
Original Article

Using Europe: Strategic action in multi-level politics

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Abstract This article examines the importance of action-theoretical considerations in European studies. By outlining the notion of ‘usage’ of the European Union, we argue for a more systematically sociological consideration of strategic action in the study of European transformations. The recent turns towards constructivism and comparative political sociology allow analyzing the rationality of political actors without falling in the trap of overly reductionist rational choice assumptions. Concentrating on intentional action helps to reveal the importance of three aspects of the multi-level polity: (1) informal and non-constraining procedures; (2) the effects of ways in which actors move in between the different levels of the European political system; and (3) the ambiguous and often surprising coalitions that come together despite often considerable disagreement over their final goals.

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Introduction

The relationship between sociology and European studies is a complicated one. To be sure, sociologists from a variety of perspectives now extend their studies to the European Union (EU) (see Favell, 2006; Guiraudon and Favell, forthcoming). By contrast, in some parts of Europe, and most notably France, sociology was not absent, but almost too dominant to allow for a structured disciplinary dialog.¹ In the international literature, a focus on sociological mechanisms within the narrow field of EU studies became associated with the constructivist turn in international relations (for example Checkel, 2005). Yet few authors coming from sociology would categorize their work as part of this approach, which they feel consists of a great degree of simplification and a superficial theoretical analysis that does not reflect adequately the wealth of insights of classical sociology. Unfortunately, this contention remains implicit



in most studies and impedes a full-fledged dialog between international debates and the sociological contributions with a strong empirical focus.

One of the issues that could gain from such a dialog, and the one we would like to concentrate in this article, is the study of individual action and its role in the transformation of the European political system. With its emphasis on the micro-foundations of personal motivations, trajectories and behavior, a great number of sociological studies are well equipped to contribute to the ontological debate between rationalists and constructivists (see Jupille *et al*, 2003; Pollack, 2005; Checkel, 2007). Our ambition is to draw attention to studies of intentional action in the European Union, focusing in particular on the notion of ‘usage’ that we have developed as a contribution to the studies of Europeanization (Jacquot and Woll, 2003; Jacquot and Woll, 2004), and to argue for a more nuanced perspective on strategic action in European studies.

For many, strategic action belongs to the realm of rational choice theory, not sociology.² We argue that such an opposition is restrictive. Focusing on the social context of intentional action reveals the constitution and effects of strategic behavior that would be obscured by a categorical opposition between different action motives. It is therefore quite important to study the social construction of rational or strategic behavior.

Our article divides into two parts. We begin by situating our approach in the recent evolution of European studies: the move away from treating the European Union as a *sui generis* case and the sociological perspective on political action. A second part presents the notion of ‘usage’ as an example of a strategic action approach and highlights its insights, in particular (1) the importance of informal and non-constraining procedures; (2) the effects of ways in which actors move around in between the different levels of the European political system; and (3) the ambiguous and often surprising coalitions that come together despite often considerable disagreement over their final goals. The conclusion summarizes the lessons of this research agenda.

The European Union as a ‘Normal’ Object of Sociological Inquiry

The analysis of strategic action in the European Union is part of a twin evolution in European studies: the move away from treating the multi-level polity as a *sui generis* phenomenon and the turn towards sociological perspectives in its analysis.³

From normalization to Europeanization and back

Theory-building on European integration has concentrated since the 1960s on international cooperation within Europe before turning to the analysis of



policymaking within this new polity (Caporaso, 1996; Risse-Kappen, 1996). The original *sui generis* debate asked whether the European project was an unusual kind of regional integration project. In the 1990s, comparativists grew tired of the sometimes sterile debates between neo-functionalism and intergovernmentalism and called for the ‘normalization’ of EU studies (Hix, 1994; Hassenteufel and Surel, 2000): they argued that the characteristics of European policymaking are more effectively studied by comparing it to other political systems rather than treating it as a unique case. By the end of the 1990s, comparative scholars had become quite active contributors to the study of the European political system and relegated the macro-theories of international relations to the background (Hix, 1994; Lequesne and Smith, 1997). With respect to some dimensions, such as voting rules or the degree of federalism, an analysis of the EU institutions could only gain from the comparison with any other country even if they are not necessarily alike (for example Scharpf, 1988; Dehousse, 1994). A wealth of studies on the different mechanisms of European institutions followed in this comparative vein.

