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The Cognitive Turn(s) in EU Studies

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Research Papers from the Department of Social Sciences, Roskilde University, Denmark.

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Abstract

The claim that ideas play a central role in the European integration process has been recently gaining a large resonance among EU scholars. The reason for such cognitive turn(s) can be partly explained by the important transformations of EU politics and EU theories since the beginning of the 1990s. This paper identifies a strong/weak cognitivist divide in EU scholarship, and within the second, at least three different lines of academic inquiry about the role of ideas in the EU politics. The current paper points to three inter-related dimensions of the notion of ideas: instrumental, cognitive and normative, arguing that the diversity of the reviewed scholarly interpretations is due to their respective emphasis on one or another of these three dimensions. Furthermore, this three-dimensional conceptualisation of ideas facilitates a partial re-consideration of the relationship between ideas-institutions and ideas-interests in the European polity.

Keywords: European Union, theory, ideas, international relations, constructivism.

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1. Introduction

The way in which ideas influence politics has, for more than a decade, become a central question in the research strategies of comparative politics and international relations. Interesting reviews of this academic trend indicate the broad research questions opening up along these lines (Jacobsen 1995; Yee 1996; Blyth 1997). However, these analytical concerns have only slowly, and recently, arrived at EU studies. The main reason for such a relative delay has to do with the particularities and contours of the debates within EU scholarship. Despite the broad spectrum of theoretical and analytical frameworks that have characterized European studies, most of the debates since the 1970s have tended to be almost exclusively devoted to examining the role of national/private interests and the role of formal/informal institutions in this supra-national context. Issues like preference formation, the delegation of authority, agenda setting and autonomy of EU institutions have for long dominated the inquires about the policy-making and the integration process in Europe (Moravcsik 1995) (Peters 1994) (Pollack 1997) (Bulmer 1994; Pierson 1998). Several critical reviews of the integration theories have stressed the persistence of this cleavage in European studies and its in-built explanatory limits (Branch and Øhrgaard 1999) (Cram 1997) (Kelstrup 1998). One of these limits is the lack of attention to the role of ideas, which have not been perceived as an autonomous variable, and therefore they have never been conceptually clarified nor analytically operationalized. Only neo-functionalism, at an early stage of integration theory, tried to provide an account of “the shared body of ideas that bound together coalitions of élites” (Wallace 1996). But after the dismissal of their theoretical framework, especially the predictive attempt of the ‘spill over’ effect, ideas or shared beliefs hardly became a subject of study in themselves until the late 1990s.

The claim that shared beliefs, worldviews and ideas play a central role in the integration process has recently been gaining ground among EU scholars in line with the growing acceptance that ideas constitute the abstract and intellectual basis for the specific historical forms of European construction. Understood either as a new supra-national polity, or as a result of inter-state bargainings, ideas play a role in the European political action in determining the decisions about whether to allocate specific competences to the EU level and about how to design European action accordingly¹. Other studies have addressed the different and competing ideas of Europe, examining how they relate to identity formation, and to new economic projects.

The reason for this new focus within EU studies should not be understood as merely being a new fashion among the academic community (Majone 1996). Two important transformations since that date, notoriously in EU politics and in the theoretical/methodological sphere, might help understanding the cognitive turn. Changes in EU politics have been quite salient in the 1990s. To start with political questions, the legitimacy problem after Maastricht sent important shock waves to the political elite and to the students of the integration process.

¹ The decisions about where to allocate competences and how to design European action are intrinsically interrelated, and can also be seen as the substantiation of the subsidiarity principle, through which further EU action is formally and officially rationalized.

“So far, the EU literature has largely ignored ideas and communicative processes or treated them as epiphenomenal compared to instrumental rationality. Only the recent legitimacy crisis of the EU, which became apparent during the ratification debates of the Maastricht Treaties in many Member States has opened intellectual space for examining the role of ideas and collective identities in European politics” (Risse-Kappen 1996: 59).

The Maastricht interlude showed that social attitudes, political values and cultural perceptions are the foundation of the European construction (O’Neill 1996). Indeed, not all can be explained in relation to the legitimacy problem. The 1990s have seen two ambitious political projects of the integration process, namely, Economic and Monetary Union, and the future enlargement eastwards. In their attempts to provide coherent explanations of the EMU project, scholars have been aware of the influence that specific economic ideas have had on this political process. Similarly, the challenges of the projected enlargement pose the question about what kind of EU we want, and have opened political debates about the diverse projects of Europe.

A second important change has to do with the theoretical/methodological context in EU studies during the 1990s. The emergence of the ‘new governance’ perspective (Hix 1998), has provided a new ground for considering the semi-autonomous role of ideas in the construction of Europe. Focusing on the non-hierarchical and polycentric nature of the governing process in the EU opens up the possibility of considering how ideas (understood as the intellectual and abstract frameworks for social and public action) relate to the process of policy-making and to the construction of a new type of political order. In the same vein, the emergence of the social-constructivist school in EU studies comes up with new theoretical and meta-theoretical considerations. For these scholars ideas and identity are ineluctably bounded each other, and are the essential elements in the process of integration and in policy making by providing meaning and relevance.

This double context is the background for a growing attention to the role of ideas in EU studies. However, and despite its novelty, the cognitive turn is quite dispersed, stemming from different lines of academic research. This dispersion is so salient that it might even question whether we can talk about one or several cognitive turns. Much of the ideational focus relates to similar debates in comparative politics and in international relations. This means that the theoretical and methodological developments along this line in EU studies follow, very closely, those already existing in other schools of social studies. Rather than being in the avant-garde of conceptual developments, EU scholarship has tended to introduce those into its field of analysis.

