

Sociological Approaches to the European Union in Times of Turmoil*

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Abstract

This contribution aims at questioning the explanatory capacity of sociological approaches to European integration in times of crisis. Its main argument is that in times of turmoil – perceived or real – analysis of actors' strategies and cognitive frames is crucial for understanding the emergence of solutions proposed to remedy the problem. Starting from a sociological definition of crisis, the article illustrates through empirical examples how the cognitive frames in which actors evolve determine their analysis of problems as well as solutions. Sociological approaches to public policy, which reject the basic assumption of actors behaving solely according to a presumed material cost–benefit analysis, help us to better grasp the complexity of decision-making. The main reason for this is that they allow for linking the domestic and European levels when analysing cognitive and decision-making processes, instead of concentrating on either European citizens or European elites separately.

Keywords: Integration theory; concepts; sociology; strategic constructivism; EU crisis

Introduction

The European political system is said to be in crisis. The important financial and economic difficulties of a number of eurozone member states have questioned the capacity of the institutional framework of the European Union. New economic instruments have been developed to control the so-called sustainability of national budgets more effectively than those developed in the framework of EMU (Economic and Monetary Union); these include the EFSF (European Financial Stability Facility); ESM (the European Stability Mechanism); the European Semester; the Six-Pack and Two-Pack and the Fiscal Compact (TSCG or Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in EMU), to mention but the most salient.

This crisis has also led Europeans to become more sceptical towards and disenchanted about European integration (Van Ingelgom, 2014) and has sparked increased political contestation. Until the 1990s, euroscepticism seemed to be reserved to a small number of citizens at the margins of the European political spectrum, but the 2014 EP elections resulted in a considerable increase in seats for eurosceptic and extremist parties in the European Parliament. Every European debate on economic and financial issues is now extensively followed by the media – although EU day-to-day politics get as little attention as ever at the domestic level. The current situation has put the question of financial

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solidarity on the agenda, with transfer amounts going widely beyond those redistributed by the EU through Common Agricultural Policy and Structural Funds programmes.

In this crisis context we observe political contestation and power struggles that take place not only among decision-makers, but also between decision-makers and their constituencies and among different constituencies. Contrary to a definition of the crisis as a purely exogenous shock, the crisis is an environment in which its definition itself evolves and within which the interests and identities of actors/policy-makers develop and change. Actors and policy-makers use these reformulated interests and identities to influence but also to frame negotiation processes and to communicate with their constituencies.

This article argues that sociological approaches to European integration (for overviews see Delanty and Rumford, 2005; Favell, 2007; Favell and Guiraudon, 2011; Saurugger, 2009; Saurugger and Mérand, 2010) can help us to better understand the EU in crisis situations. While they have participated in deepening our understanding of the day-to-day workings of the EU political system and its impact at the domestic level and societies, sociological approaches that concentrate on the question of how actors frame different problems as well as solutions to make them acceptable, and hence act strategically on different levels, are crucial to make sense of the development of the current EU crisis. This is due to two characteristics they share (Saurugger, 2009).

First, they put actors up front and analyse them in their social context. Actors are neither pure profit maximizers, as rational choice analysts would want us to believe, nor purely embedded in a logic of appropriateness whereby their social context determines their preferences and actions. They are thus distinct from institutionalist accounts (for an illustration see Verdun, 2015) insofar as they show that all important EU politics is not institutionalized, which therefore leaves little space for the discussion of politics, as Manners and Whitman purposefully underline in their introduction to this special issue (Manners and Whitman, 2016). Institutionalist approaches are perceived by political sociologists as ‘too distant from the actors “making Europe” and the conflicts among them as well as the social representations that organise their actions’ (Jenson and Mérand, 2010, p. 75).

Second, sociological approaches do not take actors’ domestic or EU preferences as given, but analyse the ways in which preferences and worldviews are constructed and presented. In other words, sociological approaches analyse how these preferences and worldviews are framed and constantly transformed through interaction among actors from the international, European and domestic levels. Hence, not only do interest groups or civil society actors – as accounted for in new neo-functional readings (Fligstein and Stone Sweet, 2002; Niemann and Ioannou, 2015) – influence the norms that emerge at the EU level as a result of the crisis; so too do citizens and political contestation. From an EU political sociology perspective, however, groups, parties and citizens’ views cannot be derived from studying surveys only. As Adler-Nissen underlines in her contribution to this special issue (Adler-Nissen, 2016), ethnographic methods, interviews and in-depth case studies constitute the main methods to study political processes and societal phenomena.