The unique characteristics of the European Union were no longer the object of theory-building, even if several authors provided analytical descriptions of the ‘multi-level governance’ system (Kohler-Koch and Eising, 1999; Marks and Hooghe, 2001) or the supranational ‘regulatory state’ (Majone, 1996).⁴ But comparativists also grappled with the effect of the supranational institutions on the national polities they compared and tried to understand the ‘impact’ of European integration on domestic politics. Within few years, these questions turned into a cottage industry under the label of ‘Europeanization’ (see Featherstone and Radaelli, 2003; Börzel and Risse, 2006; Graziano and Vink, 2007).

In this perspective, the ‘misfit’ model, which argues that change of domestic politics corresponds to the more or less profound gap between European policy proposals and national traditions, has long been most influential (Börzel and Risse, 2000; Caporaso *et al*, 2001). However, several authors have criticized its focus on institutional constraints, where policy actors are reduced to ‘mediating’ factors (Radaelli, 2001; Featherstone and Radaelli, 2003; Jacquot and Woll, 2004; Bruno *et al*, 2007).

Despite the relative insulation of Europeanization studies from more general social science debates, the questions that were asked about European integration actually opened the possibility of studying European politics (again) with the tools of mainstream policy analysis, comparative politics and sociology. The debate that emerged under the heading ‘Europeanization’ goes beyond the study of how supranational institutions exert adaptive pressures: it also asks what the relationship is between institutions and individual actors, how much agency remains, and how institutions evolve. To move beyond the misfit model to study not just institutional constraints, but also informal



politics and the cognitive dimension of multi-level policymaking allows understanding instances of deliberate policy changes in the absence of adaptive pressures. The European Union can become a vector of change by providing new resources, references and policy frames, which national policy actors use strategically. It therefore becomes crucial to understand what motivates these different strategies and to study the action of individual participants in the policy process. This ties EU studies to fundamental questions of institutionalist analysis and raises important epistemological and methodological issues, in particular by shedding light on the tensions between structure and agency or continuity and change.

A sociological perspective on political action in the European Union

The reason why sociological studies seem to talk past rational choice studies of the European Union is that they turn the focus of inquiry on its head (cf. Dobbin, 1994, p. 123). Rather than studying how universal laws generate social practice, they investigate how social practices generate the logics of European integration. The European Union is not construed as a geo-political or institutional game, where the distribution of resources or capacities creates incentives for action or constrains the participants, but rather as the reorganization of 'fields' (Favell, 2006, p. 127), that creates new social arrangements, opens up sites of contestation and differentially empowers a variety of actors. The task is therefore to understand what orients individual behavior and social practices, even in the absence of formal institutional constraints.⁵

This micro-perspective is characteristic of the French contributions on the European Union (see Smith, 2004).⁶ Romain Pasquier and his co-authors have called for a 'bottom-level' perspective on European studies, that concentrates on local actors and the ways in which they seize and interpret European rules and opportunities (Pasquier, 2002; Pasquier and Weisbein, 2004; Pasquier and Baisnée, 2007). Others have studied collective action and the constitution of transnational networks, with a focus on the sociology of social movements and political engagement (Chabanet, 2001; Guiraudon, 2001; Weisbein, 2001; Balme *et al.*, 2002; Weisbein, 2003) or citizenship and the identification of citizens with European ideals (Duchesne and Frogner, 2002; Strudel, 2002; Sauger *et al.*, 2007). More generally speaking, European public and private actors, be they part of the political elite or regular citizens, have been central to the analysis of change in the political system of the European Union (Georgakakis, 2002; Joana and Smith, 2002; Costa and Magnette, 2007).

Put differently, a micro-sociological perspective highlights the 'political work' of individuals (see also Jullien and Smith, 2008). Yet, in order to tie these



insights into the theoretical debates, we need to clarify how individual action is related to institutional change. Traditionally, intentional action has been analyzed in the institutionalist literature either from the perspective of rational choice theory as cost-benefit calculations⁷ or from a sociological perspective as appropriate behavior (March and Olsen, 1989). In the first case, interests are given and actors pursue them strategically, in the second, they co-evolve with the institutional setting (see Jupille and Caporaso, 1999). This theoretical opposition divides scholars on European integration and corresponds to the rationalist–constructivist divide in the international relations literature.