This paper critically reviews the cognitive turn(s) of EU studies. The first section introduces the distinction between strong and weak cognitivists. Next section is devoted to the new governance perspective, which generally follows the weak cognitivist approach. The third section conceptualises/operationalises the notion of ideas along three inter-dependent dimensions, instrumental, cognitive and normative. And the final section elaborates on the way in which the relationship between interest and ideas, and between institutions and ideas can be re-considered under this tri-dimensional conceptualization. The conclusions summarize the

findings and discussion of this paper pointing out the potential that this conceptualisation offers for European studies.

THE COGNITIVE TURN IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND EUROPEAN STUDIES.

It is somewhat striking that the question about how ideas influence EU politics has been so ignored in previous theoretical frameworks, and that it has only recently become a salient issue. Indeed, the same could be said about the theoretical debates within the field of international relations, within which some of the EU-related debates have taken place. In introducing the general outlines of these, the current section will focus mainly on the frameworks developed by reflectivists and social constructivists, whereas successive sections will examine how liberal inter-governmentalists and the ‘new governance’ perspective have addressed this topic. The reason for undertaking such a strategy is purely for the narrative purposes of this paper². The reflectivist account of the cognitive dimension in international and European politics is grounded in substantially different ontological and epistemological premises than the mainstream theories of international relations. By introducing such differences we can critically understand that the way in which ideas and the cognitive processes are theoretically tackled has tremendous effects not only on how the research object is identified, but on the overall research exercise as such.

The recent cognitive turn in various schools of international relations is based on the shared notion that ideas are important explanatory variables, and that within this notion there is a critique of the rationalist assumptions implicit in previous schools. However, the dividing line between them is essentially how far and radical the criticism of the rationalist assumptions should be. On the basis of this, Hassenclever, Mayer and Rittberger have developed a two-sided distinction of the cognitivists that might be useful for our purpose of identifying this turn in European studies: weak and strong cognitivists.

“While weak cognitivists regard the problem of mainstream (i.e. neoliberal and realist) approaches to the study of international regimes as one of (essential) incompleteness, strong cognitivists challenge the rationalist mode of analysis in international relations theory (and other branches of social inquiry) more fundamentally, suggesting a replacement of the homo oeconomicus by the homo sociologicus as the microanalytical foundation of social theorizing” (Hasenclever, Mayer et al. 1997: 136-7).

European studies have recently experienced the emergence of this school of strong cognitivists under the social-constructivist/reflective approach³. The reflective

² I am aware that this distinction is problematic because reflectivist studies so far have generally followed the governance paradigm, and because constructivism is a meta-theoretical and philosophical framework, rather than a theory as such.

³ In this study I refer inter-changeably to constructivism and reflectivism as they are based on the similar philosophical, ontological and epistemological premises. Alternatively, some authors try to distance both of them, placing the first as a middle ground between the second and realism within the schools of international relations (Christiansen, Jørgensen et al. 1999). I do not share this view.

approach to the European integration is in a rather early phase (Jørgensen 1997). This might be explained partly by the gradual emergence of the reflectivist approach in IR itself, and the controversies it has provoked about its research agenda (Checkel 1998). And partly, by the dominance of the rationalist approach in the conventional theories of European integration.

Strong cognitivism

As said, the reflective and constructivist approach to IR criticises the rationalist assumptions of previous schools. It emphasizes the essential embeddedness of actors in institutions and rules, an understanding that is diametrically opposed to the utility-maximizer, rational actor of the other schools. This means that reflectivists tend to follow a rather structurationist approach to the study of international relations, as an alternative to the methodological individualism of the former. This is the main argument behind the ‘homo sociologicus’ vs. ‘homo economicus’ perspectives mentioned earlier, and the reason why reflectivists openly subscribe to a ‘sociological’ approach in IR. These ontological divergences are also reflected in their respective epistemology, that is, in the way in which social science is understood. The rationalist premises of mainstream IR schools subscribes to a positivist understanding of science where values and facts are clearly discernable. These social facts follow regularities and can be grasped and explained coherently, identifying the correct causality link through testable hypothesis. Against this epistemology, reflectivists follow the philosophical tradition of phenomenology that has for long questioned the distinction between facts and values, and indeed the nature of the scientific exercise. This understanding has powerful effects on the way in which social science is constituted, and this is also obviously so in the domain of international politics.

Followers of the reflective school in European governance argue the advantages in these terms ‘ (...) we find that reflective approaches are not only appropriate – they have a clear analytical advantage. Why? Because social institutions and intersubjective meanings also constitute part of European governance.’ (Jørgensen 1997: 5). Looking at the forms of European governance as a supra-national polity in the making naturally falls into the scope of the heuristic line of the strong cognitivists. The European construction, as the construction of a new political order of trans-national dimension, inherently entails a new understanding of the self and of the other. And this is based on intersubjectivity and on the reconstruction and re-interpretation of previously existing socially constructed meanings, mainly the idea of the nation-state.

“Constructivism focuses on social ontologies including such diverse phenomena as, for example, intersubjective meanings, norms, rules, institutions, routinized practices, discourse, constitutive and/or deliberative processes, symbolic politics, imagined and/or epistemic communities, communicative action, collective identity formation, and culture of national security.” (Christiansen, Jørgensen et al. 1999:4).

