

# **THE PUBLIC POLICY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: WHITHER POLITICS OF EXPERTISE?**

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## **Abstract**

The role of expertise in European public policy has become the object of a passionate debate. On the one hand, European Union (EU) policy studies argue that knowledge, in various guises, can foster learning, enlightenment, problem-solving attitudes, and policy change. On the other, EU public policy is in the firing line because of its technocratic bias. However, what is meant by technocracy in the case of the EU? How can political scientists be fascinated by the positive input of knowledge, and, at the same time, horrified by technocratic policy-making? The aim in this article is to tackle this puzzle by suggesting an appropriate conceptual framework. Concepts such as technocracy, epistemic communities, and bureaucratic politics refer to different modes of the politics of expertise. Empirically, they should be contrasted with the logic of politicisation. Case studies discussed in this article suggest that the power of expertise is being counterbalanced by a process of politicisation. The conclusion is that the main challenge is neither to preserve an unattainable de-politicised Union nor to assume that politicisation will tame technocracy, but to make expertise more accountable in an increasingly politicised environment.

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**Keywords:** knowledge utilization, technocracy, bureaucratic politics, epistemic communities, advocacy coalitions, regulation.

## **THE PUBLIC POLICY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: WHITHER POLITICS OF EXPERTISE?**

### **1. KNOWLEDGE IN EU PUBLIC POLICY: A MIXED BLESSING?**

As is often the case, the current interest in the cognitive dimension of politics is more representative of re-discovery than of absolute novelty. If conceptualised in a broader sense, the cognitive dimension of politics is comprised of well-known features of political studies. Classic examples are provided by the literature developed on incrementalism (Lindblom 1959), bounded rationality (Simon 1957), the cognitive maps of political elites (Axelrod 1976), the view of politics as learning (Deutsch 1966:80; Heclo 1972), and the discussion of technocracy (Burris 1993; Meynaud 1969). Why then 're-discover' the political role of knowledge? One reason is that models of knowledge utilisation and learning have been refined and can be empirically tested (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Consequently, there is an effort to assess the performance of knowledge-based models in the explanation of policy change. Another reason pertains to the very nature of politics. Almost invariably, the idea that the policy process goes beyond conflict resolution percolates in studies of the 'power of ideas'. Learning, problem-solving attitudes, fora of debate, and policy enlightenment – it is argued – can be more relevant than adversarial politics. Is then politics moving beyond adversarial democracy?

These questions have a particular importance in the study of the public policy of the European Union (EU). Here the role of expertise has become the object of academic interest and passionate debate. Studies have shed light on how knowledge shapes public policy formation due to the presence of experts and epistemic communities (Richardson 1996; Zito 1998), fora of discussion (Coen 1997), and the policy entrepreneurship of the Commission (Cram 1993), an organisation possessing knowledge as its main resource. This seems to bode well in terms of quality of the democratic process. Are we moving then towards a better-informed, perhaps even enlightened policy?

There is also a dark side of the cognitive dimension of politics, however. Its name is technocracy. Not surprisingly, policy shaped by experts and non-elected policy entrepreneurs is in the firing line. At stake is the allegation of a Union ruled by technocrats. Whilst democracy is based on legitimate consensus, free elections and participation, technocracy recognises expertise as the sole basis of authority and power. Concerns have been expressed by scholars engaged in the theoretical-normative analysis of the democratic deficit (O'Neill 1999; Wincott 1998). However, what is meant by technocracy in the specific case of the EU? How can EU scholars be fascinated by post-adversarial politics and, at the same time, horrified by technocratic policy-making?

The purpose of this essay is threefold. First, I will explain to what extent terms such as technocracy, the regulatory state, bureaucratic politics and epistemic communities shed light on different aspects of the politics of expertise in the EU (Section 2). The second aim is to suggest a framework that enables the researcher to contrast the various manifestations of the politics of expertise with politicisation (Section 3). Thirdly, I will present my own thoughts on the normative implications of the analysis (Section 4).

## **2. HOW DOES EXPERTISE MATTER?**

### Technocracy and its limits

Since the problematic ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht, the debate on the technocratic nature of the EU has intensified. The decision-making system of the EU relies on a plethora of working groups, standardisation bodies, and committees of experts (Joerges *et al.* 1997; Pedler and Schaefer 1996). Not only citizens, but also companies have lamented that EU technocrats working in splendid isolation tend to produce too much regulations and bad legislation (Radaelli 1998). The resignation of the Santer Commission in March 1999 has spawned yet another debate on the danger of technocracy in European affairs.

