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The Ontology of Institutions and Actors

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European studies is characterized by an increasing amount of empirical studies. For scholars, it is difficult to keep up with the multilingual publication pace. One way to make sense of all this is to do some theory, and more specifically to engage in a study in ontology. How does research define the basic elements of the political realm and the beings that inhabit it? What are the underlying construction presuppositions of the EU as an object of knowledge? The starting position of this ontological reflection is anti-realist in the sense that it is assumed, following Carnap's classical statement (1950), that several ontological frameworks are possible, depending on their purposes. Consequently, there is no philosophical answer to the metaontological question of the objective criteria for deciding if the realists or the anti-realists are right. In this article, I will discuss the issue of ontology through a discussion of EU research and its interpretations of the nature of political reality. I will argue that the political ontology structuring much research on the EU prevents a more complex theoretical and empirical understanding of political reality: its ontology needs to be revised and a more inclusive ontology developed.

The background for this theoretical reflection is informed by a number of empirical studies I have conducted in recent years on European political institutions. Generally, these works argue that the logic of change of essential European institutions like the European Commission and the European Parliament is not only due to internal dynamics but is also linked to transnational interplays of differentiated agents operating simultaneously in multiple social spheres (Kauppi 2005). My studies suggest that institutions and particularly institutional change have to be explained in the light of both new policy challenges and the individual preferences and habits of the agents making up these institutions and their surroundings. Consequently, such an analysis challenges a number of firmly held ontological assumptions of key texts on the EU. Moreover, it defies the common view of rationality as exogenous. In my account, not all agents are equally rational or irrational, but play different social roles and rely on differentiated knowledge. Ultimately, it is my claim that examining these interplays allows for a more accurate understanding of both agents and institutions in the EU. However, in order to ground this approach a more thorough ontological reflection is needed.

In the following, I will explore these issues through two ideal-typical ontological positions that I will call, for want of better terms a realist ontological framework and a reflexive ontological framework that is close to an anti-realist position (for a "classical" statement see Christiansen et al. 2001, for empirical examples see also Medrano 2003, Mérand 2008). These positions are obviously not the only possible ones but they represent some of the main background assumptions of much research on the EU. Drawing the rough contours of the implicit premiums and taboos that define acceptable scholarly frameworks will reveal some of the

weaknesses of current EU research. It will also offer ammunition for some in-depth critique of not just EU research but social scientific research more broadly (see Flyvbjerg 2001 for some stimulating ideas).

In social science, this research perspective contributes to a more developed institutionalism that concentrates on the interaction of agents and institutions (see Scharpf 1997, Mayntz and Scharpf 1999), a dimension that has been neglected in institutionalist research on political institutions (Peters 1999, 70). Recent sociological studies that focus from a similar research perspective on the interaction between individuals and institutions and mobilize a reflexive ontological framework include works on a variety of European power elites, Members of the European Parliament (Beauvallet 2007, Kauppi 2005), European civil servants (Georgakakis and de Lassalle 2007), regional elites (Kull 2008), and lawyers (Madsen 2006). I will first discuss ontology in general, then move to a more thorough analysis of some texts that are based on the exclusive, realist ontological framework, to finish with a discussion of a reflexive framework.

## Ontology

By ontology is meant the interpretation of the basic constituents of the world of experience (cf. Heidegger 1996). In philosophy, ontology is contrasted with the ontic, that which concerns the real world understood as the physical or more broadly the empirical world. The basic constituents of existence have a foundational status and ontology involves the basic categories of being and existence, the standards that have to be met for something to fully exist (being of being). Following Taoist philosophy, Wittgenstein stated that ontology forms the hinges of our ordinary thoughts, the riverbed within which our thoughts flow (Wittgenstein 1969, §§97-99, 341-343). If the ontological and the ontic can be analytically separated from one another, in the real world the ontological comes, so to speak, out of the pores of the ontic.