Moving beyond the criticism of the rationalistic assumptions and micro-foundations of social action held by inter-governmentalists (Wind 1997), EU social constructivists are now engaged in the design of a new research agenda, which focuses on these issues (Christiansen, Jørgensen et al. 1999). Some of them are interested in the question of legitimacy, identity and ideas in the construction of a

supra-national polity (Marcussen 1999; Risse 1999), others in security aspects (Wæver 1998), still others in the European Court of Justice and the construction of the EU legal order (Wind), and others in treaty reforms (Christiansen and Jørgensen 1999). These works point to a rather wide research area, which has recently been re-articulated under a threefold constructivist research program based on rules and norms in European governance, political community and identity-formation, and discourses and communicative action (Christiansen, Jørgensen et al. 1999).

For our review purposes, it is interesting to see how this emerging constructivist school addresses the question of ideas in the EU context more explicitly. By emphasizing the advantages of constructivism to explain transformation processes (as opposed to static notions of previous theorising), these authors consider ideas mainly in endogenous terms. Ideas are endogenously bounded to the European construction, and are especially related to the (trans)formation of identities. Therefore, they are essential elements to explain the sui-generis nature of European integration. In those terms, the European integration process must be generally seen as the process of constructing a meaning for the new order, a new self, based on multiple identities co-existing in (dis)harmony, and based on collectively shared values and norms. This has important analytical consequences, namely, “(...) if we start conceptualizing the EU as an emerging polity of collectively shared values and norms, we must incorporate communicative rationality in our efforts at theorizing about the nature of the beast” (Risse-Kappen 1996:70).

Communicative rationality is the cognitive process through which ideas are developed and shared in a communitarian way by elites, and these ideas can work powerfully as they reach consensus-like agreements. This means that

“If we want to understand the process by which norms are internalized and ideas become consensual, we need to leave behind the logic of rational utility-maximizing actors, and incorporate the logic of communicative action. This does not mean that ideas cannot be used in an instrumental way to legitimize or delegitimize policies motivated by purely material interests. However, the ‘power’ of ideas in such instances is linked to their consensuality. Ideas become consensual when actors start believing in their value and become convinced of their validity. In other words, communicative processes are a necessary condition for ideas to become consensual” (Risse-Kappen 1996:70).

Risse’s point is that communicative and deliberative processes co-exist with the ones based on instrumental rationality. Differences are explained due to types of politics: firstly interlocking politics, and secondly intergovernmental bargaining (1996:72).

In the view of strong cognitivists, represented by constructivism, I see an essentially unclear question at this point. If, as Risse argues, instrumental rationality and strategic bargaining co-exist in the European polity, and should not be conceptualized as two opposing modes of social action, are we not approaching an ontological eclecticism? To what extent is it possible for constructivists, being strong cognitivists, to accept such a postulate about the co-existence of the social and material ontology? Is this not a ‘softening’ of the philosophical positions of these scholars, moving towards a weak cognitivism?

Weak cognitivists

Weak cognitivists represent a less radical criticism to rationalism in the sense that they assume that no alternative hermeneutics and conception of social sciences is needed when addressing the question of ideas.

“Unlike these (reflectivist) critics, however, we do not wish to engage in epistemological debates about the origins of preferences and about structure versus agency. Rather, we simply hope to show that microfoundational and ideational approaches are not mutually irreconcilable and indeed may very fruitfully be integrated.” (Garrett and Weingast 1993: 183).

Therefore, their point of departure is to complement previous theories by stressing the cognitive dimension of politics and policy-making. The interpretative dimension of international politics is important, because co-operation between states can only take place once the actors have a minimum of shared understanding of what problems are.

Weak cognitivism cannot be considered a school in itself because large theoretical differences persist among them. Instead, the term ‘weak cognitivists’ should be interpreted as broadly serving our purpose to indicate the different implications of the cognitive turn in conventional theories of international relations, and of European politics. These do not question previous ontological or epistemological assumptions, and have so far developed their analytical frameworks from conventional meta-theoretical premises.

Inter-governmentalism: too weak a cognitivism?

This section devotes its attention to one of the most salient examples of how rational institutionalism addresses the issue of ideas in EU politics, namely, the work of Garrett and Weingast in the edited volume of Goldstein and Keohane (1993). EU inter-governmentalists generally follow the notion of the IR liberal institutionalists that ideas are an interesting, yet auxiliary explanatory variable. This is mainly to be found in the way that they see the relationship between ideas and interests. For authors like Goldsmith and Keohane, ideas are an important variable explaining changes in foreign policy formulation and in international politics in general, but ‘in conjunction with other changes, either in material interests or in power constellations.’ (Goldstein and Keohane 1993:25). Garrett and Weingast materialist approach becomes evident in their essentially state-centric perspective of the EU, looking at ideas as essentially being the other side of the national interest. Under changing power structures ideas might have a political impact by re-aligning interests. Similarly, continuity is explained by the institutionlisation of ideas, accomplishing an instrumental function in regime maintenance. Later in their argumentation, these two authors more openly deny the notion that ideas might have an autonomous role. Quite the opposite, ideas are essentially constrained by interests because the former are a utility of the later. ‘More generally, the force of ideas is neither random nor independent. Only certain ideas have properties that may lead to their selection by political actors and to their institutionalization and perpetuation. It is not something intrinsic to ideas that gives them their power, but their utility in helping actors achieve their desired ends under prevailing constraints.’ (Garrett and Weingast 1993:178). This means that both, institutions

and ideas are unavoidably linked to (national) interests in the European (integration) co-operation. Blyth has also strongly criticized this understanding of ideas (1997). In his words concerning Garrett and Weingast

“(...) ideas are either signaling devices designed to increase information flows, or they are synonymous with institutions. If they are signaling devices, then their role is extremely circumscribed. If they are synonymous with institutions, then they are simply an ad hoc addendum to institutional economics.” (Blyth 1997:243).

