

**Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies**

International Relations Theory and European Integration

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## **ABSTRACT**

The explicit effort to theorize about the process of European integration began within the political science subfield of international relations, and the field of integration theory was, until recently, dominated largely by students of international relations. During the first few decades of the integration process, the literature was essentially divided between neofunctionalists (who theorized integration as a gradual and self-sustaining process) and intergovernmentalists (who emphasized the persistent gatekeeping role of national governments). Although originally intended as a general theory of economic and political integration, however, neofunctionalism and its intergovernmentalist critique were limited in practice to the analysis of the European case, and they had little impact on the larger study of international relations. With the relaunching of the integration process in the 1980s and 1990s, however, students of international relations have begun to approach the study of the European Union using more general, and generalizable, theoretical approaches. This paper examines the recent debate among realists, liberals, rational-choice institutionalists, and constructivists in IR theory as to the nature of the integration process and the EU as an international organization. Although originally posed as competing theories, I argue, realist, liberal and institutionalist approaches in IR show signs of convergence around a single rationalist model which assumes fixed preferences and rational behavior among all actors in the EU, and examines the ways in which member governments adopt institutions which subsequently constrain and channel their behavior. This rationalist approach is now the dominant approach to the study of European integration in international relations theory, I argue, with constructivism remaining as the primary rival, but less developed, approach to the study of European integration.



## **INTRODUCTION**

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

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

### **I. REALISM, LIBERALISM, AND RATIONAL CHOICE INSTITUTIONALISM: THE EMERGENCE OF A RATIONALIST RESEARCH PROGRAM**

#### **Realist Approaches**

Realist theory, with its emphasis on material power and the resilience of the state, provided the theoretical underpinnings of the intergovernmentalist critiques of neofunctionalism in the 1960s and 1970s. With the exception of Hoffmann (1966, 1995), however, few realist scholars have made any significant effort to predict or explain the subsequent course of European

integration or the operation of the EU as an institution. Neorealist theorists have been even more explicit in their dismissal of international institutions such as the EU, which are generally considered to be epiphenomenal reflections of the underlying distribution of material power in the international system. Thus, for example, in his seminal statement of neorealist theory, Kenneth Waltz attributed the (uneven) progress of European integration to the fact that the United States had emerged after World War II as the guarantor of West European security, leaving the member states of the European Community free to pursue integration without concerns about security threats from their European partners.<sup>2</sup> Similarly—and entirely consistent with the underlying assumptions of neorealist theory—John Mearsheimer predicted in 1991 that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent return of a multipolar international system would lead to an increase in concerns about security and relative gains among EU member states, and place a significant check upon the future course of European integration (Mearsheimer 1990).

In contradiction to Mearsheimer's lucid and testable prediction, however, European integration has continued its uneven but impressive course throughout the 1990s, including the creation of a European Union and a single currency in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, and the subsequent deepening of integration in the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty which extended the use of qualified majority voting and the delegation of powers to supranational organizations. These developments presented a puzzle to neorealists, according to Joseph Grieco, the neorealist who has devoted to greatest intellectual attention to the study of the European Union. One neorealist response to the relaunching of European integration, according to Grieco, would be to posit the resurgence of the EU during the 1980s as European balancing against the emerging economic threat from the United States and Japan. However, as Grieco acknowledges, the timing of the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty also coincide with the end of the Cold War, the reunification of Germany, and the rise of concern about German economic hegemony among the other member states of the Union. In this view, the insistence upon economic and monetary union by France and Italy appear not as balancing behavior, but rather as bandwagoning with a potentially hegemonic Germany. Thus, as Grieco admits,

From a neorealist perspective there is an acute need for an explanation for the decision by France and Italy to join with a potentially hegemonic partner—one that is closer geographically and one with which France in particular has had a difficult history—within the framework of an economic balancing coalition (Grieco 1996: 286).

In response to this challenge, Grieco posits a “neorealist voice opportunities hypothesis,” which he argues is consistent with the core hypotheses of neorealist theory, and generates new insights into the “institutional rule trajectory” of the European Union.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, Grieco draws on the earlier work of Albert

Hirschman regarding the possibilities for “voice,” i.e. the expression of dissatisfaction with existing institutions. When negotiating new international institutions, Grieco argues, “states—and especially relatively weak but still necessary partners—will seek to ensure that any cooperative arrangement they construct will include effective voice opportunities,” which are defined in turn as “institutional characteristics whereby the views of partners (including relatively weaker partners) are not just expressed but reliably have a material impact on the operations of the collaborative arrangement” (Grieco 1986: 288-89). Where such voice opportunities are absent, Grieco hypothesizes that states will attempt to renegotiate the terms of the institutional arrangement, and may reduce or withdraw their commitment to the organization if such attempts fail. In empirical terms, Grieco argues that the French and Italian entrepreneurship in favor of Economic and Monetary Union can be explained, not simply by the functionalist desire by all of the member states to commit credibly to their joint aim of monetary stability, but rather, or also, by their eagerness to secure a *voice* through their representatives on the new European Central Bank.