However, many authors have criticized the debate between rationalism and constructivism as a false opposition (Adler, 2002; Fearon and Wendt, 2002). To be sure, the two camps are divided on a number of ontological and epistemological questions, but rationality in itself is rather unproblematic. In their weakest form, rational choice approaches merely make one simple assumption: when faced with several options, an actor will choose whichever option allows obtaining the most advantageous final outcome. Constructivists insist on the fact that preferences are social phenomena and as such should not be held constant. Therefore, it is not the optimization hypotheses that poses a problem to the constructivists; it is the idea that whatever the individual value is given exogenously and does not change.⁸ For them, interests are context-dependant and multifaceted and cannot be resumed as a pure material cost-benefit calculation. It is thus the materialism that underlies many rational choice explanations that should be situated in opposition to constructivism, not rationalism in and of itself.

Indeed rationality and the study of strategies are not incompatible with a sociological perspective and need to be studied to understand how the European polity evolves. Understanding the social origins of political rationality clarifies the variation in strategies and highlights the cultural nature of instrumentality (Swidler, 1986; Dobbin, 1994). In her previous work, Woll (2008) has shown that it makes little sense to use economic ‘interests’ as the default starting point for policy analysis, because firms adjust their economic policy objectives in interaction with competitors and politicians. Firms behave rationally in pursuit of their objectives, once these are well defined. But if we want to understand the goals of their political lobbying activities, we have to study the ‘construction of economic rationality’, which happens as part of implicit or explicit political struggle. Similarly, both Le Galès (2001) and Schmidt (2000) have shown in their respective analyzes that reiterated confrontations between national and supranational actors can transform stakes and thus affect policy preferences. The actors that contribute to shape the rules of the game – in these cases the actors within the supranational institutions – can thus induce a change in the goals pursued by their opponents.



With this idea in mind, Jabko (2006) has criticized constructivists for their underestimation of strategic calculations on the part of political actors, especially when they design policy frames. The agreement on monetary union in Europe, for example, appears as a natural consequence of the decline of Keynesianism. In reality, new concepts such as a 'single market' are used strategically by actors, which try to create new policy coalitions. However, they cannot control all of the consequences of their choices and will eventually be transformed by the ones that are most effective. Labeling his approach 'strategic constructivism', Jabko insists on a necessary incorporation of the study of strategic behavior into the study of the social embeddedness of individual actors. Vivien Schmidt (2008) has regrouped analyses in this vein under the label 'discursive institutionalism', to signal where institutional change results from the ideational and discursive work of the actors operating within them.

In sum, the analysis of political strategies can gain from a sociological perspective that pays attention to the origins of the goals an actor pursues and the feedback effects a strategy can have on the identity and the preferences of the actor. Understanding political change as the result of multiple interactions between national and European politics helps to see that the actors at the heart of these processes use European opportunities strategically, but are also transformed by them in the process (Guiraudon, 2003; Sanchez Salgado, 2008).

The Usages of Europe: Strategies at the Heart of Political Work

We start from the premise that the political work of individual actors is central to understanding the orientation of political intervention in the European Union. Studying the ways in which actors make use of Europe helps to understand the nature of this work: how do they seize opportunities and work around constraints, and how do they interpret and transform both? Working on usages is thus first and foremost an approach that defines analytical priorities and should not be understood as a new theory or model.⁹ Indeed, it merely provides a focal point for phenomena that have long been acknowledged by policy analysts, such as blame shifting or multi-level games (cf. Menon, 2008). We begin by reviewing the notion of usage and then turn to its utility in recent studies of European politics.

The political usages of Europe

The ambition of the notion of political usages is to draw attention to the cognitive and strategic dynamics of European transformations in order to



caution against institutionalist analyzes that treat individual actors as simple transmission belts. Institutional contexts need to be interpreted and actors do not give automatic responses to political pressure: they can choose and learn and thus develop agency independent of structural conditions. By focusing on this agency, the notion of usages highlights how actors engage with, interpret, appropriate or ignore the dynamics of European integration. Their behavior is therefore central to the ways in which national political systems respond to supranational politics (and vice versa).

We have defined ‘usage of Europe’ as social practices that seize the European Union as a set of opportunities, be they institutional, ideological, political or organizational (Jacquot and Woll, 2003, p. 9). It is therefore important to distinguish between usages and the resources or constraints provided by the European Union. Resources and constraints are a necessary but not sufficient condition for strategic behavior. They are only contextual element that usages are based on; actors intentionally transform them into political practices in order to reach their goals. Making use of something implies voluntary action and thus intended meaning, but conscious and voluntary action does not mean that the final outcome is identical to the initial objective, as the effects of an action are often not entirely predictable or controllable. As strategic as usages may be initially, in the long run, it entails cognitive and/or normative adaptation by actors and their political environment, which in turn affects their subsequent behavior and positioning.