Nevertheless, scholars of European integration studies who follow the supranational governance tradition do not share this rather restrictive interpretation of institutions and ideas. The premises of weak cognitivists have recently emerged within this tradition. And they have done so from at least three different theoretical and empirical starting points. The next section deals with them and explores the growing convergence of academic studies on the role of ideas as (semi-)autonomous variables in the politics and policy-making of the EU.

SUPRANATIONAL GOVERNANCE AND THE ROLE OF IDEAS

Having seen the extreme weakness of the cognitive turn of the inter-governmentalists, we will now overview how the new governance perspective in EU studies has increasingly approached the issue of ideas. It is my claim that this academic attention has been emerging from three different, yet converging, lines of inquiry all of them within the large boundaries of the new governance research agenda. This agenda has been developing rapidly since the 1990s in relation to a novel theoretical framework which suggests that the current forms of political order are moving towards new forms of governance (Kooiman 1993; Rhodes 1997). In EU studies, the debates about supranational governance generally share some assumptions about the sui generis form of the EU political order, which is based on a unique set of non-hierarchical and regulatory institutions, and a mix of state and non-state actors (Hix 1998:39). The EU is a new form of political organisation ‘located somewhere in the middle of an imagined continuum between horizontal (market, international system) and vertical (hierarchical state) organisation.’ (Jachtenfuchs 1995:124). In this sense, the EU represents one of the most conspicuous examples of international governance, which is not based on the territorially defined nation-state (Rosenau 1992).

Governance studies are quite wide, and have tended to follow distinct lines within EU studies. This diversity becomes evident when examining how the governance perspective has approached the issue of ideas. I have identified at least three clear analytical lines tackling this topic, namely, policy analysis, political economy and the more general debates about the forms of supranational governance. The table above summarises their most striking analytical elements: the research focus, their level of analysis and their respective identification of the social actors.

Table 1: Three lines of the ideational turn within the supranational governance perspective

| | Focus on | Level of analysis | Who's ideas |
|--------------------------------|--|--|---|
| 1. Actor-based policy analysis | Ideas in the EU policy-making process | Micro and meso: agenda setting and shaping of single EU policies, functionally divided. | Policy networks (epistemic communities, advocacy coalitions), and experts. |
| 2. Political economy | The politics of economic ideas in the construction of a supra-national economic order. | Meso and macro: The shaping of economic policies and the political economy of capitalist regulation. | At meso level: professionals, economists, central bankers. At macro level: people(s) and elites. |
| 3. Supra-national governance | Ideas and legitimacy in the European political construction | Macro: Political images of a legitimate Europe. Public/elite support. | European people(s)/elites. |

Policy analysis

Studies of the EU policy process have recently paid more attention to the role of ideas in two interrelated ways. Firstly, there has been an emphasis on the way in which ideas are an important variable understanding changes of individual policies through time (Richardson 1996; Sabatier 1998), and understanding the functional expansion of EU involvement through the particularities of the EU agenda-setting (Peters 1994). And secondly, there has been an increasing scholarly debate about the large influence of scientific knowledge and experts in EU policy-making (Schendelen van 1998) (Mazey and Richardson 1995; Dehousse 1997), and the problems it poses for the democratic accountability in the development of this trans-national polity (Wallace and Smith 1995; Radaelli 1999). In general terms, it can be said that both ways are deeply interrelated, and they both owe much to similar debates within the wide fields of public administration and policy analysis, under comparative politics (Albæk 1995; Yee 1996). As for the first, the focus has mainly been on trans-national policy networks and how decisions are taken through a deliberation process where resources are exchanged, following an actor-based account of policy-making. Knowledge and information are key resources, indicating that deliberation it does not only entail negotiations between pre-fixed interests, but the exchange and development of ideas where the interests are also defined (Majone 1993). Notions like policy networks (Kenis and Schneider 1991; Kickert, Klijn et al. 1997), advocacy coalitions (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993) and epistemic communities (Haas 1992), have recently started to be used at EU level (Peterson 1992; Peterson 1995) (Zito 1995) (Schneider, Dang-Nguyen et al. 1994; Lawton 1997; Kluth 1998). This also follows the understanding that conventional theoretical focuses on (national) interests provide limited instruments for understanding the complexity of the decision-making process at this supra-national

level. Ideas play an important role in the policy deliberation phase and in the overall development of the European Union as a polity due to the functional differentiation and emergence of networks where experts play a fundamental role. The importance of technical and scientific expertise is a crucial point addressed by some scholars within this line of inquiry. The question is whether the ability of states to control the overall policy process is seriously undermined in such a complex context of institutional arrangements (Dehousse 1997).

Political economy

The second of the lines of inquiry shown in the table falls under the studies of political economy. As a consequence of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) project, scholars of economic integration have become more aware of the political choices and values involved in EU decisions. Visions and normative premises about how market, society and public authority relate to each other have always deeply influenced the path and pace of European integration. The novelty is that analysts are now re-discovering the role of ideas because they are being confronted with the importance of the political choices involved in these recent transformations of the EU's political economy. As Weiler has pointed out, one of the most salient political effects of the 1992 project was the break from the (supposed) ideological neutrality of the Community, as the public opinion became more aware of the ideological choices (Weiler 1995:33). This runs parallel to the ideational turn in comparative political economy (Blyth, 1997), of which Hall has been the most eminent proponent:

“To neglect the role of ideas in political economy, is to miss an important component of the economic and political worlds. It is ideas, in the form of economic theories and the policies developed from them, that enable national leaders to chart a course through turbulent economic times, and ideas about what is efficient, expedient, and just that motivate the movement from one line of policy to another.” (Hall 1989:361).