From a social science perspective, it would be an understatement to say that ontological “choices” (for want of a better term as they are not choices because they are assumed or presupposed and not explicitly selected and motivated) have political effects. They are eminently political or even better metapolitical “choices” as they structure as core-imposed limits (Collingwood 1940, Mäki 2001, 6) at the implicit level of presuppositions, the scope of social action, the constitutional framework of social arenas (see Bourdieu 1991, Buchanan 1991, Vanberg 2005, 23). In ordinary circumstances, this “predefinition” or “preformatting” is not put into question. Although it forms, using phenomenological parlance, the background beliefs (Husserl) and shared perceptions necessary for social action (Schutz), it is necessary fuelled by belief and not knowledge. Precisely because the ontological preformatting is the condition of existence of the political in the ordinary sense of the term, the ontological is depoliticized (Mouffe 1994, Palonen 2007, Žizek 2000). A constitutive conceptual division between the ontological and the “real” (the ontic) defuses the political stakes of the ontological domain. Further, the political world is ontically vague and its contours not clear (Castoriadis 2001). Because ontological presuppositions are passified and they apply to a world that is opaque and overdetermined, they play a key structuring role in the categorization of reality, its production and reproduction. The purpose of this paper is to temporarily politicize the ontological dimension of EU studies, to question some of its unformulated presuppositions, to put into question its power to determine the real via a reflexive

detour (for the always preliminary character of this type of reflection see Derrida 1982).

This article is based on a close reading of a few, very different recent texts (Bicchi 2006, Blomberg et al. 2008, Checkel 2005, Eriksen 2005, Frockhart 2007, Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2006, 27-49, Schimmelfennig 2002 and 2003, Trondal 2007) that reflect the broader ontological position sketched above. In the next part, I will discuss more closely Frank Schimmelfennig's synthetic institutionalist approach.

### A Realist Ontological Framework

The basic presuppositions of the realist ontology are twofold: political institutions exist like natural entities and individuals are economic rational actors. These conceptions resonate with deep-seated beliefs political actors themselves have of the political realm, as well as with social perceptions in the media and ordinary citizens' common sense ontology that applies to the political realm. It is this realist ontological matrix composed of implicit ontological categorizations that forms the unquestioned backbone of the prevalent political order. The intellectual challenge is not to demystify the ontological order of the EU but to develop an adequate strategy of ontological resistance. Negating the upper ontology does not provide a means to escape the ontological matrix. It is merely an indirect way of reinforcing ontological domination (see for a similar point Derrida 1982).

In the exclusive, realist framework, institutions form the core of political reality (for a textbook example of this position, see Blomberg et al. 2008). They are objectified entities independent of human will. The institutional order constitutes a natural order that can be observed and examined like other elements of the natural world such as rocks and plants (for an elaboration see Searle 1984). Institutions are detached both from the individuals operating in them and from the individuals observing them. In this *Weltanschauung*, institutions are objectified, naturalized, anthropomorphized and quantified. This framework can be observed in action in the flagship publication of European political science, the *European Journal of Political Research*.

Political action is guided by rational individuals following a universal exogenous conception of rationality that is close to a variation of economic rationality. Individuals are Leibnizian monads, rationally egotists. Ontologically speaking individuals exist, like institutions, individually, separated from one another. The world is organized in a dichotomous fashion into the rational and the irrational. Political action is rational, socialization irrational. Interests are rational, identity irrational. Science cannot study the irrational. Therefore socialization and identity are not privileged objects of research. In this exclusive logic or framework science is neutral, as are facts. Science and the absolute observer merely objectify reality that exists "out there" following a dichotomous logic (either-or, rational-irrational, objective-subjective, national-supranational, and so on). Political reality is thus empirical non-metaphysical, waiting to be analyzed by the subject. The things that compose it can be incorporated into a broader set of things in spacetime.