We have categorized usages according to their functionality and distinguish three main types (Jacquot and Woll 2003, 2004). *Cognitive usage* refers to the understanding and interpretation of a political subject and is most common in when issues are being defined or need to be discussed, so that ideas serve as persuasion mechanism. *Strategic usages* refer to the pursuit of clearly defined goals by trying to influence policy decision or one’s room for maneuver, helping to aggregate interests and to build coalition of heterogeneous actors – be it by increasing one’s access to the policy process or the number of political tools available. It is the most common of all types and occurs typically in the middle of the political process, once all stakes are clearly defined. *Legitimizing usage* occur when political decisions need to be communicated and justified. Actors rely on the image of ‘Europe’ to communicate implicit content or employ related discursive figures such as ‘the European interest’, ‘European constraints’, ‘the application of the Maastricht criteria’ to legitimate political choices. Cognitive usages are generally mobilized during the framing phase of a reform (which entails problem definition and the elaboration of policy alternatives), strategic usages are more concerned with the policy and decision-making phase, while legitimizing usages are linked with the general public and can take place up and downstream of the policy process (during the framing of the diagnosis and the solutions or during the justification of the reform).



Each of these three categories can be associated with the elements that are typically used in its pursuit, the actors that most commonly engage in it and political work pursued, are summarized in Table 1.

The motivations behind these different usages can be of three kinds. The first is a *logic of influence*: actors try to shape the content or the orientation of national or supranational stakes. The second is a *positioning logic*: here the goal is to improve one's institutional position in the policy process. Finally, the third is a *justification logic*, where actors try to obtain the support of other actors or the general public for decisions that are already taken.

The notion of usage makes particular references to the institutional setup of the European Union and the academic debate on European integration, but can in principle be extended. It has indeed been developed in the framework of the Europeanization literature in order to give flesh to and disaggregate the question 'How does the EU matter?' Its key concern are the specific resources provided by European integration (legal, institutional, budgetary, political, cognitive resources) and the types of actors who participate in the European policy process – at the intersection of the supranational and the national level. As an analytical tool, the notion of usages is consequently instrumental in examining the interaction between the European Union and its effects on the domestic level. However, focusing on the political work of actors can allow more generally to grasp the mechanisms of change at work in any multi-level polity and to shed some light on the concrete articulation between the different levels. In this sense, the study of usages could also contribute to a research agenda concerned with other complex institutional contexts or comparative regional integration functioning and impact (Warleigh-Lack, 2006; Telo, 2007).

Table 1: Characteristics of the different types of usage

	<i>Elements used</i>	<i>Type of actors</i>	<i>Political work</i>
Cognitive usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ideas ● Expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Political entrepreneurs ● Advocacy coalitions ● Public policy networks ● Experts ● Epistemic communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Argumentation ● Framing of political action ● Problem building
Strategic usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Institutions ● Legal resources ● Budgetary resources ● Political resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bureaucratic actors ● Decision-makers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Resource mobilisation
Legitimizing usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Public space ● Discursive references 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Politicians ● Lobbyists, special interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Justification ● Deliberation

Source: Adapted from Jacquot and Woll, 2004.



A heuristic notion?

Studying usages reveals how the redefinition of borderlines – geographical, sectoral or between the public and the private – has enabled actors to reinvent their role in the political game, be it in the definition of policy stakes and solutions or in the implementation process (Radaelli and Franchino, 2004). Concentrating on usages allows focusing on political actions and on the substance of political relations. It has helped to think differently about the central mechanisms of European transformation (Radaelli, 2004): How does the role of actors materialize? How do they appropriate the tools and resources offered by European integration to reach their goals? Who can (or cannot) make what type of usage of Europe and why?

By asking these questions, the analysis of usages draws attention to three specific dimensions: (1) the dynamics of informal and non-constraining procedures; (2) the movement of actors between the different policy levels; and (3) the importance of networks and coalition which form among actors with fundamentally different goals.