The ideational turn of the EU political economists has been driven by two main research questions. The first, what the table identifies as the meso level, has to do with the role that ideas have played in shaping key economic policies. Of special relevance has been the attention to the EMU project and how economic theories embedded in expert communities have been behind its successful launch in the mid-late 1990s (Tsoukalis and Rhodes 1997; Marcussen 1999; Marcussen 1999; Verdun 1999). Other economic policies are being studied in these terms. Recent changes in EU technology policy can be traced on the basis of a new economic theorizing that emphasizes ‘contextual’ elements creating a positive institutional environment for innovation process (Borrás and Sanz 1999). Similarly, the important reforms of the cohesion and agricultural policies presently under way are re-opening the negotiations about their re-distributive effects. In such negotiations national interests are not the only driving forces, the images and normative perceptions about the nature of the European way of regulating capitalism are also at stake (Hooghe 1998). At a more macro level, the economic dimension is central element in the integration process due to the functionalist design of the Treaties. This initial design has had tremendous implications for the historical development of the European construction, in the sense that we can now perceive the integration process as the historical result of the different (consensual or not, complementing or alternative) understandings of how an economic order should be

organised. In this sense Hooghe and Marks have recently conceived the overall integration process as the place for contending (political-economic) projects.

“We conceive European politics as an interplay among a limited number of overarching political designs or ‘projects’, rather than a flow of discrete decisions. These projects are coherent, comprehensive packages of institutional reforms around which broad coalitions of political actors at the European, national, and subnational level have formed.”(Hooghe and Marks 1999:75).

These projects are mainly two, the neo-liberal and regulated capitalism, following the conventional left-right ideological divide. Other works point to similar trends. Van Apeldorn and Rhodes argue that the emergence of a new supranational socio-economic order or model of capitalism is the result of four contending ideological and strategic orientations, namely social-democracy, neo-liberalism, neo-mercantilism, and embedded neo-liberalism, which are rooted historically in the different models of capital regulation at national level (Apeldorn and Rhodes 1998). In a similar vein, Ruigrok and van Tulder show how four competing models of industrial control (networks of SMEs, industrial democracy, macro-fordism, and micro-fordism) have been the main barrier to a more consistent EU industrial policy (Ruigrok and Tulder 1996). These studies show that the study of how the European *political* order is being constructed cannot be analytically disentangled from its *economic* dimension. In this respect, the neo-Gramscian approach, which links ontologically the political and economic dimensions in the construction of the new order represents a promising theoretical framework colluding with the reflectivist school (Johansen 1998).

European governance and legitimacy

The third line of the current interest about the role of ideas is directly related to the more abstract debates about how legitimacy, public/elite opinion, and identity formation have a role in the forms and evolution of the European supra-national governance. This is not at all a new line of inquiry, as the question about the link between a narrow and a broad institutionalisation, and whether common decision-making leads to shifts in loyalty, has been a central theoretical issue in European studies (Kelstrup 1998:22). Jachtenfuchs stresses the convergence between neo-functionalism, constructivist and system theory traditions, in the questioning of identity formation (Jachtenfuchs 1995). His attention to this issue is related to legitimacy as a nodal element in the European construction, stressing, in a rather Eastonian way, that only legitimacy can provide stable and effective political orders. Ideas, understood as macro polity-ideas, are the cognitive dimension of legitimacy and identity, as they are symbolic structures of meaning. Polity-ideas are “normative orders in which specific constructions of the legitimacy of a political system are (re)produced through the ascription of purpose and meaning.” (Jachtenfuchs, Diez et al. 1998:413).

But the topics of European identity and legitimacy have also been studied in separate trends. Identity and cultural studies have examined how the European identity is constructed in relation to pre-existing national identities and to the creation of the ‘other’(Smith 1992; Duchesne and Frogner 1995; Howe 1995). Concerning legitimacy, political sociologists have long paid attention to popular and elite attitudes towards the European Union. A recent work by Anderson on this

issue concludes rather strongly: in general European mass publics are largely uniformed about the integration process, this means that “attitudes toward Europe are structured by domestic political concerns and believes in powerful and predictable ways” (Anderson 1998:591). This corresponds to Jachtenfuchs’ conclusions about the fact that the models of polity-ideas are based on ‘deep-seated convictions’, which are very resilient through time and are nationally related (Jachtenfuchs, Diez et al. 1998). These recent findings seem to question a fundamental assumption of neo-functionalists and some supra-national institutionalists (Sandholtz and Sweet 1998), namely that developments of the European governance have a positive effect on popular legitimacy, recalling the theoretical disputes about elite/popular support of the European construction (Wessels 1995).

Studies about political elites’ attitudes have also been quite numerous (see (Wessels 1995) for a review). Starting with national civil servants, Beyers has found out that differences between supra-national and inter-governmental attitudes of national representatives in the working groups of the Council are mainly based on seniority in national and trans-national experiences, and on general national patterns of public support to the EU (i.e. southerners and founding members being more supranationalist) (Beyers 1998). The first of these results strongly supports the hypothesis of a substantial socialisation effect of national elites. Studies of elites attitudes have also focused on commission officials. Some of them have analysed the Commissioners (Page and Wouters 1994; MacMullen 1997), and some others on senior Commission civil servants (Hooghe 1997), all of them pointing to political/ideological choices together with the supra-national/inter-governmental choice contending in the idea of Europe.

The table above has summarised and stylised the different angles of the recent cognitive turn in European studies within the new governance perspective. This succinct review has shown us the potential synergetic elements of these three lines of inquiry, the way in which they address different analytical levels and different questions about the construction of the European polity. However, it also shows the large differences that exist in the conceptualization of ‘ideas’. If we want to make the most of the debates arising along the three lines identified, we need to answer the question of what we understand by ideas.