More recently, Michael Mosser (2000) has built upon Grieco’s insight to examine the ways in which small and weak states “engineer influence” through international institutions. Despite the standard neorealist view that small states in the international system are faced with no other choice except to balance against their more powerful neighbors, Mosser argues that—under certain conditions, including the ability to “get in on the ground floor” of institutional choice—small states can bind large states into institutional rules that provide systematic voice opportunities for small states, while at the same time establishing norms against the use of certain types of power (such as the use or threat of force). In the EU case, Mosser analyses the use of EU institutions by the Benelux countries, which were present at the creation and have steadfastly resisted any change to institutions that provide them with systematic over-representation in the Council, as well as supranational allies in the Commission and the Court of Justice, all of which serve to bind the larger member states and force them to take heed of the views of their smaller neighbors (Mosser 2000).

Taken together, the work of Grieco and Mosser focuses our attention on how small states can participate in the design and amendment of international institutions so as to provide themselves with opportunities for voice while at the same time binding large states into institutional rules and norms that limit their ability to exploit material power resources. However, as Legro and Moravcsik (1999: 41-43) point out, nothing in Grieco’s voice opportunities hypothesis is distinctive to realist theory, with its emphasis on the conflictual nature of international relations, the importance of relative gains, and the ultimate recourse to the use of force—none of which is explicitly mentioned in Grieco’s analysis. Indeed, Grieco’s basic assumptions of international anarchy, the

central role of states, and actor rationality are consistent with neoliberal institutionalism, as well as with liberal intergovernmentalism and rational choice institutionalism, each of which offers more detailed and explicit hypotheses about the determinants of European integration and the workings of EU institutions. It is to these two schools, therefore, that we now turn.

### **Liberal Intergovernmentalism—and Its Critics**

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

For our purposes, the most important and influential liberal theory of European integration is Andrew Moravcsik's “liberal intergovernmentalism” (LI), as laid out in a series of articles during the first half of the 1990s (Moravcsik 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995). Moravcsik's theory has of course been widely read and cited, and requires little elaboration here (although see below for a detailed analysis of the changes introduced in Moravcsik's 1998 book). Put simply, liberal intergovernmentalism is a two-step, sequential model of preference formation (for which Moravcsik draws on liberal theories of IR and international political economy) and international bargaining (for which he draws from bargaining theory and from Putnam's two-level games analysis). In the first stage of the model, national chiefs-of-government (or COGs) aggregate the interests of their domestic constituencies, as well as their own interests, and articulate national preferences toward European integration. In the second stage, national governments bring their preferences to the intergovernmental bargaining table in Brussels, where agreements reflect the relative power of each member state and where supranational organizations such as the European Commission exert little or no causal influence.

Although often mischaracterized as neorealist by his critics, Moravcsik's theory represents a twofold departure from neorealism, insofar as national



preferences are assumed to be domestically generated and not derived from a state's security concerns in the international system, and insofar as bargaining power is determined by the relative intensity of preferences and not by military or other material power capabilities. In empirical terms, Moravcsik argued that major intergovernmental bargains, such as the Single European Act or the Maastricht Treaty, were not driven by supranational entrepreneurs, unintended spillovers from earlier integration, or transnational coalitions of business groups, but rather by a gradual process of preference convergence among the most powerful member states, which then struck central bargains amongst themselves and offered side-payments to smaller, reluctant member states. The institutions adopted in such bargains, finally, *did* serve to provide member states with information and reduce transactions costs, but they did *not* lead to the transfer of authority or loyalty from nation-states to a new center, as neofunctionalists had predicted. Rather, Moravcsik argued, European integration actually *strengthens* national executives vis-à-vis their domestic constituencies, since COGs enjoyed a privileged place at the Brussels bargaining table from which domestic interests are generally excluded.

During the 1990s, liberal intergovernmentalism came to occupy a strange but central place within the literature on European integration: Although few scholars other than Moravcsik have explicitly identified themselves *as* liberal intergovernmentalists (indeed, I am aware of none), nearly all American and European students of the EU defined themselves *against* one or another aspect of liberal intergovernmentalism, or both. Oversimplifying a complex literature, the response of international relations scholars was three-fold:

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

A second group of American scholars, who can be assembled under the rubric of institutionalist theory, have generally accepted Moravcsik's assumptions about national preferences, but have disputed his parsimonious model of intergovernmental bargaining, arguing that existing EU institutions shape and constrain intergovernmental policymaking in ways not captured by liberal intergovernmentalism. Pierson's (1996) historical institutionalist

approach, for example, focuses on the ways in which integrative decisions become "locked in" and difficult for member governments to change, even when gaps open in member state control over policy outcomes. Similarly, various rational choice institutionalists have argued that the EU legislative process cannot be understood as a strictly intergovernmental process, but is instead shaped by EU institutions that allow for qualified majority voting, for "conditional agenda setting" by the Commission and the European Parliament, and for an independent causal role for the EU's supranational agents.