Sociological approaches to EU studies are diverse, and to speak of one sociological approach as better able to explain the current crisis in the EU’s system than other theoretical accounts would be an oxymoron. Sociological approaches can be schematically divided into three broad categories (Favell and Guiraudon, 2011; Saurugger and Mérand, 2010) – (i) *EU sociology*, complementing the formal institution-focused approach that has dominated the field of EU studies until now by bringing in a European society

perspective (Bach, 1999, 2000; Imig and Tarrow, 2001; Favell, 2008; Fligstein, 2008; Diez Medrano, 2003); (ii) an *EU political sociology* approach, concentrating on the interaction and power games among individual actors (Guiraudon, 2000; Kauppi, 2003; Mérand, 2008; Adler-Nissen, 2008; Vauchez, 2014); and (iii) EU work that *sociologizes constructivism* (McNamara, 1998; Parsons, 2002; Jabko, 2006). This article concentrates on the last two approaches, as they allow us to analyse the two main challenges identified above – how to understand the framing of problems through actor interaction and how to make sense of the constant political contestation of the EU experience.

Two caveats are necessary here. First, the objective of this article is not to develop one single sociology of the EU, but to evaluate how useful insights from two sociological approaches in particular can be used to understand the crisis situation in which the EU currently finds itself (see also Saurugger and Mérand, 2010). Second, crisis situations are not considered normatively ‘unhealthy’ phenomena in this article (as opposed to ‘healthy’ societies, which are somehow constructed around community ‘core values’). Crisis situations question standard working environments, but these need not be ‘healthy’ and perfectly well-functioning environments.

This article will be structured as follows. Section I defines the notion of crisis by insisting on the capacity of crises to create political contestation between all actors as well as new perceptions and cognitive frames. Section II concentrates on the use of sociological approaches to understand the framing processes that occur between and inside actors during crisis situations. The final section argues that in a crisis situation, analysis of the relationship between domestic constituencies, contestation and governments is crucial to understand the circular negotiation processes of EU norms.

I. Crises

Crises can take many forms and ‘crisis’ can refer to political, military, social or economic and financial turmoil in a given context. In its most general sense, a crisis marks a phase of disorder in the seemingly ‘normal’ development of a system (Boin *et al.*, 2005, p. 2) and induces a sense of urgency. Crises are framed by political and media discourse as a threat to core values or the functioning of systems. That does not mean that they are always linked to an emergency – such as the occurrence of a natural disaster – but the situation must be perceived as an emergency, in the sense that non-action would lead to a serious worsening of the situation. In this sense, the economic and financial crisis of the EU certainly falls under this heading. Non-action on the part of the government and financial actors was argued to be impossible, as it would have led to a worsening of the crisis, increasing job insecurity and welfare payments.

Most importantly for our purposes, however, in a situation of crisis, the perception of threat is accompanied by a high degree of uncertainty. Uncertainty concerns the origins of the crisis, its analysis and the remedies that could be administered. Crisis response is not a routine that institutions apply to a well-known situation; rather, it implies finding solutions to unclear and complex problems. In other words, crises are situations of overwhelming complexity and ambiguity with regard to the problem encountered and the solutions envisaged (Hall *et al.*, 1978; Hall, 1993). Sense-making is one of the crucial processes that occur: ‘Policy makers must recognise from vague, ambivalent, and contradictory signals that something out of the ordinary is developing’ (Boin *et al.*, 2005, p. 10;

Harrison, 2001). This understanding must then be transformed into a specific meaning. Policy-makers are expected to reduce uncertainty and provide an authoritative account of what is going on, why it is happening and what needs to be done. It is here that the conceptualization of agency, as argued by sociological approaches, helps to understand why certain solutions are preferred over others in EU affairs.

Crises are not only exogenous factors that mechanically trigger change. Neither are they pure social constructs: earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, famine, wars or financial breakdowns are not only discursively constructed phenomena. However, how we perceive them is partially framed by actors such as the media, decision-makers or societal actors. Crisis situations then transform actors' understanding of how to deal with issues, and on the other hand enable actors whose interests have diverged from the mainstream paradigm to use the window of opportunity created by the crisis to influence the debate anew. It is crucial to understand which actors drive change and what types of strategies flourish in which kinds of institutional settings.