However, what does technocracy mean nowadays? A vast literature has discussed the evolution of technocracy as a concept and political ideology (Burris 1993; Fischer 1990;

Sartori 1987; Williams 1971). This literature has also underlined the main difference between the earlier stage of technocratic utopias and the contemporary technocrat. The former advocated for a direct rise to power of experts, whereas the latter is formally respectful of democratic values and institutions. Nobody is currently arguing for a government of scientists, or a Soviets of Technicians à la Veblen. Yet technocrats (both in domestic and EU politics) are gaining power in the shadow of formal structures: advisory boards (Boston 1988), think tanks (Stone et al. 1998), EU regulatory policy (Majone 1996) and governments teeming with non-elected ministers are the primary loci where experts have now secured a pivotal position.

The point to emphasise, however, is not about types of actors (experts instead of elected politicians) but about the change in the nature of power. Several instances of radical policy change (de-regulation, administrative reform, and new directions in monetary policy) have been characterised by an extraordinary battle of ideas. Knowledge has thus become the terrain of politics (Fischer 1990). At the same time, the public sphere has become de-politicised. Due to its complexity and the growth of independent agencies, public policy is often insulated from public scrutiny. Social movements, diffuse interests, and public opinion can thus be silenced.

The change in the nature of power is accompanied by the rise of the technocratic mentality within élites. The technocrat is fundamentally hostile to the openness of democracy, and suspicious of parliamentary institutions (Putnam 1976; see also Meynaud 1969). Political conflict is not considered a healthy component of democracy, but a consequence of ignorance. Rational analysis – the technocratic mantra recites – produces efficient solution that should be accepted by all people of good will. Hence ‘the technocrat believes that social and political conflict is often, at best, misguided, and, at worst, contrived’ (Putnam 1977: 386). A corollary is a mentality more concerned with technological progress, efficiency and material productivity than with fairness and social justice.

Turning to the EU, the original conception of European integration and its legacy enshrine several technocratic components. The early stage of European integration was marked by a technocratic approach embodied in the Monnet Plan for the ECSC (Featherstone 1994)<sup>i</sup>. The key idea of the plan was the special position given to experts in the making of supranational public policy. Hence the idea of a High Authority composed of selected experts. Those experts, however, were not to operate in isolation from the society. The Monnet method of integration prefigured a system of engrenage whereby networks of interest groups, organised labour and firms would be gradually involved in the making of public policy (Haas 1958). The founding fathers of European integration envisaged governance by technocratic consensus. The engine of integration would be represented by a combination of technocrats and interest groups, building together supranational coalitions in favour of European public policy (Haas 1958). Monnet had not even conceived of a Council of Ministers, presumably because the High Authority had a limited competence, confined to steel and coal policy. But this is also indicative of his technocratic approach. It was up to the Belgian and Dutch delegations to raise the point of a Council to counterbalance the High Authority and provide political direction.

This legacy has survived throughout the years, as illustrated by Featherstone (1994). It is not confined to the Commission, but pervades the whole political structure of the EU. Andersen and Burns (1996) argue that the EU is based on three mechanisms of representation: expert representation ('in the context of a stress on 'rationality' and effectiveness' – Andersen and Burns clarify), representation of interest groups (and diffuse interests) in policy networks, and national representation. The first two mechanisms point to a marked de-politicisation and opacity of public policy, a typical characteristic of technocracy at work.

The emphasis on efficiency is associated with the specialisation of the EU as a political system producing regulatory policy<sup>ii</sup>. In this respect, the EU has evolved differently than nation-states. While the nation-states matured and consolidated around distributive and redistributive policies, the EU - as Gian Domenico Majone's studies have shown - has

chiefly developed the regulatory dimension. The EU budget constraint bars the growth of distributive and redistributive policies (since social policy programmes require large sums of money), but to write a rule that, say, lays down requirements for engaging in credit or for international mergers and acquisitions, the only resource needed is a thorough knowledge of the markets and the subjects to be regulated (Majone 1996). The Commission is a bureaucracy wherein cognitive resources are most developed.

As for the intimacy with the recipients of regulation, the Commission is at the centre of dense networks of interactions (Peterson 1992; Richardson 1995). In his writings, Majone refers to the idea of copinage technocratique to denote an intense system of interaction between Brussels officials, experts from industry, and national civil servants. Thus the original system of engrenage envisaged by Monnet still plays its main function of providing relatively smooth policy-making within circles of experts.

The Commission, moreover, like all bureaucracies, is oriented towards expanding its own power (Majone 1996). The mission to promote and deepen European integration is even laid down in the Treaties, and this is what is referred to when the Commission is spoken of as the 'engine of integration'. Analysts of European public policies, as averred, have highlighted the Commission's role as policy entrepreneur, a term designating a political subject capable of opportunistically exploiting the scarce resources at its own disposal in order to create new policies (Cram 1993).