WHAT ARE IDEAS?

The three ways in which the new governance perspective has dealt with ideas are deeply inter-related. It can be argued that differences between them are not so clear-cut, and are a question of the level and focus of the analysis. The micro-, meso- and macro- levels of the table are not pre-fixed. They should be seen as a flexible analytical design with the purpose to locate logically these three groupings of academic production. Nevertheless, what it is most important to retain is that these three lines of inquire treat ‘ideas’ in slightly different ways on the basis of the scholarly interest in the dynamics of European policies or on the ideational dimension of the overall European construction.

Most of the new governance perspective follows an institutionalist approach to the European polity, assuming that the construction of this new (and special) political order is related to a formal and informal institutionalisation process. Ideas play an important role in the institutionalization process that characterises EU policy-

making and the integration process, in different ways, namely, from an abstract normative dimension, to a more day-to-day praxis of policy design. Also embedded in the governance paradigm, the social-constructivist agenda focuses mainly on the more abstract and normative dimension of ideas. The essential element that explains the European construction, as a historically placed social and collective construction, is the evolution of this normative understanding/idea of what Europe is and should be. The social-constructivist research agenda is distinguished from the conventional governance perspective in that the analytical consequences they draw from this statement, namely that European studies should exclusively be focused on the social ontology that ultimately constitutes the European political project.

However, the same cannot be said, a *prima vista*, of the way in which inter-governmentalists have considered ideas in the sphere of European politics. As we saw earlier, Garrett and Weingstad suggested a notion of ideas too closed to interests, in a way that ideas were interpreted as expressions of the interests in the decision process. In line with other scholars, I criticised this understanding, as being too restrictive and poor, underestimating the potential of collective cognitive processes taking place in supra- and inter-national politics. Nevertheless, it is important not to interpret this notion of ideas as a mere expression of the ontologically materialistic premises of this school, and of their understanding of social action. Instead, their instrumental understanding of ideas relates back to the argumentative side of political negotiation and deliberation, something perhaps marginalised within the institutionalist tradition.

Assuming a weak cognitivist position, which does not challenge conventional epistemology and does accept the co-existence of material and social ontology, I maintain that the different notions of 'ideas' are to a certain degree complementary to each other. And this is so because the understandings of ideas of these authors have different dimensions, namely, instrumental, cognitive and normative. Placing these dimensions into a three-level typology will have two main benefits. Firstly, it will help us solving the question of what ideas are by conceptualizing them in a coherent way. In the introduction of this paper we provided a rough definition of ideas as the intellectual and abstract frameworks for social and public action. This implies an understanding of ideas as endogenous as well as explicit elements in the policy process and political life in general⁴. And secondly, this typology will allow us to see that the different ideational turns in EU studies are not incompatible, but rather complementary, because they have implicitly focused on one or another dimension, or just in some aspects of each. Therefore this typology might eventually serve as an interpretative basis to address in theoretical terms, in which way and how ideas are an essential explanatory factor of the historical developments of the European construction.

Ideas can be primarily seen as *argumentative instruments*, as logically constructed intellectual reasoning, more or less coherent and more or less convincing to the audience they are addressed to. In this dimension ideas can be seen as communicative mechanisms that express specific strategies. Their instrumentality is due to the notion that ideas at this level are representations and expressions of these strategies. A fine example of ideas in this dimension can be found in the

⁴ My typology owes much to the one developed by Campbell (Campbell 1998), with the difference that I have introduced the instrumental dimension as a separated one beside the cognitive and normative. Campbell's text develops further on this endogenous aspect, contrasting the different schools of institutionalism.

subsidiarity principle, which commands that further transfer of competences to the EU has to be argued convincingly. This legal requirement paves the way to a type of EU agenda that is formally articulated in such argumentative lines, stipulating and rationalising 'the need for European action'. The instrumentality of ideas in this example lies basically on the formal and informal utilisation that the different political actors do of the ideas argumentative substance in order to become (or not) reflected in the formal rationalisation of further EU action. And here theoretical divergences emerge, as the intergovernmentalists school has tended to see the principle as decisively placing national interests at the center of EU policy making, fully controlling the cession of competencies to this level of (delegated) authority. Hence, in the European context, ideas are the argumentative instruments of the different national interests in the negotiation process. On the other hand, supra-national institutionalists have focused on the Commission and its different DGs, as central actors in this play, with specific strategies and roles in setting the agenda (Nugent 1997). The purposeful opportunism of the Commission points to the instrumentalisation of political arguments for attaining its own specific strategies (Cram 1997).

But ideas are much more than argumentative instruments. They have a *cognitive dimension*, being 'descriptions and theoretical analyses that specify cause-and-effect relationships' (Campbell 1998:384). They are, in other words, coherent frameworks of intellectual understanding that help explaining the complexities of social and natural phenomena. Studies of the policy process that take into consideration ideas in this cognitive dimension assume that the policy process is not a mere exchange of ideas (as argumentative instruments of interests at play), but a cognitive process in itself. By this it is understood that deliberation is not a lineal process where ideas are argued and persuasion takes place. Deliberation is a complex social process where ideas shape a collective cognitive process within given parameters (Majone 1989). The school of social constructivism in EU studies has generally followed this cognitive dimension. As mentioned earlier, their cognitivism has its basis on alternative meta-theoretical considerations that question the conventional epistemology of social sciences. In these terms, action (also policy action) is based on the reflective understanding of the self. Another school of EU studies that focuses mainly on the cognitive dimension of ideas is the new governance perspective. As explained in the section above, actor-based approaches to policy analysis, and studies of the EU political economy, have emphasized this cognitive dimension in slightly different ways. The first, by looking at the role of experts and expertise in EU policy process; and the second, by looking at the impact of some economic theories in the economic order of the Union.