A third group of scholars reject LI entirely, opting for models of EU *governance* informed by comparative and American politics. Thus, for example, Gary Marks and his colleagues have argued that the EU should be understood as a system of "multi-level governance," in which member governments, while still of importance, have become one among many subnational and supranational actors in a complex and unique system of governance (Hooghe and Marks 1995, 1997; Marks 1996; Marks, Hooghe, and Blank 1996; Marks and McAdam 1996; Marks, Nielsen, Ray and Salk 1996). Other scholars have drawn on the comparative politics literature to examine the workings of policy networks in the EU (Peterson 1995a, 1995b, 1995c), or to compare the EU to federal systems such as the United States which combine territorial and non-territorial principles of representation (Sbragia 1994; Leibfried and Pierson 1995), while social movement theorists have noted the rise of transnational social movements within the European Union, arguing that, far from being confined to having their interests aggregated by national governments, social movements, like regional governments, may influence Brussels decisionmaking directly, or even eschew the institutions of government in favor of direct action by transnational civil society (Wapner 1996; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Tarrow 1999, Imig and Tarrow, eds., 2000). The culmination of this literature is arguably the *governance* approach to the European Union, ably described elsewhere by Markus Jachtenfuchs (2000) and criticized at length by Simon Hix (1998a). In the remainder of this paper, I therefore concentrate on the two other approaches identified above, namely the new institutionalism in rational choice (which challenges Moravcsik's model of intergovernmental bargaining) and the constructivist or sociological institutionalist school (which challenges the rationalist model of preference formation).

## **Rational Choice Institutionalism**

The new institutionalism(s) in political science did not, of course, originate in the field of EU studies, but reflected a gradual and diverse re-introduction of institutions into a large body of theories (such as behaviorism, pluralism, Marxism, and neorealism in IR theory) in which institutions were either absent or epiphenomenal. By contrast with these institution-free accounts of politics

which dominated American political science between the 1950s and the 1970s, three primary “institutionalisms” developed during the course of the 1980s and early 1990s, each with a distinct definition of institutions and a distinct account of how they “matter” in the study of politics. In rational choice theory, scholars like William Riker and Kenneth Shepsle discovered that institutions, defined as the formal rules of the game, could induce an equilibrium outcome in games that would otherwise be subject to indeterminate “cycling” among unstable decisions; and subsequent work attempted to formally model these institutions and their effects on the outcomes of collective choices, particularly in American politics. By contrast, sociological institutionalists defined institutions much more broadly to include informal norms as well as formal rules, and they argued that such institutions “constitute” actors, shaping the way in which we view the world and a “logic of appropriateness” for human behavior; and these scholars, together with their constructivist counterparts in IR theory, examined the process by which institutional norms are diffused and legitimized among actors in both domestic and international politics. Historical institutionalists, finally, took up a position in between the two camps, focusing on the effects of institutions *over time*, in particular the ways in which a given set of institutions, once established, can become subject to increasing returns or lock-in effects, constraining the behavior of the actors who established them.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, all three of Hall & Taylor’s new institutionalisms have been adopted by students of European integration—with results that have been reviewed extensively elsewhere (see e.g. Pollack 1996; Jupille and Caporaso 1999; Aspinwall and Schneider 1999; and Dowding 2000). Interestingly for our purposes here, the initial applications of rational choice institutionalism were a reaction against both neofunctionalism (which was rejected for its lack of microfoundations) and against liberal intergovernmentalism (which was rejected for its minimalist account of EU institutions). Within this literature, the leading figures are indisputably Geoffrey Garrett and George Tsebelis, who (writing alone, together, and with their respective students) have established the general lines of rational choice inquiry in the EU, as well as formally modelling the roles of the European Court of Justice and European Parliament, respectively.<sup>5</sup> Simplifying considerably, we can say that some of the earliest rational-choice work on the EU focused on the judicial process and the independence of the ECJ, while later work examined the questions of supranational delegation and agency, as well as the EU legislative process and the agenda-setting role of the European Parliament.

