be employed by students of world politics' (1989, p. 173). As Knud-Erik Jørgensen (1997, pp. 6–7) points out in an excellent review, Keohane's call became a standard reference in subsequent debates, with some analysts agreeing with Keohane's plea for a testable research programme, while others adopted the mantle of a defiant Dissent refusing to adopt the standards of a dominant Science.

Within the ranks of constructivist scholars, there remain a substantial number of post-positivist scholars who continue to reject hypothesis-testing and falsification as the standard of social-scientific work, and who arguably construct theories that are essentially unfalsifiable 'lenses' through which any outcome confirms the social construction of European identity and preferences. Nevertheless, if constructivism and rationalism are indeed emerging as the defining poles of international relations theory, as Katzenstein *et al.* (1998) have suggested, *and* if these two approaches begin with fundamentally different assumptions or 'ontologies' about the nature of agency and social interaction, then I would argue that we must necessarily fall back on careful, empirical testing of rationalist and constructivist hypotheses as the ultimate, and indeed the only, standard of what constitutes 'good work', and what constitutes support for one or other approach.

As Moravcsik points out, there is no inherent reason why constructivists cannot specify testable hypotheses, and indeed the past three years have witnessed a spate of constructivist works that attempt rigorously to test hypotheses about socialization, norm-diffusion, and collective preference formation in the European Union. Some of these studies, including Hooghe's extensive study of the attitudes of Commission officials and Beyers' survey of attitudes among national officials in Brussels, use quantitative methods to test hypotheses about the determinants of officials' attitudes, including socialization in national as well as European institutions. Such studies, undertaken with methodological rigour and with a frank reporting of findings, seem to demonstrate that EU-level socialization plays a relatively small role in the determination of elite attitudes by comparison with national-level socialization and other factors, or that EU socialization interacts with other factors in complex ways (Beyers, n.d.; Hooghe, 1999a, b, c). Other studies, including Checkel's (1999) study of citizenship norms in the Council of Europe, and Lewis's (1998)

analysis of decision-making in Coreper, utilize qualitative rather than quantitative methods, but are similarly designed to test falsifiable hypotheses about the conditions under which international norms are internalized by national officials, and focus on explaining *variation* in the acceptance of such norms. Such studies represent a significant maturation of the constructivist research programme on European integration, in which scholars like Checkel and Hooghe seem genuinely interested in understanding the conditions under which norms constitute actors, genuinely willing to subject their hypotheses to falsification, and genuinely prepared to report findings in which norms appear *not* to constitute actors. Above all, such studies promise to engage with rationalist theories and subject their hypotheses to the common standard of empirical testing, overcoming the current dialogue of the deaf among rationalists and constructivists in EU studies.

III. Conclusions

In place of the old neofunctionalist/intergovernmentalist dichotomy, the last half of the 1990s has witnessed the emergence of a new dichotomy in both IR theory and EU studies, pitting rationalist scholars, who generally depict European institutions as the products of conscious Member State design, against constructivist scholars who posit a more profound role for EU institutions in socializing and constituting the actors within them. Is this new dichotomy in international relations theory just a replay of the old neofunctionalist/intergovernmentalist debate under another name, or has the field actually progressed over the past decade? The question is a difficult one, and there is a real danger that the current line-up of rationalist and constructivist schools may devolve into a dialogue of the deaf, with rationalists dismissing constructivists as 'soft' and constructivists denouncing rationalists for their obsessive commitment to parsimony and formal models.

Nevertheless, on balance the current state of EU studies in international relations theory seems healthy, and superior to the old intergovernmentalist/neofunctionalist debate, in three ways. First, whereas the neofunctionalist/intergovernmentalist debate was limited almost exclusively to EU studies and contributed relatively little to the larger study of international relations, the rationalist/constructivist debate mirrors the larger debate among those same schools in international relations theory generally. Indeed, not only are EU studies *relevant* to the broader study of international relations, they are in many ways in the *vanguard* of international relations, insofar as the EU serves as a laboratory for broader processes such as globalization, institutionalization, and (possibly) norm diffusion and identity change.

There is, however, a second and perhaps more important virtue of the rationalist/constructivist debate in EU studies, which is that *both* schools are actively challenging the traditional distinction between international relations and comparative politics. Within the rationalist school, Putnam (1988), Milner (1998), Moravcsik (1998) and others have argued that the assumptions of rational choice allow us to model the interaction of domestic and international politics, including the effects of globalization on actor preferences and political outcomes at the domestic level, the aggregation of actor preferences within the domestic institutions of individual states, and the two-level games played by chiefs of government. The new institutionalism in rational-choice analysis, moreover, has allowed IR scholars to import theoretical concepts such as incomplete contracting, principal–agent relations, and agenda-setting to the field of international relations, thereby enriching IR theory and reducing its traditional parochialism and exceptionalism. Similarly, an increasing number of scholars in the constructivist tradition have begun to test domestically derived hypotheses about socialization at the international level, and about the interactions of international and domestic norms.

Third and finally, it seems clear that both rationalist and constructivist analyses have advanced considerably over the past decade, in both theoretical and empirical terms. At the start of the 1990s, the rational-choice literature on the European Union was in its infancy, concerned primarily with the elaboration of formal models in the absence of empirical testing, while the constructivist literature consisted of equally tentative assertions of collective identity and collective preference formation in the absence of brittle, falsifiable hypotheses. By the end of the decade, both approaches had produced more detailed models, testable hypotheses, and at least a few examples of ‘best practice’ in the empirical study of EU politics.

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