First, while formal procedures are important, informal procedures provide immediate resources that can help actors to increase their room for maneuver. One of the most illustrative examples is the open method of coordination (OMC), an experimental form of intergovernmental policy coordination, which has been used by some policymakers as a lever to bring about reform initiatives at the national level (Erhel *et al*, 2005; Heidenreich and Zeitlin, 2009). In the domain of pensions for instance, the OMC has become a resource for the economic and financial actors who sought to modernize the retirement system by developing employment of the elderly, cutting down early retirement options and increasing the privately financed part of pensions (Bruno *et al*, 2006). In his study of defence policy, Bastien Irondele (2003) shows that European references became crucial for reformers of the French military in 1996, even though defence is not very integrated at the European level. What might appear like a mere alibi of French elites to gather support for an unpopular reform triggered a complex process of change. The references to Europe entailed a profound discursive change within the French military, which increasingly included European imperatives in its objectives. The same mechanisms of resources seized in informal procedures thus operated in both examples.

All policy processes leave open some room for maneuver and thus requires the mediation of actors. It is not their *a priori* 'degree of coercion' that matters, but the usages that are made of them, their concrete implementation and the meaning that actors attach to them. Several authors have shown that the liberalization of service sectors has resulted from the strategic and creative expansion of competition policy instruments, which were applied in contexts



that previously fell outside of European intervention (Schmidt, 1998; Grossman, 2006; Woll, 2006).

This creativity brings us to our second point: the movement of actors between different policy levels. As several studies have shown, within different policy fields, the interpretation of rules and their usage tend to become routinized over time (Guiraudon, 2003; Mérand, 2008). Actors which can move around between different sectors or policy levels are therefore crucial for importing new rules or re-interpreting those already in place (Delazay and Rask Madsen, 2006). In this perspective, Bereni (2004) has demonstrated how the leaders of the French feminist movement have been able to employ institutional and cognitive resources at the European level to exert pressure and legitimize their demands at the national level. This ‘detour through Europe’ was crucial for advancing their calls for equal representation in France, which national actors had previously been able to block both legally and symbolically. Similarly, Toens (2006) analyzes how opportunities at the supranational level have enabled social associations in Germany to overcome the constraints of neo-corporatist consultation procedures at the national level and employ innovative lobbying strategies.

Rather than looking for the often impalpable ‘influence of the EU’, the multi-level usages of Europe allow studying whether and how the European Union has been instrumentalized by policy actors to help them stall or advance on their reform projects, be it through providing bargaining assets, legitimization, room for maneuver, blame avoidance or power increases (Jacquot, 2008). Focusing on the dimension of the usages is helpful to understand domestic reform processes, because it becomes possible to investigate the actual causal links that constitute the often invoked ‘impact of the EU on national settings’ (Graziano *et al.*, 2009).

Thirdly, the study of usages and strategic action allow analyzing the heterogeneous coalitions that form around different policy issues, because they draw attention to the difference between the cognitive frames employed and the motivations of political actors. Distinguishing between these two is crucial for revealing the tensions that can exist behind an apparent political agreement. To go beyond superficial agreement helps to study the power relations between different actors, even when they do not play out in open conflict (Woll, 2007).

Palier (2005) has called this phenomenon ‘ambiguous agreement’ and shows how such heterogeneous coalitions have pushed for social policy reforms such as pensions, health care or legislation on social security financing. Jacquot (2006, forthcoming) has studied the institutionalization of gender mainstreaming as a policy instrument. She shows that its acceptance by both conservative and progressive actors depended crucially on the ambiguity of its meaning and distinguishes between conformist, purist, realist and opportunist usages. Jabko (2006) in turn shows that European integration hinged on coalitions of the ‘strange bedfellows’ that included federalists, national governments eager to



defend their *status quo*, economic liberals and those that sought to counter the pressures of globalization.

Studying the possibilities for such strategies highlights the profoundly political nature of interventions that might otherwise appear as a simple court case, a bureaucratic judgement or the implementation of a European directive. Scharpf (2008), for example, has recently criticized three ruling of the European Court of Justice concerning the right to strike and the reach of industrial agreements in the European Union. According to him, the judges did not just implement what had previously been agreed upon by the member-states, but went far beyond their mandate. As firms have used the European court by hoping for such judicial activism, trade union ended up finding themselves severely disadvantaged despite the fact that the existing industrial relations arrangements had remained unchallenged within their domestic contexts. Moving arenas and being able to appeal to a different set of images or rules is thus part and parcel of the reconfiguration of political conflict in Europe. Concentrating on formal rules and their implementation would leave some of the most striking features of this transformation in the dark.