In his early work on the EU, Garrett focused on the European Court of Justice, drawing on principal-agent analysis to argue that the Court, as an agent of the EU’s member governments, was bound to follow the wishes of the most powerful member states. These member states, Garrett argued, had established

the ECJ as a means to solve problems of incomplete contracting and monitoring compliance with EU obligations, and they rationally accepted ECJ jurisprudence, even when rulings went against them, because of their longer-term interest in the enforcement of EU law (Garrett 1992). In such a setting, Garrett and Weingast (1993) argued, the ECJ might identify “constructed focal points” among multiple equilibrium outcomes, but the Court was unlikely to rule against the preferences of powerful EU member states, as Burley and Mattli (1993) had suggested in a famous article drawing on neofunctionalist theory. Although Garrett’s early work overestimated the control mechanisms available to the powerful member states and the ease of sanctioning an activist Court—resulting in a wave of critiques and empirical studies suggesting considerable judicial discretion (Mattli and Slaughter 1995; Stone Sweet and Caporaso 1998; Stone Sweet and Brunell 1998a, 1998b)—the approach has proven useful in the study of the Court, and rational-choice models of judicial policymaking have become more complex, and have been subjected to greater empirical testing, in response to critics (see e.g. Garrett 1995; Garrett, Kelemen and Schulz 1998; Kilroy 1995; and the review in Mattli and Slaughter 1998).

Related to this ECJ debate, another group of scholars has focused on the delegation of power to, and agency and agenda-setting by, supranational organizations such as the Commission. These studies generally begin by asking why and under what conditions a group of (member-state) *principals* might delegate powers to (supranational) *agents*, and they go on to examine the central question of principal-agent analysis: What if an agent—such as the European Commission, the Court of Justice, or the European Central Bank—behave in ways that diverge from the preferences of the principals? The answer to this question in P-A analysis lies in the administrative procedures which the principals may establish to define *ex ante* the scope of agency activities, as well as the oversight procedures which allow for *ex post* oversight and sanctioning of errant agents. Applied to the European Union, principal-agent analysis therefore leads to the hypothesis that agency autonomy is likely to vary across issue-areas and over time, as a function of the preferences of the member states, the distribution of information between principals and agents, and the decision rules governing the application of sanctions or the adoption of new legislation (Pollack 1997; Tsebelis and Garrett 2000b).

Much of this literature on delegation and agency focuses on the rather arcane question of *comitology*, the committees of member state representatives established to supervise the Commission in its implementation of EU law. Although often depicted by legal scholars as the site of technocratic deliberation, in which the aim is collective problem-solving rather than control over the Commission bureaucracy (Joerges and Neyer 1997), comitology committees actually come in seven different variants with distinct voting rules, which have

been shown in formal models to place varying degrees of constraint upon the Commission in its activities (Steunenberg et al. 1996, 1997). In recent empirical studies, moreover, Dogan (1997) and Franchino (2000a, 2000b) demonstrate that the EU's Council of Ministers adopts systematically distinct committee structures across issue-areas, suggesting that comitology is indeed employed consciously as a control mechanism by member states. Both authors find (unsurprisingly, in light of P-A analysis) that the Commission has displayed a consistent preference for less restrictive procedures, and that this preference is shared by the European Parliament. However, they also find (again unsurprisingly) that the Council of Ministers regularly adopts more stringent procedures than those proposed by the Commission, and that the strictest procedures are clustered in certain issue-areas such as social policy, phytosanitary standards, and environmental protection. In addition, Franchino's analysis suggests that the Council adopts the most stringent regulations in areas characterized by high levels of uncertainty and conflict, although his conclusions should be regarded as tentative insofar as his measures of uncertainty (i.e. word count of the legislation in question) and conflict (i.e., number of amendments adopted by the Council) are open to question.

Both Dogan and Franchino focus their attention on the choice of comitology rules at the *delegation* stage, where the choice of committee types provides a large-n, quantifiable dependent variable. By contrast, direct studies of Commission agency raise significantly greater methodological obstacles, in the form of *rational anticipation* by the Commission and other strategic actors in any principal-agent interaction. In essence, the problem is that agents such as the Commission may rationally anticipate the reactions of principals, and adjust their behavior in advance to avoid the costly imposition of sanctions. If this is so, then agency behavior that seems at first glance autonomous may in fact be subtly influenced by the preferences of the principals, *even in the absence of any overt sanctions*. Similarly, Commission proposals that are accepted or adopted by the Council of Ministers may represent successful agenda-setting, or they may represent the Commission's rational anticipation and accommodation of member-state preferences. Thus, although there is no shortage of empirical studies asserting an independent causal role for the European Commission (see e.g. the essays in Nugent 1997), many of these studies are guilty of selecting on the dependent variable for most-likely cases of Commission influence, few make any attempt to identify the *conditions* for Commission influence, and even fewer attempt to deal systematically with the consequences of the "law of anticipated reactions." Schmidt (1997) and Pollack (1998) have undertaken preliminary efforts to test principal-agent hypotheses through the use of comparative case studies and process-tracing, but these cases do not constitute a representative sample of Commission activity, and the findings remain tentative.