Two explanations can be found as to why crises suspend these equilibria. First, a crisis relaxes the structural constraints that kept institutions in place. It directs attention to previously unnoticed vulnerabilities. In these situations, decision-makers can act on the basis of large support and develop unconventional or risky policy options. The routine way of working and thinking (cognitive frames) becomes discredited in the eyes of outsiders and room for alternatives suddenly emerges. This does not only concern a specific policy sector, but can question the political system as a whole (Zittoun, 2014).

Second, this means, more precisely, that institutional change occurs when problems of rule interpretation and enforcement open up space for actors to perceive as well as implement existing rules in new ways. This understanding of change allows us not only to consider exogenous shocks as independent variables leading to institutional change, but also to take endogenous variables seriously. A change in the shared understanding of effects that specific institutions may have can constitute an endogenous shock leading to institutional change. While institutions in general are highly constraining in periods of stable politics (Francesco, 2007), critical junctures, such as the economic and financial crisis periods, open up opportunities for change. This change, however, needs agents that seize this opportunity to induce change (Katznelson, 2003; Genieys and Hassenteufel, 2012).

Sociological approaches concentrating on the interplay between individual actors allow us to understand how actors make sense of the crisis. They offer the possibility to study both processes and outcomes of framing phenomena (Section II) and the relationship between political contestation and decision-making (Section III), arguing that they are neither the result of a static cost–benefit analysis nor based on a pure logic of appropriateness. They focus on the fact that agents need to use the window of opportunity strategically.

II. Actor-centred Views of Framing Processes

Neo-institutionalist, and more specifically historical institutionalist, accounts of the EU's economic and financial crisis concentrate on the development of new rules, norms and institutions at the European level (Verdun, 2007, 2015; Deeg and Posner, 2015; Salines *et al.*, 2012). They place emphasis on path-dependent institutional structures (previous

institutional structures affect possible solutions to current problems) and critical junctures (short periods of time when actors' choices are likely to affect outcomes; Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007). When under time constraints, layering on top of, or copying from, existing or past institutional arrangements is considered as an effective strategy to come up with solutions. According to Verdun (see also Ioannou *et al.*, 2015), this explains the particular shape taken by new crisis-related institutions. Hence, the European Financial Stability Facility, established in May 2010, resembles the Schengen agreement and the Bologna Process in Higher Education, insofar as the European Commission took on a co-ordination role but the arrangement was still outside the EU Treaty (Verdun, 2015, pp. 226–30).

However, neo-institutionalist accounts – be they historical or rational choice-inspired – underestimate how crises change actors' perceptions and open possibilities for actors to modify the rules and institutions in which they act. While 'the EU is undoubtedly the most densely institutionalized international organization in the world, with a profusion of intergovernmental and supranational institutions and a growing body of primary and secondary legislation, the *acquis communautaire*' (Pollack, 2004, p. 137), this may precisely be the problem for those scholars adopting a sociological approach to EU studies (Saurugger and Mérand, 2010). The sociological critique of EU institutionalism has a great deal to do with the latter's narrow focus on *formal* institutions. While EU institutionalists study institutionalization processes 'from afar', Virginie Guiraudon (2000) argues that sociologists will tend to construe the EU '*in situ* and in action', concentrating prominently on how actors shape particular views on problems and solutions. Methodologically, this research concentrates on in-depth fieldwork. Rebecca Adler-Nissen shows this particularly well in her article in this special issue (Adler-Nissen, 2016): political sociologists often make greater use of fieldwork, e.g. ethnography, a methodology rarely used by institutionalists. If the EU is a resource and a power base, she adds, it is worthwhile to ask ourselves who are the political and social actors who mobilize at the European level and who are those who remain at the margins of this transnational space.

This perspective paves the way for a different understanding of the influence of actors' preferences, particularly in times of crisis. In analysing European immigration policies, for example, Guiraudon (2000) combines Bourdieu's field theory and March and Olsen's 'garbage can' model to explain the timing, form and content of a policy. But, going beyond policy formulation and implementation, she also documents how multiple actors mobilize around shifting policy venues to produce the public policy of migration, with its inevitable winners and losers.

This specific puzzle is at the heart of actor-centred constructivist approaches, which, by using institutionalist, constructivist and sociological insights, have developed tools to analyse how actors frame problems to gain influence that help us to understand the outcomes of crisis situations. While constructivist approaches based on socialization and learning either explicitly or implicitly insist on the clear difference between rationalist and constructivist thinking (Saurugger, 2009), actor-centred constructivists reject the assumption that material factors are the main independent variable. Adopting the view that ideational factors frame the understanding of these material factors (for an in-depth debate of this 'intellectual topography of ideational explanations' see Gofas and Hay, 2010, p. 3), they attempt to reintroduce the fact that actors can use these ideational factors strategically

(Hall, 1993; Fligstein and Mara-Drita, 1996; McNamara, 1998; Surel, 2000; Blyth, 2002; Parsons, 2003; Jabko, 2006).