At a third level, ideas have a *normative dimension*. They entail assumptions about how the world and the reality should be. Campbell identifies this dimension of ideas with values and attitudes (Campbell, 1998:384). Studies about the identity-formation and legitimacy question in European integration have addressed ideas in this normative dimension, and in rather abstract considerations: those polity-ideas as expressions of popular political values are the ultimate explanation of different attitudes towards the integration process. Political economists have stressed something similar in a rather more conventional ideological sense: competing models of Europe are based on different models of how the market and public authority should relate to each other. In this respect, some studies have shown that these competing normative ideological visions of Europe are the background of elite attitudes (Hooghe 1998).

HOW IDEAS RELATE TO INSTITUTIONS AND INTERESTS

Having conceptually clarified the notion of ideas in their three dimensions, the challenge now is to draw a plausible explanation of how they affect policy-making and European integration. Such a task would need a re-consideration of the relationship between interests, institutions and ideas in the specific dynamics of the European polity, but this is a major theoretical exercise beyond the scope of the current paper. Instead, I will just make some critical remarks about how these three aspects have so far been understood in EU politics, examining respectively the relationship between ideas-institutions and ideas-interests.

Historical and neo-institutionalists have paid considerable attention to the relationship between ideas and institutions. Mainly focused on the cognitive and normative dimensions of ideas, their main research question has been to see how ideas are institutionalized, under which conditions, and how do they become an integral part of the abstract intellectual framework within which policy is designed and debated. Hence, institutional change can partly be explained by ideational innovativeness, like transition from keynesianism to monetarism in national (Hall 1993) and European politics (Marcussen 1999b, Verdun 1999). In this situation ideas and institutions are analytically distinct or blurred, depending on the time sequence of policy development. Before policy change takes place, ideas and institutions are separated because the cognitive framework operating within the institutions is different to the one in the ideas that are still 'outside' the policy frame. Ideas are exogenous to the institution because they have not yet been internalized. However, as soon as ideas are internalized and become an endogenous element of the institution, then the neat distinction between them and the institution itself is blurred (Thelen and Steinmo 1991)⁵. Policy continuity means that ideas have been institutionalised and have become an integral part of the cognitive process involved in policy-making. There are these institutionalised ideas that make individual actors operate under the logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen 1989), and that constitute the policy paradigms in policy change (Hall 1993). Examining the institutionalization of ideas in the European polity is an interesting academic exercise. This is so due to the unconventional nature of the European political order, in the sense that it lacks some important elements for policy change that are well in place in conventional national political systems, namely, the existence of an articulated public opinion, and a resource-rich executive. However, other characteristics help explaining the rapidly policy development at EU level. More particularly, the openness and inner dynamism of the integration process as such, the openness of the Commission as an 'opportunistic' bureaucracy (Cram 1997), and the wide range of functionally dispersed issues, foster collective (yet functionally differentiated) cognitive processes within specific constellations of actors. The 'power of ideas' within these constellations or epistemic communities in the European polity is obvious, constituting a valuable source for policy innovativeness and entrepreneurship. Marcussen has recently introduced the notion of the ideational life cycle, which states that the relationship between ideas and policy-making follows a Kuhnian path (Marcussen, 1999b). This analytical model, has been developed under the framework of political economy and therefore from the understanding of ideas in their cognitive dimension. However, it might work

⁵ Thelen and Steinmo relate in this work the unclear boundaries between ideas and institutions, and the theoretical controversies among neo and historical institutionalists about to what extent the normative dimension of ideas constitute or not institutions.

equally powerful when used in the other two dimensions (instrumental and normative).

However, it is the relationship between ideas and interests in European studies which seems to be theoretically more problematic. And this is so because the dominant theoretical frameworks in European studies have tended to sustain alternative understandings of interests, and therefore the way in which these relate to ideas. Coming back to the instrumental dimension of ideas, we examined earlier, they can be seen as argumentative instruments expressing some strategies. However, we can trace at least two very different ways of theoretically understanding the consequences of such a statement. Firstly, in a rather lineal conception, ideas are expressions of specific (pre-fixed) strategies, as courses of action determined by the interests of each negotiating actor. The inter-governmentalist school in EU studies has tended to focus on the instrumentality of ideas in this way. Their primary attention to national interests and preference formation has interpreted ideas as the argumentative instruments of interests in the negotiation phase. The linearity of this model is formed by the assumption that in a time and logic sequence, interests come first and ideas after, expressing the former. Indeed, a second understanding of the instrumentality of ideas goes beyond this linear model. Ideas are instrumental in a wider understanding, in the sense that they might be intentionally manipulated through a re-packaging and re-framing of policy issues (Campbell). This conscious manipulation of ideas shows a rather more complex relationship between them and interests, insofar as it assumes that ideas and interests are endogenous to each other. Interests might manipulate ideas in the struggles of policy-making by re-framing, but they are also deeply embedded and dependent on ideas for undertaking such re-framing. Rather than being linear, the model is more complex, as ideas and interests are mutually dependent on the framing and re-framing process inherent in policy-making.