A third and final strand within the rational-choice literature on the EU has attempted to model the EU legislative process, including both the relative voting power of member states in the Council of Ministers, as well as the variable agenda-setting powers of the Commission and the European Parliament under different legislative procedures (e.g. consultation, cooperation, codecision I, codecision II, and assent). As Dowding (2000) points out, this literature has thus far focused on three primary questions: (1) the utility of power-index analyses for the understanding of member governments' influence in the Council of Ministers (see e.g. Garrett and Tsebelis 1996, and the special issue of the *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 3); (2) the conditions for the EP's agenda-setting powers under the cooperation procedure (see e.g. Tsebelis 1994; Moser 1996a, 1996b; Tsebelis 1996); and (3) Tsebelis' controversial claim, based on a formal model, that the European Parliament had *lost* agenda-setting power in the transition from the cooperation procedure to the Maastricht version of co-decision (Tsebelis 1997; Tsebelis and Garrett 1997a, 1997b; Crombez 1997; Moser 1997; Scully 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1997d). By and large, each of these debates has focused on the proper specification of the formal models in question, rather than on the empirical support for these models, with the result that these debates have been effectively "tuned out" or disregarded by the majority of qualitatively oriented non-modellers in EU studies. In the past two years, however, several studies have appeared using both qualitative and quantitative methods to test these various models (Kreppel 1999; Tsebelis and Kalandrakis 1999; Tsebelis et al. 1999), and the recent creation of two major databases of EP votes should increase the quality and quantity of empirical tests in the years to come.<sup>6</sup> Overlapping with these studies of the EU legislative procedure, finally, are the growing number of rational-choice analyses of decision-making *inside* the European Parliament, whose party systems, committee procedures and voting behavior has been studied by a new generation of scholars in legislative studies (Tsebelis 1995; Hix and Lord 1997; Raunio 1997; Scully 1997a; Hix 1998a, 1998b; Kreppel and Tsebelis 1999; Hix 2000).

In short, the rational-choice approach to EU institutions has developed quickly over the past decade, beginning with Tsebelis and Garrett and their students in the United States, but spreading as well to rational choice bastions in Europe such as Konstanz and the London School of Economics, where new generations of students are modelling an ever-growing array of legislative, executive and judicial procedures, and testing these models with both quantitative and qualitative evidence. From the perspective of non-rational choice scholars, these studies may seem highly abstract, concerned more with theoretical elegance than with policy relevance, and somewhat off-putting in their claim to be doing "real" social science. However, as Dowding points out, rational choice scholars have made genuine progress in the past decade in both the specification of formal models and the gathering of empirical data to test

them; more generally, rational choice institutionalism holds the promise of re-examining old neofunctionalists topics like supranational agency, and doing so within a framework that provides theoretical microfoundations, testable hypotheses, and a set of assumptions broadly consistent with other rationalist approaches.

### **Liberal Intergovernmentalism Redefined**

At this point in the story, we need to return—and not for the last time—to Moravcsik, who in his (1998) book, *The Choice for Europe*, and in a subsequent (1999a) article in supranational entrepreneurship, elaborates on his original liberal intergovernmentalist model, while at the same time bringing that model closer to rational choice institutionalism in terms of both core assumptions and the addition of an explicit theory of institutional choice as a third step in the model. At the level of basic assumptions, Moravcsik employs

a “rationalist framework” of international cooperation. The term *framework* (as opposed to *theory* or *model*) is employed here to designate a set of assumptions that permit us to disaggregate a phenomenon we seek to explain—in this case, successive rounds of international negotiations—into elements each of which can be treated separately. More focused theories—each of course consistent with the assumptions of the overall rationalist framework—are employed to explain each element. The elements are then aggregated to create a multicausal explanation of a large complex outcome such as a major multilateral agreement (Moravcsik 1998: 19-20).

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

With regard to preferences, for example, Moravcsik specifies, not only that state preferences are domestically generated, but also that the economic interests of various societal actors, rather than security interests, have been the driving motivation behind the five history-making or constitutive bargains in EU history. Here once again, Moravcsik sets a set of liberal hypotheses about the domestic, economic sources of national preferences against a realist hypothesis about the external, security interests of states, and concludes that the empirical record overwhelmingly supports the liberal view.

Similarly, in his elaboration of intergovernmental bargaining theory, Moravcsik sharply contrasts his own theory—in which outcomes are generally efficient and asymmetrical interdependence is the determinant of relative power and thus of bargaining outcomes—against a model of supranational entrepreneurship in which EU organizations such as the Commission purportedly initiate, mediate and mobilize social groups around international agreements in a context of high transaction costs. Here, Moravcsik argues that the historical record overwhelmingly supports his own view that, “The entrepreneurship of supranational officials... tends to be futile and redundant, even sometimes counterproductive,” although he does concede one exception to this rule, namely the role of the Delors Commission in the design of the Single European Act, which Moravcsik attributes to Delors’ ability to mobilize latent constituencies among multinational export-oriented producers (Moravcsik 1998: 8; see also Moravcsik 1999a).