In his "synthetic institutionalist approach", Frank Schimmelfennig (2003) seeks to bridge the gap between a rationalist and a constructivist account of preferences, revealing in the process elements of a solid realist ontological framework. Schimmelfennig's approach can be described as a rationalist one topped with a thin layer of constructivism, and wrapped up in a second thick layer of rationalism. Following rationalist institutionalism, he argues that agents in the EU act

“strategically on the basis of exogenous specific policy preferences”, but they do so within a community environment defined by its ethos and a high interaction density. However, “institutions constrain the choices and behavior of self-interested actors but do not constitute their identity and interests” (Schimmelfennig 2003, 161). Basing his novel approach on the sociological works of Erving Goffmann (see also Schimmelfennig 2002), Schimmelfennig argues for a sequencing of rationalist and constructivist propositions in an analysis of EU policy issues.

In his empirical analysis of the eastern enlargement of the EU, Schimmelfennig combines a “rationalist” account of preferences and logics of action that is followed by a constructivist explanation of interaction dynamics and outcome. In other words, the enlargement preferences of the EU member States can be explained by the preferences of these and not by the community ethos of the EU that, however, prevents those reticent to enlargement from sabotaging the process. In Schimmelfennig’s analysis, the enlargement preferences of the EU member States and not the social conventions regulating social interaction in the community environment, which do not affect preferences, determined the larger process of enlargement.

In Schimmelfennig’s synthetic institutionalist approach, institutions are systematically presented in an objectified and disembodied form. Institutions are not only exterior to individual agents, but they also are quasi-material in terms of modes of social existence. Further, they are reified and anthropomorphized, presented as having wills of their own. They are the central dramatis personae of European integration and European politics. In this ontological framework of European integration, agents are States or the Commission for instance (for a similar ontological position in this respect see for instance Moravcsik 1999, more recent examples Eriksen 2005, Bicchi 2006). This projection from the individual to the institution is a major problem in Schimmelfennig’s adaptation of Goffman’s sociological framework, in which agents are individuals, not institutions. In fact, an analogous process took place in Wendt’s social constructivist theory of IR (Wendt 1999), where Wendt projected individual-level analysis and presuppositions based on a reading of Erving Goffman and George Herbert Mead onto to a “higher” plane to analyze social and political institutions. States are people too, Wendt famously stated.

The same intellectual habit of mixing the individual agent and States or institutions is visible in more recent constructivist works that adopt a exclusive ontological framework (for instance Trondal 2007). But in this operation, institutions are transformed into objectified entities that have a rational mind of their own following an asocial “economist” interpretation of the human mind. It is then logical that the preferences of the actors, the States, are “not informed by collective identities, norms and other ideas” (Schimmelfennig 2003, 161). An asocial individual, a rational egotist, finds its theoretical equivalent in an asocial institution. Institutions are examined without analysis of roles and the characteristics of those occupying, and partly making them. Institutions seem to be doing everything by themselves.

According to Schimmelfennig States do not change preferences when deciding about EU enlargement. Preferences are thus fixed. Lets assume for discussion’s sake that institutions such as the “community environment” do not change their identity and interests. But this might have to do more with the characteristics of the “community environment” as conceptualized by Schimmelfennig. Because when we switch our focus to individual agents and their socialization, a distinction has to be made between socialization tout court and professional socialization. For instance, to a French anti-European MEP (member of the European parliament) professional

integration into the European Parliament is necessary, but it might not involve socialization into European values. Competent institutional behavior does not necessarily require ideological commitment on the part of individuals occupying certain social roles (Beauvallet 2007). In fact, what can be observed in institutions such as the European Parliament is an inversed Weberian process of socialization, in which individuals integrate the institutions, acquire certain professional skills and practices, and only later some of them commit themselves to the values the institution is supposed to represent and defend (European values, European democracy, etc.). Preferences can thus be fixed and variable at the same time. Part of the problem has to do with the separation following the dualistic logic of the exclusive ontological framework of national and supranational modes of behavior. This same intellectual habit can be found in other research. For instance, in his analysis of the Commission, Trondal separates following an either-or logic from one another supranational and national social roles, as if they were mutually exclusive (Trondal 2007). It could be argued that all EU Member States are Europeanized and have developed a host of social and professional roles that are, to varying degrees, both supranational and national (for analysis at the regional level see for instance Kull 2008).