'Actor-centred' Constructivism

The aim of this 'actor-centred' constructivism is to understand how worldviews, which provide the cognitive background against which actors evolve, are also used by actors to strategically achieve their goals. In this perspective, ideas and norms do not solely constitute the environment in which actors are embedded (constitutive logic), but are also tools, consciously used by these same actors to frame problems in order to attain their goals (causal logic).

By 'sociologizing' constructivism to a certain extent and developing an actor-centred constructivist approach, a number of authors, in particular Kathleen McNamara (1998), Craig Parsons (2003) and Nicolas Jabko (2006), reintroduce politics into their analysis of EU policies. In their work, they stress the key role of actors in the production of ideas and cognitive frameworks which, when they are used strategically, lead to reformed public policies. These studies focus on the role of ideas and perceptions in institutional development, while emphasizing actors' strategies in decision-making processes. When studying cognitive frames, it is crucial to do so in conjunction with the social structures that produce them. Neither ideas, nor values, nor norms float freely. Their establishment, development and maintenance imply constant strategic calculations (See Saurugger 2013).

In this sense they are distinct from social constructivist accounts, which have taken various forms – stretching from post-positivist constructivists, who explore the discursive practices that make certain norms in the EU possible in the first place (Diez, 1999; Checkel, 2006), to more 'conventional' constructivists, whose aim is to analyse how ideational factors influence political and policy outcomes (Béland and Cox, 2011). Contrary to constructivism, sociological approaches argue that, albeit influenced by cognitive frames, actors have larger room for manoeuvre in power struggles and social conflicts than social constructivists assume when they analyse the framing activities of these actors. As Kauppi puts it (2003, p. 777): '... despite its stated aims to study the social fabric of Europe and world politics, [constructivism] is only weakly sociological. Its protagonists are eager to example the discursive processes informing European integration, identity, norms of behavior, and so on, leaving largely untouched the social characteristics of the individuals and groups who, through their activities, construct this symbolic and material entity'. At the same time, contrary to mainstream Bourdieusian sociological approaches studying the emergence of European professional 'fields' (such as Kauppi, 2003; Vauchez, 2015), actor-centred constructivism considers actors' strategies as a dynamic concept (for a more critical use of Bourdieu see Mérand, 2008; Zimmermann and Favell, 2011). Embedded in informal norms and institutions, actors are entirely predefined neither by their 'social capital' nor by the 'field' in which they evolve. They are able to adapt and to change their environment.

How do ideas frame interests, and how can one describe the practices of actors and the development of policies through this framing process? When and why, for example, do European public officials evoke the neoliberal paradigm in their messages, and when and why does this idea not find its way into official documents and discourse? In crisis situations this question is crucial, as actors are confronted with a transformed environment

in which they must frame problems and decide on solutions. In other words: ‘Since structures do not come with an instruction sheet, economic ideas make such an institutional resolution possible by providing the authoritative diagnosis as to what a crisis actually is and when a given situation actually constitutes a crisis. They diagnose “what has gone wrong” and “what is to be done”’ (Blyth, 2002, p. 10).

Research based on this perspective is particularly important in the field of the European political economy, and in the context of its economic and financial crisis management. The main question dealt with here is why and how a convergence of beliefs around economic and political solutions to specific European problems has emerged (Hall, 1993; Blyth, 2002; Abdelal *et al.*, 2010; McNamara, 1998, 2006; Parsons, 2002; Jabko, 2006, 2010; Woll, 2008; Clift and Woll, 2012; Schmidt and Thatcher, 2013).

With regard to the recent crisis situation, actor-centred constructivism allows us to understand how specific economic ideas framed the solutions to the crisis that were put on the table, but at the same time how these solutions were used strategically. In studying the ECB’s (European Central Bank’s) role during the crisis, Fontan (2014a, 2014b), for instance, starts from a crucial question: why did the European Central Bank continue to defend an orthodox model of central banking while its response to the crisis deviated from it – and how did it manage to do so? Fontan argues that while the creation of the ECB was prominently inspired by the orthodox model of the Bundesbank and the new classical economy, the ECB’s decision to implement heterodox monetary measures in order to answer the eurozone crisis triggered internal and external tensions. These tensions – illustrated by the 2011 resignations of Axel Weber, president of the German Central Bank, followed by Jürgen Stark, member of the ECB’s executive board – endangered its organizational unity. The ECB dilemma consisted in implementing the necessary crisis measures while protecting its original orthodox reputation. Fontan argues that these strategies helped the ECB agents to protect and enhance their reputation within crucial Ecofin arenas as well as the market.