In relation to the rational-choice institutionalist literature, however, Moravcsik’s acknowledgement of a causal role for Delors in the SEA is less important than his explicit statement that supranational organizations might enjoy greater agenda-setting powers (or other forms of influence) *outside* the five intergovernmental negotiations studied in the book:

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

Note the two-fold theoretical shift in this analysis. First, Moravcsik makes explicit that his theory of intergovernmental bargaining, with its highly restrictive analysis of the conditions for supranational influence, applies only to negotiations of Treaty amendments, and that supranational authority *within* the Treaties may be significant and variable across issue-areas. Second, Moravcsik identifies a third question of intense interest to rational choice institutionalists in general and principal-agent analysts in particular: Why and under what conditions do member states delegate such powers to supranational organizations?

Moravcsik’s answer to this third question, once again, bears a close resemblance to the views of a large number of rational choice institutionalists.



After rejecting two competing hypotheses—namely the notions that governments pool sovereignty out of a commitment to the ideology of European federalism or because they agree on the importance of delegating power to centralized technocratic experts who are purportedly more efficient at processing information—Moravcsik develops a very spare model of institutional choice<sup>7</sup>, but one which is clearly consistent with the views of most rational-choice institutionalists:

Choices to pool and delegate sovereignty to international institutions [he writes] are best explained as efforts to constrain and control one another—in game-theoretical language, by their effort to enhance the credibility of commitments. Governments transfer sovereignty to international institutions where potential joint gains are large, but efforts to secure compliance by foreign governments through decentralized or domestic means are likely to be ineffective. This general explanation lies at the heart of functional theories of international regimes, the central strand of which views international institutions as devices to manipulate information in order to promote compliance with common rules. Significant pooling and delegation tend to occur, I find, not where ideological conceptions of Europe converge or where governments agree on the need to centralize policymaking in the hands of technocratic planners, but where governments seek to compel compliance by foreign governments (or, in some cases, future domestic governments) with a strong temptation to defect (Moravcsik 1998: 9).

In the empirical chapters of the book, Moravcsik seeks to support this claim, arguing that most decisions to pool or delegate authority in the EU can be understood as an effort to solve problems of incomplete contracting, monitoring, and compliance with the Treaties. Interestingly, however, Moravcsik also concedes a secondary role for federalist or democratic ideology in the adoption of some general institutional provisions, notably the progressive delegation of legislative powers to the European Parliament, which he attributes to the weak preferences and uncertain consequences of such delegation.<sup>8</sup>

My task in the previous paragraphs was not to provide a comprehensive or critical review of Moravcsik's book—a task already undertaken at great length by many of the leading scholars in the field (see e.g. Wallace et al. 1999)—but rather to suggest that Moravcsik's liberal intergovernmentalism, which was widely considered as a rival to rational choice institutionalism only a few years ago (c.f. Garrett and Tsebelis 1996), in fact shares most of its basic assumptions, including the notion that states aggregate interests and act rationally to advance their preferences at the EU level, and that member governments rationally select institutions that are designed to maximize their utility (e.g. by allowing for credible commitments). In empirical terms, moreover, Moravcsik makes clear that his skepticism about supranational influence is limited essentially to claims about informal agenda setting or entrepreneurship in unanimous treaty-

amending decisions, and does *not* apply to the day-to-day policymaking within the Treaties that is the bread and butter of rational choice institutionalists. Thus, I would argue, the difference between Moravcsik's approach and a rational choice institutionalist approach is primarily one of empirical emphasis, with Moravcsik focusing on the intergovernmental choice of political institutions in intergovernmental conferences, while institutionalists focus first and foremost on the day-to-day workings of those institutions.

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

## II. CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACHES

As Jeff Checkel (1998) has most lucidly pointed out, rational choice institutionalists and constructivists generally agree that institutions *matter*, in the sense of exerting an independent causal influence (not reducible to other factors) in social life generally, and in international relations in particular. However, the two approaches differ fundamentally in their arguments about *how* institutions matter. Oversimplifying only slightly, rationalists generally define institutions as (formal or informal) rules of the game that provide incentives for rational actors to pursue certain strategies in pursuit of their (exogenously given) preferences. By contrast, constructivist scholars generally define institutions more broadly to include informal norms and intersubjective understandings as well as formal rules, and posit a more important and fundamental role for

institutions, which *constitute* actors and shape not simply their incentives but their preferences and identities as well. In the view of such analysts, rational-choice approaches may capture some part of the effect of institutions, but they are incapable of grasping and theorizing about the more profound and important effects of institutions.

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

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

The authors go on to argue that a constructivist perspective is based on a “broader and deeper ontology” than rationalist approaches, and can therefore offer a basis for understanding a broader range of “social ontologies, i.e. identity, community, and collectively intentionality” (ibid: 533).