In great part because of his implicit ontological framework, Schimmelpfennig reproduces a dualistic conception of social reality, in which individual preference formation is independent of the social sphere in which these agents operate (for a similar ontological position see Wendt 1999). This ontological dualism prevents a deeper empirical scrutiny of the interaction between agents and the EU environment, of social roles, of political institutions, and of the complicity between the individual and his/her habitat in terms of knowledge and action. The mutual constitution of society and individual dear to so many protagonists of a reflexive ontology (Berger 1963, Berger and Luckmann 1966, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, Elias 1983, Giddens 1986) is transformed into a rather basic schema according to which, in the end and paradoxically, individuals create institutions but institutions have little effect on them.

The advantage of a reflexive ontological framework that I will present next is that it brings to the fore of the analysis institutions as embodied entities involving individual and collective social action.

### A Reflexive Ontological Framework

The reflexive framework offers a set of powerful counter-presuppositions to the realist framework. The dichotomous logic that pervades the realist framework is substituted with a more gradual approach that includes the extremes (after all, we cannot get rid of concepts) but introduces shades of grey, an empirically more reasonable and fruitful position. It presents a more comprehensive approach that does not a priori disqualify or rule out some dimensions of scholarly reflection. The observer is not absolute, neurotically through various cosmetic cover-ups detached from the object of research, but rather tied emotionally, socially and politically to reality (see Adams et al. 1990). This proximity, its nature and effects, has to be empirically taken into account (see Kauppi and Madsen 2007 for some elements). In this framework, proximity is thus then not negative, a hindrance to scientific and scholarly work (see Mulkay 1981 for this position). The observer is part of the observed. In order to evaluate a description of EU politics, one has to have information on the observer or producer of that information in order to assess the value of the information itself, its limits and biases.

In contrast to the exclusive framework, the world is not predetermined or natural (Blomberg et al. 2008). There is always real choice and agency (Berger 1963). Reality is composed of interdependent people, groups and institutions. Reality is symbolic-physical, composed of symbolic entities that are not reducible to physical reality. For instance, the European Commission is composed of a complex set of material and symbolic elements. Most of political reality is symbolic, immaterial and virtual, but it requires physical props, individuals, social actions, stationery, buildings, and the like to really exist. Reality is co-(re)produced by people as groups. Although individuals are born into a ready-made world of institutions, and although as a general rule they cannot change institutions, institutional change does take place. Political reality is like language: it changes, but as a general rule individuals cannot change it. However, some individuals (the president of the French Republic for instance) and social groups (like parliamentarians) have, in theory at least, the power to change institutions. The inclusive ontological position developed here emphasizes the ties between the macro and the micro, institutions and power and actions of individuals and groups in more or less structured social spheres. Constrained by webs of social and institutional relationships, these arenas of political competition evolve unevenly (see Elias 1983).

In a reflexive ontological framework (Berger and Luckmann 1966), the dualism between rationalism and constructivism in EU-studies can be temporarily overcome. These two elements, rationalism and constructivism, can be combined, but not sequentially. Instead of arguing, like Schimmelfenning and a great majority of rationalist institutionalists sharing the same exclusive ontological framework do, that preference formation is exogenous to institutions, or of maintaining the opposite extreme constructivist stance according to which the logic of social action is always endogenously formed (cf. for instance Douglas 1986), this reflexive interpretation argues that the formal aim or logic of social action is the same in all social spheres and is therefore exogenous to institutions, but that the substantive logic of social action is endogenous to institutions. The formal logic consists, for agents, of acquiring the resources that are, in their eyes, the most valued. These can be political power for politicians, financial profits for businessmen or intellectual recognition for academics, for instance. These agents are all then engaged in a semi-controlled competition for values that are prized in their spheres of social action (Weber 1968, Waltzer 1983), values that motivate their action and gives it meaning.