Other studies on reforms of the European economic policy framework show that while the idea of German ordoliberalism was as strong in 2003/4 as it is today, German stakeholders use the paradigm strategically in negotiations (Bulmer, 2014): the German government accepted Axel Weber’s resignation, although he represented German ordoliberalism in a very clear form, because the government perceived compromises to be crucial in 2011 to go beyond the deadlock in which the European Central Bank found itself with regard to saving the eurozone (Jones, 2013). The French government’s position, defending the need for an economic government that takes into account other variables than just low inflation and spending control, is another illustration of the interaction between ideas and strategies in this particular crisis at the EU level. More specifically, neoliberal ideas are perceived as particularly resilient because they adapt to actors’ strategies: Mügge (2013), Howarth (2013) and Thatcher (2013), for example, underline such strategic usages of neoliberal ideas in the regulation of European financial and economic markets. Finally, if only the stable ‘field’ of the *Eurocracy* influenced the positions of European institutions, and more specifically the European Commission’s stance with regard to austerity, it would be difficult to explain how Juncker’s presidency of the European Commission coincided with an opening for a European stimulus package negotiated with Member States.

III. The Society–EU Relationship under Scrutiny in Times of Crisis

One of the consequences of crisis situations in general is the reinforced politicization of the political debate (Crespy, 2010,2012). For more than 20 years, phenomena such as citizen protest against specific European policies, referenda lost over the ratification of treaties and, more recently, governments that have lost their chances of re-election because of their pro-European position have been in the headlines. The eurozone crisis, however, has not only led to debates and redefinitions of preferences, ideas and identities at the EU level, as we have seen above, but has also shown an important increase in the interest in EU-level negotiations shown by European citizens and the public sphere.

The analysis of these relations during the eurozone crisis in mainstream theoretical approaches takes two distinct forms: on the one hand, LI (liberal intergovernmentalism), which explains the politics used to cope with the eurozone crisis through the interaction of national preferences, governmental bargaining power and institutional choices designed to commit euro-area countries credibly to the currency union (Schimmelfennig, 2015); on the other, public opinion research which focuses on the dynamics of support for European integration, arguing that the euro crisis has emphasized the economic and redistributive implications of integration and decreased the importance of national identity for influencing citizens' attitudes towards European integration (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014; Hobolt and Wrátil, 2015), based on extremely enthusiastic Eurobarometer surveys showing continued support of EU citizens for the euro and the European Central Bank, but questioning the legitimacy of their own national governments.

The difficulty of these approaches is, however, that they do not explain the dynamic interaction between the public opinion and the European level. LI, while acknowledging the influence of domestic politics, argues that governments' preferences regarding European integration result from a domestic process of preference formation. These preferences are based on national economic interests. While LI distinguishes between organized interests (economic interest groups) and diffuse interests (public opinion) – arguing that the more institutionally represented and organized the former are, the more influence they have, while diffuse interests are more likely to lead to the prevalence of ideological preferences (Schimmelfennig, 2015) – it does not allow for conceptualizing the influence of salience of the public debate nor that of party politics on the governmental position at the EU level during the bargaining process. Once fixed, the preferences of the government remain stable. As a consequence, LI does not take into account feedback loops, i.e. how the debate triggered by the implementation of decisions in the domestic realm feeds back once more into renewed debates at the EU level. However, we observe empirically that these preferences are constantly influenced and framed by debates that take place at the domestic level, be it in their own constituency or that of other Member States. There is a constant back and forth between the European and the domestic level, which does not allow for considering preferences as fixed or stable.

The findings on public opinion research attempt to address these shortcomings. Work on European integration, notably the theory of postfunctionalism (Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Paterson, 2010), has highlighted increasingly politicized EU issues in domestic arenas. The 'permissive consensus' of the early period of integration, where insulated leaders could make decisions without public consultation, seems to have been replaced by a 'constraining dissensus' where public opinion is both more critical and more

decisive. This is based on the observation that political entrepreneurs increasingly use identity frames to mobilize the integration issue in public discourses. A recent study by Hobolt and Wratil (2015; Hobolt and Tilley, 2014) suggests that as the issue of monetary integration became more salient and citizens more aware of it, identity concerns became less important to citizens and utilitarian concerns about the EU's institutional effectiveness and benefits of integration became more important. However, these studies predominantly explain how European integration influences public opinion towards the EU, analysing less the dynamic interaction and mutual influence between public opinion, civil society and decision-makers at the EU level.