Although taken out of the context of a skillful review of the constructivist literatures in international relations and EU studies, these quotations—and numerous others from the literature—illustrate a tendency among constructivists to *assume* the existence of certain phenomena (or “ontologies”) such as identity or preference change as the starting point of analysis, and consequently to reject rationalist approaches for their purported inability to predict and explain these phenomena.<sup>9</sup> As it happens, the editors of the journal invited critiques from both a reflectivist perspective (by Steve Smith) and a rationalist perspective (by Andrew Moravcsik). Given the thrust of this paper—namely that the rationalist perspective has become the dominant one in American IR approaches to the EU, and that the rationalist-constructivist divide is the most salient theoretical cleavage in the contemporary literature—Moravcsik’s critique deserves further analysis here.

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

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

Constructivists might, of course, respond that Moravcsik privileges rationalist explanations and sets a higher empirical and methodological standard for constructivists (since, after all, rationalists typically make no effort to demonstrate that preferences are *really* exogenously given and *not* shaped by institutions). Many reflectivist or post-positivist analysts, moreover, dispute the very project of social science, with its claims of objectivity and of an objective, knowable world, and would reject Moravcsik’s call for falsifiable hypothesis-testing as a power-laden demand that “noncomformist” theorists play according to the rules of rationalist, American, social scientists. In this sense, the EU debate over constructivism bears a striking resemblance to the earlier debate in IR theory touched off by Keohane’s (1989) call for reflectivists to develop “a clear research program that could be employed by students of world politics” (1989: 173). As Knud-Erik Jorgensen (1997: 6-7) points out in an excellent review, Keohane’s call became a standard reference in subsequent debates, with

some analysts agreeing with Keohane's plea for a testable research program, while others adopted the mantle of a defiant Dissent refusing to adopt the standards of a dominant Science.

Within the ranks of constructivist scholars, there remain a substantial number of post-positivist scholars who continue reject hypothesis-testing and falsification as the standard of social-scientific work; and there are no doubt other scholars who take no clear *principled* stand against falsification, yet nevertheless construct theories that are essentially unfalsifiable "lenses" through which any outcome confirms the social construction of European identity and preferences. Nevertheless, if constructivism and rationalism are indeed emerging as the defining poles of both international relations (Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner 1999) and EU studies (Jupille and Caporaso 1999), *and* if these two approaches begin with fundamentally different assumptions or "ontologies" about the nature of agency and social interaction, then it seems to me that we must necessarily fall back on careful, empirical testing of rationalist and constructivist hypotheses as the ultimate, and indeed the only, standard of what constitutes "good work," and what constitutes support for one or the other approach. Like Moravcsik, I believe there is no inherent reason that constructivists cannot specify testable hypotheses, and indeed the past three years has witnessed a spate of constructivist works that attempt rigorously to test hypotheses about socialization, norm-diffusion, and collective preference formation in the European Union. Some of these studies, including Hooghe's extensive study of the attitudes of Commission officials and Beyers' survey of attitudes among national officials in Brussels, use quantitative methods to test hypotheses about the various determinants of officials' attitudes, including socialization in national as well as European institutions. Such studies, undertaken with methodological rigor and with a frank reporting of findings, seem to demonstrate that EU-level socialization plays a relatively small role in the determination of elite attitudes by comparison with national-level socialization and other factors, or that EU socialization interacts with other factors in complex ways (Beyers, n.d.; Hooghe 1999a, 1999b, 1999c). Other studies, including Checkel's (1999) study of citizenship norms in the Council of Europe, and Lewis's (1998) analysis of decision-making in COREPER, utilize qualitative rather than quantitative methods, but are similarly designed to test falsifiable hypotheses about the conditions under which international norms are internalized by national officials, and both focus on explaining *variation* in the acceptance of such norms. These studies, it seems to me, represent a significant maturation of the constructivist research program in European Union studies, in which scholars like Checkel and Hooghe seem genuinely interested in understanding the conditions under which norms constitute actors, genuinely willing to subject their hypotheses to falsification, and above all genuinely prepared to report findings in which norms appear *not* to constitute actors.

Above all, it seems to me, such studies promise to engage with rationalist theories and subject their hypotheses to the common standard of empirical testing, overcoming the current dialogue of the deaf among rationalists and constructivists in EU studies.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

In place of the old neofunctionalist/intergovernmentalist dichotomy, I have depicted the emergence, toward the end of the 1990s, of a new dichotomy in both IR theory and EU studies, pitting rationalist scholars of various stripes (realists, liberals, and institutionalists), who generally depict European institutions as the products of conscious member-state design, which then constrain those member states in various ways; and constructivist scholars who posit a more profound role of EU institutions socializing and constituting actors whose basic preferences and identities change as a result of European interaction. Is this new dichotomy in international relations theory just a replay of the old neofunctionalist/intergovernmentalist debate under another name, or has the field actually progressed over the past decade? The question is a difficult one, and there is a real danger that the current line-up of rationalist and constructivist schools may devolve into a dialogue of the deaf, with rationalists dismissing constructivists as “soft” and constructivists denouncing rationalists for their obsessive commitment to parsimony and formal models.