Recent studies in European politics have tried to combine both understandings. Majone has argued extensively that ideas matter in the EU context only in the deliberation process of issues related to effectiveness. This explains partly the (des)regulatory trends of the 1980s. In this case, ideas have shaped the abstract context where decisions are taken, and therefore interests are re-aligned and defined on this basis. However, whenever the decision is about issues related to economic distribution, no ideational deliberation is possible because the negotiating parties have clear material interests at stake. Partisan and particular interests control the decision-making process in a way that deliberation does not take place. In this situation ideas are only argumentative instruments of the pre-fixed material interests, and follow the linear model presented above. Ideas and communicative action are central on the effectiveness-related type of policies, but non-existent on the second type, which is dominated by the logic imposed by the material interests of the negotiating parties. This double logic explains Risse's statements above about the need to combine communicative rationality and instrumental rationality.

The problem of this double logic (and the required double analytical strategy) is not so much theoretical nor ontological, but more prosaic, namely, how to accurately distinguish and operationalise the effectiveness-distributive divide. This functional policy divide, apart from being questionable and unclear in many occasions, presupposes that in the first case (of effectiveness-related policies) policy change is a matter of institutionalising ideas in the European political order, and in the second (distributive policies), a matter of institutionalising interests through trade-

offs. This is a rather restrictive understanding of policy types and of policy-making, as it only infers cognitive and deliberative processes for effectiveness-related policies. My point of view is that there are also deliberative processes in distributive-related types of policy. This has to do mainly with the cognitive and normative dimensions of ideas in the EU polity, rather than with the instrumental. Theoretical frameworks and normative visions about how capitalism is and should be regulated, and about how market, society and public authority do and should relate to each other, are essential in the framing of the (re)distributive policies. If this is true at national level, it is also at EU level. Despite the important role of national (material) interests in issues like the structural funds and the agricultural policy, the current substantial reforms of both are showing that the conventional trade-off explanation falls short to account for all the transformations at stake (Borrás and Johansen 1999). Taking the Cohesion policy as an example, focusing on national interests vying for the economic resources tends to disregard two further elements of the reform. Namely, the fact that the new orientation towards unemployment and human capital in the Funds reflects a greater attention to the intangible elements of economic development, which follows the premises of the 'knowledge-based economy'. Secondly, despite the pressures from different sides to reduce the overall allocation to this policy, no single actor in the negotiations has questioned the basic political principles that underpin this policy, namely the notions of equal social and territorial distribution. These notions have for long illuminated the construction of the welfare states since the postwar period. Their 'Europeanization' has allowed Cohesion policy to develop along specific historical lines since 1988, and has provided an ideationally institutionalised framework within which material interests are currently negotiating. These considerations bring us back to the notion that polity-ideas and other ideational constructions of normative character have underpinned the European construction from its more abstract form, to the day-to-day policy-making.

This is to say that the instrumental, cognitive and normative dimensions of ideas are not separately co-existing in the European supranational governance along functionally distinct paths of policy-making. Rather, they co-exist simultaneously in the complex process of policy decision-making at this supra-national level. Disentangling how the different dimensions of ideas have been articulated, and how have they been related to specific interests and institutional arrangements, can give us a better clue to examine how ideas have constrained and enabled policy continuity/change. At a more abstract level, it can provide a clue as to how the European construction has been ineluctably related to the developments of ideas in all their three dimensions.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The role of ideas in EU policy-making and integration process has received different scholarly treatment in relation to the different theoretical and meta-theoretical contexts within this scholarship. The first divide between strong and weak cognitivists draws the distinction between different meta-theoretical considerations about the ontological and epistemological understandings of social action and social sciences respectively. The emerging constructivist/reflectivist research agenda in EU studies follows the strong cognitivist tradition in IR studies. Based on intersubjective meanings and social ontology, when directly addressing the question of ideas these authors have stressed the need to bring in the study of communicative rationality in conventional integration theories. They have also paid

considerable attention to how ideas of the European political order are essential cognitive elements in the construction of the new political order as such. Weak cognitivism, on the other hand, does not follow the same epistemological considerations of constructivists, in the sense that they do not challenge conventional understanding of social sciences. From different scholar traditions, these authors are increasingly aware of the importance of ideas as cognitive processes and normative worldviews. The current paper identified at least three converging lines of inquiry within the so-called new governance perspective in EU studies, these are policy analysis, political economy and theoretical works about supra-national governance. Inter-governmentalists, representing an alternative theory, have also devoted attention to the role of ideas, but pretty much in relation to interests. Their rather instrumental understanding of ideas has kept a distance with the more institutionalist inspired considerations of the supra-national governance school.

Openly following the weak cognitivist tradition, the current work developed a three-dimensional conceptualisation of ideas. By this it is understood that ideas have an instrumental, a cognitive and a normative dimension. Owing to John Campbell's previous work along those lines, the current typology adds the instrumental dimension as a crucial way of integrating analytically the role of interests. In this way this three-dimensional conceptualisation permits to address the relationship between interests and ideas, complementing the already relatively well-researched relationship between ideas and institutions.

However, the literature dealing with this issue has to bridge two further gaps. The first refers to the bias for looking at the role ideas have played either so single policy-making, or to the whole integration dynamics. This gap became evident between the first line of policy analysis studies and the two latter ones about political economy and theoretical considerations about supra-national governance. One way of doing it could be to bring the studies of legitimacy into specific policy-making questions. The institutionalisation of ideas is the result of competing visions of how to organise public action, where opinion, social attitudes and normative 'seated-convictions' are important elements. This approaches us to the second gap, namely the focus of attention to elites or popular ideas. Studies of legitimacy and attitudes have followed both trends. But how long are elite and popular beliefs co-evolving or distancing? One of the most evident questions posed by the Maastricht legitimacy crisis was precisely the important gap between them in most member states.

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