Both approaches make a clear distinction between the domestic realm in which public opinion exists and – more or less systematically – influences government preferences and the EU level. However, this dichotomy does not allow for understanding the dynamic nature of the interaction between the domestic and the European realm (for analysis of dichotomies in sociological approaches of EU studies see Parsons, 2010). Two conceptual tools developed by the EU political sociology approach focusing on the interaction amongst individual actors are particularly useful here: the concept of usage (Jacquot and Woll, 2010) and the concept of circular Europeanization or feedback loops (Radaelli, 2001).

Feedback Loops and Usage

Feedback loops in EU policy-making represent a well-known puzzle in EU studies (Fligstein and Stone Sweet, 2000). Addressed in particular by the sociological strand of Europeanization studies, they are the basis of Claudio Radaelli's (2001) definition of circular Europeanization. In this understanding, EU norms were first influenced by domestic-level formal and informal institutions, debates and interests – whether diffuse, such as those represented by public opinion, or organized, such as those defended by interest groups and civil society organizations and then implemented and adapted again at the domestic level. While this definition requires a methodologically complex research design and is the subject of criticism such as concept stretching, in reality it helps identify at least the different levels, actors and instruments of change, and has led to a wider understanding of Europeanization as 'usage' (Jacquot and Woll, 2010). The concept's ambition is to draw attention to the cognitive and strategic dynamics of European transformations. Institutional contexts need to be interpreted by actors. They do not react constantly the same way to political pressure: they can choose and learn, and thus develop agency independent of structural conditions. By focusing on this agency, the notion of usages highlights how actors engage with, interpret, appropriate or ignore the dynamics of European integration. Their behaviour is therefore central to the ways in which national political systems respond to supranational politics, and vice versa (Jacquot and Woll, 2010). In other words, while circular Europeanization analyses domestic change, it does not do so without having considered how the norm which is developed at the EU level has been influenced by domestic debates, public opinion and power games between actors.

A higher degree of politicization, understood as the process of making citizens and concerned actors more involved in politics, can be observed during the current economic and financial crisis in the EU. This high degree of politicization has influenced the policy positions of Member States, such as France, which sought to renegotiate policies at the

EU level. Domestic opposition is taken up by national representatives and translated again at the EU level: Member States re-open debates on specific policy instruments, arguing about the difficulty of implementing them at the domestic level and asking for reinterpretation of these issues. The banking reform at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the year 2000 is just such an example. In times where there are no immediate problems, such as banking bankruptcies or failures, debates at the domestic level remain technical (Howarth, 2007; Hardie and Howarth, 2009) and receive very little media coverage. In times of high politicization, however, debates on the development of policies and their implementation become politically contested (Crespy, 2010). The contemporary debates about banking regulations are no longer purely technical debates, as can be seen by the *indignés* movements that have emerged over the past five years in Spain, Italy, France and, more specifically, Greece, where they have participated in governing the country. These movements' viewpoints are increasingly taken into account, as could be observed in the recent Italian, Greek and French electoral campaigns.

Actor-centred sociological approaches allow us to see when and why Member State governments anticipate the opposition that might occur at the domestic level, or actively use the European level to circumvent opposition that might arise at the domestic level, deciding together with their partners at the EU level and then domestically 'blaming' the EU level for the decision. An understanding of these processes, beyond the mainstream theoretical concentration on European-level institution-building as undertaken by the liberal intergovernmentalism, institutionalisms or neo-functionalist approaches (Schimmelfennig, 2015; Verdun, 2015; Niemann and Ioannou, 2015), urgently needs process-tracing EU political sociology approaches in order to grasp the impact of political contestation on the perceived legitimacy of the EU political system.