Nevertheless, on balance the current state of EU studies in international relations theory strikes me as healthy, and superior to the old intergovernmentalist/neofunctionalist debate, in several ways. First, whereas the neofunctionalist/intergovernmentalist debate was limited almost exclusively to EU studies and contributed relatively little to the larger study of international relations, the rationalist/constructivist debate mirrors the larger debate among those same schools in international relations theory generally. Indeed, not only are EU studies *relevant* to the broader study of international relations, they are in many ways in the *vanguard* of international relations, insofar as the EU serves as a laboratory for broader processes such as globalization, institutionalization, and (possibly, although I personally remain skeptical of this point) norm diffusion and identity change. Although it may seem crass and self-interested to say so, the shift from neofunctionalism/intergovernmentalism to rationalism/constructivism has taken EU studies from the sidelines of international relations theory and placed us squarely at the center.

There is, however, a second and perhaps more important virtue of the rationalist/constructivist debate in EU studies, which is that *both* schools are actively challenging the traditional distinction between international relations and comparative politics. Within the rationalist school, Putnam (1988), Milner

(1998), Moravcsik (1998) and others have argued that the assumptions of rational choice allow us to model the interaction of domestic and international politics, including the effects of globalization on actor preferences and political outcomes at the domestic level, the aggregation of actor preferences within the domestic institutions of individual states, and the two-level games played by chiefs of government. The new institutionalism in rational choice analysis, moreover, has allowed IR scholars to import theoretical concepts such as incomplete contracting, principal-agent relations, and agenda-setting to the field of international relations, thereby enriching IR theory and reducing its traditional parochialism and exceptionalism. Constructivist scholars, it seems to me, have not progressed as far as rationalists in the systematic integration of domestic and international politics and theories, but the work of scholars like Hooghe has begun to test domestically derived hypotheses about socialization at the international level, while the work of IR scholars like Checkel and Legro (1997) has begun to articulate and test specific hypotheses about the interactions of international and domestic norms.

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

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> A thorough discussion of the neofunctionalist/intergovernmentalist debate is beyond the scope of this paper, which deals primarily with American IR theorizing about European integration in the 1990s. For representative works and commentaries, see Haas 1958; Lindberg 1963; Hoffmann 1966; Lindberg and Scheingold 1970; Pentland 1973; Haas 1976; and Taylor 1981.

<sup>2</sup> “Because the security of all them came to depend ultimately on the policies of others rather than their own, unity could effectively be worked for, although not easily achieved.” Waltz 1979: 70-71.

<sup>3</sup> Grieco is not, of course, the only realist to note the persistence of the EU and other Western institutions after the end of the Cold War. Randall Schweller and David Preiss, for example, argue that the persistence (although not necessarily the deepening) of European integration is consistent with traditional realism, which “predicts that some institutions will endure longer than the structural factors or threats that brought them into existence because of a shared sense of ‘in-group’ identity induced by prolonged, intense and focused threats.... Even though structural changes and shifts in state interests make the disintegration of alliances and attendant institutions inevitable in the long run... some institutions will endure longer than neorealism predicts because of the development of shared identities, especially if ‘in-groups are maintained by the perception of new ‘others’” (Schweller and Preiss 1997: 21). Note, however, that it is the prediction of disintegration that is distinctive to realism; by contrast, the development of a shared sense of identity draws primarily from recent work in constructivist theory, which is analyzed in greater detail below.

<sup>4</sup> The literature on the new institutionalism in political science is huge, and I will make no attempt to provide a full set of citations here. For an excellent review, and the now-classic tripartite classification scheme set out above, see Hall & Taylor 1996.

<sup>5</sup> This analysis omits discussion of Fritz Scharpf’s seminal (1988) article on “joint decision traps” in the European Community, which was arguably the first rigorous application of rational choice analysis to the EU. Unlike Garrett and Tsebelis and their army of graduate students, however, Scharpf’s pioneering article was not followed up by subsequent work in the rational choice tradition.

<sup>6</sup> The first of these databases, collected by George Tsebelis with a grant from the National Science Foundation, is publically available on Tsebelis’ website ([www.ucla.org/polsci/faculty/tsebelis](http://www.ucla.org/polsci/faculty/tsebelis)); the second is part of a larger multinational project on the 1999-2004 by the European Parliament Research Group, currently underway.

<sup>7</sup> Moravcsik’s explication of his model of institutional choice based on credible commitments receives only four pages (73-77), by contrast with fifteen pages (35-50) devoted to his political economy model of national preference formation. The empirical chapters of the book similarly devote the most attention to preference formation, followed by bargaining, with the shortest section in each case devoted to institutional choice.

<sup>8</sup> For a similar line of argument, see Pollack 1997: 107.

<sup>9</sup> For similar claims, and similar rejections of rationalism (and of Moravcsik’s LI in particular), see e.g. Sandholtz 1993: 3; Jorgensen 1997: 5-6; Wind 1997: 27-31; Matlary 1997: 206-07; and Risse and Wiener 1999.