In other words, the formal and teleological logic of accumulation does not explain what kinds of actions and values these agents engage in or even what are the goals of their actions. The formal level of analysis (see Meyer et al. 1997, Beckfield 2006) has to be linked to the actual practices of the agents involved. The substantive logic of their actions, the type of actions they engage in, where and when, with whom, is dependent on the chronotopic (Bakhtin 1981) or figurational (Elias 1983), that is, the temporal and structural characteristics of the spheres in which they operate, and on the ontological frameworks that structure their action. Their preferences are endogenously formed in the sense that what they aim at depends on various historical and structural factors (the real) that structure their sphere of social action. Social and cultural conventions and norms that have ontological status exist in terms not only of the means through which certain resources can be acquired, but also in terms of exactly what will the most valued resource that most in a sphere of social action will struggle to attain at a specific point in time and space. In a nutshell, in this inclusive approach the formal logic of social action is exogenous but the substantive logic of social action is endogenous.

An additional problem is that a host of constructivists, following in this the realist ontological framework, separate interest from value, the strategic calculation of the agents from socialization, which would not involve calculation. In the alternative reflexive ontological framework, however, individuals have an interest in some value more than in others. For instance, academics might systematically pursue symbolic recognition by peers instead of monetary awards. Individuals socialized in certain actions and preferences like engaging in scholarly activities calculate (“It might be better to publish here”) and intuitively play out their role, without even separating socialization from calculation. A competent social agent switches from one to the other. The “end point” of socialization is externalization that is social action in the world (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Social action is both endogenous and exogenous, involving bounded rationality and calculation of costs and benefits, and not either endogenous or exogenous, or rational or non-rational.

In order to be specific about what the goals of different agents are, what will be crucial will be the delimitation of the sphere of social action, the context if you like, in which individuals operate, of exactly what kind of social, joint action we are talking about. This delimitation is crucial because, to a certain extent, it will determine the limits of the playing field and thus the ontological space that will, in part, condition the beings with which individuals will have to deal with. To determine this, equating like Schimmelfennig does “the community environment“ with “social structure” is too vague. We need to specify what are the collective ends of the actions in question and what kinds of institutional figurations, as complex layered structures of joint actions (Searle 1983) mould these actions. If we talk about European energy policy, we will have national governments, European institutions, private and public agents and so on. Certain technological constraints will frame the actions of these individuals. All these agents will be involved in a political struggle the goal of which is the determination of the EU’s energy policy. The controlled competition in this policy sphere will be regulated and constituted by various social conventions and norms of various strength. These institutions and the social roles that are constitutive of these institutions have specific characteristics that the exclusive ontological framework, because of its emphasis on institutions as objectified entities, tends to minimize.

The advantage of such inclusive and relational theoretical understanding of rationality is that it enables the scholar to detect the similarities between rationality and social action in different social spheres while at the same time being sensitive to their historical and structural variations. A more inclusive ontological framework makes possible a more complex analysis of preference formation and institutionalization. A first point has to be made about the social force of institutions. Society, or any structured sphere of social action to be a bit more specific, is composed of institutions of varying social effect. Some, like the legal system, are strongly codified and ritualized, with coercive social norms and social roles. In the case of institutions of this type, individuals are significantly shaped by institutional conventions and norms. Other institutions are weaker: their coercive force is lesser (see Olsen 2007 for analysis). But even then exogenous factors are not exterior to the institutions. They might have to do with the individual “baggage” of occupiers of institutional roles in these institutions, a “baggage” that is tied to previous institutional roles in other institutional settings. Exogenous factors can then play a key endogenous structuring function. The paradox is that exogenous factors are never totally exogenous.

In the case of strong institutions, those individuals who represent the institutions in question will have to internalize institutional norms in order to be competent representatives of the institution. A “flow” has to develop between individual and institution. The same “flow” (Czikenmihaly 2000) can be observed among prime ministers representing their country in the EU, for instance. When these individuals move from an institutional context that is strongly codified like a national political sphere into a figuration like the “EU negotiating environment” where they do not have to abandon their social role but are in fact encouraged to behave according to it, they will obviously do so. Their preferences will be relatively stable, like Schimmelfennig shows very well in his empirical study. But these preferences can change because the individuals representing the institution in question change as a result of an electoral defeat.