New Economic Governance Instruments

In 2010, the European member governments decided on the creation of the 'European semester'. This refers to a mechanism according to which the Member States, after having received EU-level recommendations, then submit their policy plans ('national reform programmes' and 'stability or convergence programmes') to be assessed at the EU level. This mechanism was followed in 2011 by the so-called 'Six-Pack' and 'Two-Pack', reinforcing the Stability and Growth Pact even further. In February 2012 the eurozone member states adopted a permanent ESM (European Stability Mechanism) that may issue emergency aid to euro-area countries. In March 2012, the intergovernmental Fiscal Compact was signed by 25 EU Member States, reinforcing the Stability and Growth Pact and introducing new control mechanisms. It requires national budgets to be in balance or in surplus. This rule had to be incorporated into national law within one year of the treaty's entry into force. The rule will be deemed to be respected if the country-specific medium-term objective as defined in the revised Stability and Growth Pact is met, with a structural deficit lower limit of 0.5 per cent of GDP. If significant deviation from this objective or the adjustment path towards it is observed, a correction mechanism will be triggered automatically. The mechanism includes an obligation to implement suitable measures over a defined period of time, a process which can be interpreted as a hardening of the soft law of the former Stability and Growth Pact (Terpan, 2015).

Implementation and Adjustments

Member States, however, renegotiate the specifics of these rules: in presenting their budget at the EU level, they engage in a negotiation process in which domestic macro-economic policies and national political opposition are crucial negotiation factors. Domestic political time and timing once more play crucial roles. In line with Jacquot's and Woll's (2004, 2010) usage concept, Dyson argues, the 'European economic governance is not a single "time-rule" exercise. It reflects different functional specificities and differences in potential of issues to mobilize political opposition ... As seen most clearly in the Lisbon strategy, threats of constraints on member states' capacity to act as time setters in economic reforms from domestic electoral time rules induce governments to evade commitments that "bind their hands" and to avoid delegating power to the European Commission' (Dyson, 2009, p. 287). This is seen in the ways in which Member State governments respond to incentives and pressure to synchronize fiscal, employment or macro-economic co-ordination first under EMU rules and now under the new economic governance settings (see also Saurugger, 2014).

European Semester

The implementation of the so-called 'European semester', which aims to strengthen economic co-ordination, illustrates this point. This integrated surveillance framework governs the implementation of fiscal policies under the Stability and Growth Pact to strengthen economic governance and ensure budgetary discipline, and the implementation of structural reforms in the context of 'Integrated Guidelines' outlined in 'National Reform Programmes' to ensure progress towards the agreed goals of the EU Strategy for Growth and Jobs ('Europe 2020'). The Spanish reaction to the European semester during negotiations in 2012 illustrates domestic resistance and the associated adjustment process. The government declared that Spain remained a sovereign country and would not follow EU guidelines without having the final word. Its prime minister, Mariano Rajoy, declared that economic difficulties at the domestic level were so great that a mechanically applied austerity programme would not lead to the expected results. The exercise can therefore not be interpreted as a pure implementation of a European rule; rather, it was an adjustment process in which general EU rules were renegotiated and adapted to national constraints regarding how best to solve the crisis at the domestic level. Rajoy was increasingly criticized by extreme-left parties, which secured a landslide victory in the latest local elections in Spain.

This process cannot be understood if its analysis is not based on the conceptual frameworks of circular Europeanization and usage. Political time at the national level will influence the positions and the discourse of political actors and lead to processes to adjust these instruments at the European level. Circular Europeanization in this field very much refers to negotiated governance: economic and financial mechanisms, albeit based on specific regulations and directives, foresee instruments that can only be defined through negotiation between Member States and European institutions. Hence, rather than looking for the often impalpable 'influence of the EU', the concept of usages of Europe allows for studying whether and how the EU has been instrumentalized by policy actors to help them stall or advance on their reform projects, be it through providing bargaining assets, legitimization, room for manoeuvre, blame avoidance or power increases (Jacquot, 2008).

Indeed, European governments act under the pressure of domestic electoral timing. These are not only national elections, such as presidential or parliamentary ones, but also regional or local. Electoral vulnerability is a crucial element explaining both *ex ante* and *ex post* domestic attitudes and positions on economic governance that Member States defend at the EU level. Member States' attitudes during the debates leading to the bailout plans for Ireland, Portugal and Greece illustrate this extremely well.

Bailouts

Member States' positions and discourses have varied significantly during the crisis, influenced by electoral time and salience. Increased politicization was one of the results that led to the need to renegotiate the mechanisms at the European level. With regard to the bailout plans, after an initial refusal to support Greece, the Member States finally agreed to rescue the country in May 2010, followed by similar rescues in November 2010 (Ireland) and May 2011 (Portugal). In October 2011 a short-term EFSF was established to shore up the markets for European sovereign debt, finally ratified in October 2011 as the ESM.