These three venues of research are both at the heart of recent developments in European integration dynamics and underestimated or ignored in analyzes that concentrate only on the institutional setting. Consequently, we argue that studying usages is necessary in order to further analyze the influence of the European Union in contemporary political changes by deciphering the evolving balance of power around policy issues.

Conclusion

To conclude, we would like to make three observations. First of all, the increasing importance of usages in European policy practice over time corresponds to the changes in the nature of European integration. The most visible areas of harmonization and the importance of the Community method now exist alongside new coordination mechanisms, non-binding procedures and the commitment to preserve national policy solutions. The multiplicity of new governance modes in turn requires new analytical tools for studying the room for maneuver that results from these experimental approaches to understand if and how they lead to social and policy change.

Secondly, we would like to emphasize that not everything in the European Union is strategic usage and that not all actors have the same action capacities. The process of European integration opens up a large realm of possibilities for many actors, but political work implies conflict and power relations and not all actors are able to use the resources provided by the European Union equally. Moreover, usages are by no means an automatic response to new options, as



Rozenberg (2004) has shown. However, just like the study of non-decisions, instances of non-usage give important indications about the power relations, the configuration of interests or the constraints that curtail political innovation through individual action.

Finally, at the theoretical level, the specificity of our approach lies in the sociological perspective on rational action. We are interested in the incentive systems actors face at multiple levels, but consider them to do more than produce automatic responses by reacting innovatively and creatively in many instances that we try to consider systematically. Moreover, even though the political work is often strategic and can trigger change, none of the actors oversee and control the effects of their actions entirely. As we have argued, the movement of actors and the heterogeneous coalitions they form constitute intentional actions, but have profound effects on the actors and their long-term objectives. Understanding why individual initiatives succeed and fail to gather collective support, which ideas are carried within groups and which institutional conditions limit political creativity are therefore necessary parts of a research agenda concentrating on the micro-level of political change in the European Union. For traditional EU theorists, this might be an uncomfortable exercise, because it makes the study of the European Union as complex as the study of all human action and therefore drives another nail in the coffin of a unitary ‘EU theory’.

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Notes

- 1 Bastien Irondelle (2006) has noted the ‘hegemonic’ influence of sociology over political science: even subfields such as French international relations theory are more accurately described as international political sociology.
- 2 According to March and Olsen (1989), rational choice approaches understand human behaviour in terms of expected effects (‘logic of consequentiality’), while sociological approaches concentrate on social reasons for action (‘logic of appropriateness’).
- 3 The sociological turn is arguably much larger than just action-theoretical considerations, but a complete discussion would go beyond the scope of this article. See Saurugger (introduction to this special issue) and Favell (2006).
- 4 A recent attempt to provide a new EU theory is Hooghe and Marks’ (2009) postfunctionalist theory. Their empirical work highlights the importance of identity and not just economic variables for the organization of political conflict in the European Union, but it remains to be seen how far this actually constitute a ‘theory’ of European integration.
- 5 Institutions are here understood as formal or legal constraints, in line with traditional EU studies. From a sociological perspective, informal institutions are, of course, equally important (see for example Fligstein and Stone Sweet, 2002).
- 6 The distinction between national traditions is necessarily simplified. ‘French author’ refers loosely to scholars that produce the majority of their scientific writing for a French-speaking audience. Reviewing parts of the ‘French tradition’ allows us to make theoretical distinctions that are relevant for the evolution of theorizing about the European Union, but we acknowledge that this is neither an exclusive category, nor does it accurately describe all scientific production on the European Union in France.
- 7 The work of Geoffrey Garret or George Tsebelis are typical illustrations of this current, as are most articles published in the journal *European Union Politics*, which one could consider as the flagship journal of rationalist approaches to European studies.
- 8 For Jon Elster (1986), ‘thin’ rationality only requires that an action be coherent with the objectives of the individual, whatever they may be. Only ‘thick’ rationality, which contains an assumption by the analyst about the goals of the actor studied, has been the target of the sociological or constructivist critics.
- 9 Our approach shares a number of assumptions with what Mayntz and Scharpf (1995) have called actor-centred institutionalism and draws from diverse currants of action theory in the more general sociological literature.

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