For instance, French-German relations have been mediated by the relationships between their respective leaders. The close personal relations between Francois Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl have significantly shaped not only the relations between France and Germany but also the EU (Ross 1995, see also Fligstein 2000), providing one of the conditions for the development of the single market. Consequently, the definition of national interest cannot be just a fixed preference, as Schimmelfennig argues. In this example, certain individuals represent the State and speak in its name. This ventriloquism is institutionalized and regulated. Only certain individuals have access to this collective resource. It is difficult to see how an ontological framework that does not permit the differentiation between institutions and those representing these institutions could possibly provide an adequate analysis of variations in policies and, thus, understand the forces that shape institutionalization, the temporal and synchronic variations in political institutions, and politics more broadly.

In the inclusive ontological framework advocated here, if one abandons the duality individual-institution one does not need to separate interest from norm and social role, or the objective from the subjective. To fully exist, institutions need to have an objective existence that is sustained by subjective investment. A similar kind of comment has to be made about the analysis of social norms. Social norms are institution-specific, and they vary depending on social positions and roles in institutional spheres. The effect of norms is never uniform, contrary to what Schimmelfennig and other likeminded scholars seem to assume. And if norms, such as those relative to the promotion of common European values, are relatively weak in a specific institutional figuration, it does not mean they do not exist (for analysis of their temporal variation see for instance Duchene and Frogner 2002).

## Conclusions

The realist ontological framework and the dualisms it reproduces (objective-subjective, individual-institution, socialization-calculation, interest-norm, supranational-national, etc.) outlined briefly here prevents a great deal of research from developing a more complex, “thick” empirical description of EU integration. This ontological position has serious consequences in the real world. Individuals and institutions are isolated and there is little interaction between the two. Institutions are automatons. The problem with the “as if” theorizing (Checkel 2005) of much EU research is that in practice institutions do not do anything by themselves. They do not act by themselves, they do not have free wills, they do not reason. Individuals and groups do things in their place and in their name. By creating a parallel world in

which institutions and States exist like asocial, economically rational individuals and where socialized individuals are separated from the institutional spheres in which they act, these “as if” theorists evacuate from the realm of social inquiry a host of fundamental issues of social action and political power.

Another characteristic of the realist ontological framework sketched here is to project presuppositions concerning individual human beings to the level of political institutions such as Member States and supranational institutions. One consequence of this projection is the blurring of the lines of public and political responsibility. As institutions are not analyzed in relation with individuals and groups who at a specific point in time have the right or obligation to speak in the name of the institutions they represent, the social and politics mechanisms conditioning public policies are left untouched and even mystified. Institutions are considered as being equally institutionalized or non-institutionalized, thus preventing analysis of level of institutionalization, of the strength of the social roles they inhabit, of institutions as embodied structures of social rules and norms, of institutional logics etc. Great deals of this research moreover seems to consider, following its ontological presuppositions, that all agents are equally reflexive, or which comes to the same non-reflexive. Agents are not analyzed in terms of differential power resources, of which reflexivity (self-objectification and -knowledge, learning, adaptation, etc.) would constitute one source, or in terms of differential social integration. If, from the outset, individuals would be considered social beings, they would never pursue just their self-interest. Finally, social science research is not conceived as a political world-constructing activity that involves subjects and objects that are in an interactive relationship, but as a merely descriptive, skin deep objectivising exercise that reinforces a functionalist, apolitical image of the political realm.

In the end (but not really of course), the ontological riverbed of EU studies has to be broadened, its symbolic and practical structures further scrutinized, and new research questions generated on the basis of a radical reevaluation of the implicit assumptions and core beliefs of social science research (dualism, anti-relationalism, the absolute observer).

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