However, national use of these processes was variable and indicates contestation. French President Hollande used the debate on the European Union for electoral purposes in order to please the left wing of his electorate, declaring that he would argue for a re-negotiation of the 'Fiscal Pact' and strong support for the Greek bailout if he won the election. For over a year he argued, based on this electoral premise, in favour of an economic government, a principle to which Angela Merkel agreed in 2013.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel's use of domestic constraints was similar, in another context. The debate on whether to save Greece or not was based on internal electoral calculus in Germany. After having subsidized the eastern *Länder* for a decade in order to make reunification possible, many Germans worried that the European crisis would lead the German economy to redistribute its wealth to its southern neighbours (Hall, 2012). Confronted with difficulties in regional elections – in particular in Germany's largest state, North Rhine-Westphalia, where the Chancellor's party lost by a landslide in 2012, as it did in the Schleswig-Holstein 2012 elections – Angela Merkel severely criticized the idea that Germany was going to pay for countries such as Greece or Portugal, which were blamed for their fiscal imprudence. This position was widely shared throughout the northern European Member States. Radical right and left-wing parties exploited the nationalist reaction and politicization increased. The Dutch and Finnish governments both had huge difficulty defending, and subsequently implementing, the decision to financially support the southern periphery.

Peter Hall (2012, p. 366) argues convincingly: 'Indeed, for some months after its beginning in 2010, policy-makers presented the crisis as a policy problem for the GIIPS (Greece, Italy, Ireland, Portugal, Spain) rather than as a European banking crisis, in effect publicly ignoring the possibility that some of the costs should be borne by lending institutions in the north. Although the restructuring of Greek debt was an accomplishment, it is telling that only the segment of that debt held by the private sector was restructured'.

We observe similar reactions in the concerned countries themselves. Greece's President Papandreou's call for a referendum, leading to his resignation in November 2011, serves as another illustration of the influence of national debates on European policies:

why would French President Sarkozy and German Chancellor Merkel force the Greek Prime Minister Papandreou to choose at the Cannes G20 meeting in October 2011 between the referendum on the one hand and staying in the euro and receiving further financial support on the other, but then not do so in 2015 when the new Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras announced a referendum on precisely the same question? Neither in 2011 nor in 2015 was it possible for a national head of state or government to dismiss the public opinion of another Member State, but in 2015, doing so would have meant Greek citizens' political opinion would contest European integration forcefully enough to push the Greek government to openly consider exit of the eurozone. Hence, domestic debates, organized interests and public opinion in other Member States must be taken into account in order to understand how European politics function.

Conclusion

A crucial number of issues stemming from the current crisis of European integration can be particularly well analysed by two approaches which are part of the wider EU political sociology frameworks: on the one hand, 'actor-centred constructivism', insisting on the importance of understanding the process of framing and the strategic use of these frames in political games; on the other, the concept of circular Europeanization combined with the usage framework, which allows an understanding of the link between domestic-level political games, public opinion and European politics, not as a one-way process but as a dynamic game in which the preferences of Member States or citizens' identities cease to be fixed categories. These approaches open the possibility to better understand the processes, adjustments and influence of political contestation experienced by the European political system when in crisis.

The approaches used in this article are part of a broader category of sociological approaches to EU studies. As underlined in the introduction, the aim of this article was not to develop the argument that *a* sociological approach of EU studies explains the EU in turmoil better than other theoretical accounts, but to offer, through tools borrowed from sociology, a more nuanced understanding of political process in times of crisis. Sociology is not *an* approach to EU phenomena, but a discipline whose practitioners ask different questions (e.g. around the impact of social practices) and construct different research objects (e.g. structures of social interaction; Saurugger and Mérand, 2010).

A number of methodological difficulties remain for these approaches to solve, though. Sociological approaches mainly rely on micro-sociological studies through which the analysis of actors' attitudes and strategies become understandable. However, is it always possible to draw wide-reaching conclusions from these small-scale studies with regard to the transformation of European integration in crisis situations? Do research results remain anecdotal, or at best policy-specific? Systematic study of how specific power constellations at the domestic level influence negotiations at the European level, or which among the many domestic contestations triggered the change in EU policies, is empirically difficult. Some actors, such as the ECB, are furthermore very difficult to access, and conclusions about the influence of their internal workings on their framing power might at times remain speculative – a situation researchers working on these institutions deplore themselves.

At the same time, macro-level explanations, which ignore the small-scale interactions between actors, do not allow for grasping the extent to which the contestation of the EU influences policy-making in a circular way, and how actors frame policy problems leading to specific policy solutions. Only a combination of sociological and political science tools might allow us to get a nuanced picture of the EU in crisis.

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