It is beyond the scope of this essay to assess the implications of the politics of regulation for the theory of the EU (see however Caporaso 1996). Here it is sufficient to observe that the EU is a political system with a comparative advantage in the production of regulation. Knowledge, rather than budget, is the critical resource in regulatory policy-making, and the Commission utilises this resource extensively. Regulatory policies aim at efficiency, rather than re-distribution. This makes them suitable to discussion and negotiations in expert circles, whereas re-distribution kindles the passions of politicians, political parties and the mass opinion because of its impact on the class structure. Pareto-

efficient moves entail positive-sum games, where nobody is worse off. Re-distribution, instead, implies that resources are taken from a portion of the society and allocated to another. The emphasis on efficiency and positive-sum games is consistent with the essential thrust of the technocratic mentality (Meynaud 1969; Putnam 1977). The technocrat believes that rational analysis and scientific examination of facts will bring about unanimous consensus on policy solutions. By contrast, the technocrat feels uneasy under conditions of political conflict, ideological debates, and controversies on distributive issues of social justice. Concluding on this point, the politics of regulation in the EU is consistent with the technocratic legacy of the original model. In its current form, regulation is the type of policy that suits better the expertise of the Commission, the tendency towards technical negotiation and the general avoidance of open political debate.

The seeds of technocracy have found in the politics of regulation a fertile terrain. But how is policy made in the daily grind of the EU process? The concept of bureaucratic politics provides additional insights to our examination of the politics of expertise in the EU (Allison 1971, Downs 1967 and for the EU Peters 1992). Bureaucratic politics takes two forms in the EU, namely bureaucratic competition between (and even within) institutions and the organisation of the policy process around functional policy areas (fragmented public policy-making). Bureaucratic competition involves European institutions such as the Commission, the Council, and the European Parliament. In this process, for example, the Commission will seek to expand its power vis-à-vis other institutions. Not only does competition for power place one European institution against another, but also even within the same institution there can be an intense turf battle. Studies of the Commission offer a picture of Directorate Generals with different administrative cultures (Cini 1996) and diverse policy frameworks (Harcourt 1998). For example, DG IV has developed its own culture of competition policy and tends to see policy issues through the lenses of the competition approach. By contrast, DG XV – the single market Directorate – is the most ardent supporter of a single market approach to policy issues. When new issues crop up the Commission's agenda, DG XV tends to argue that they should be processed by relying on the single market approach. Under these circumstances, bureaucratic politics filters into

the Commission itself, with the DGs and their respective Commissioners pitched one against the other.

The bureaucratic politics approach, additionally, argues that policy-making is organised around a certain number of functional policy areas where Directorates of the Commission, Commissioners, committees of the European Parliament, Council's advisory groups, national administrations and interest groups form coalitions vying for power (Peters 1992:116; Richardson 1996). Fragmentation, coalition formation, bargaining, networking and intense negotiation in sectorial arenas are the features of this level of bureaucratic politics. The dominance of fragmented, 'pillarised' politics in the EU has important consequences. One is that choices are insulated from macro-political scrutiny and public oversight. Another is the intense competition for power (as opposed to learning and more cooperative problem-solving styles) in the policy process.

'Insulated', sectorial, technical policy-making is a particularly appropriate precondition for the type of 'a-political' process described by the technocratic literature. Coalitions including administrative officials (at the EU and national levels) and pressure groups can be seen as the modern version of the system of engrenage built into the original model of the Community. However, in certain circumstances the main issue at stake is not the competition for power among institutions 'striving to preserve their own power', as Peters puts it. EU policies often touch upon areas of great uncertainty. Environmental policy or genetic manipulation are good examples of areas where the dominant theme is radical uncertainty. Of course, the competition for power and reflexive goals are still at stake when the environmental committee of the European Parliament, for example, presses the Council on a directive concerning the quality of water. But under conditions of radical uncertainty policy-making is also 'puzzling', not mere 'powering' (Heclo 1974). This consideration draws our attention to the political role of communities of experts.

Faced with the increasing role of scientific arguments and uncertainty, a nascent body of literature has identified the presence of 'epistemic communities' in the EU (Radaelli 1997;



Richardson 1996; Verdun 1999; Zito 1998). Originally, Peter Haas developed the concept of epistemic community with the aim of 'turning the study of political process into a question about who learns what, when, to whose benefit, and why?' (Adler and Haas 1992: 370). The term epistemic community defines 'a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge' within that domain (Haas 1992: 3). The epistemic community approach introduces three characteristics of the policy process: uncertainty, interpretation and institutionalisation of ideas. When there is radical uncertainty - Haas argues - there is not a clear perception of what the interest of the actor is: accordingly, an epistemic community can generate a definition of interests by illuminating certain dimensions of an issue, from which an actor can deduce her/his interests. Interests therefore become a dynamic dependent variable, framed by knowledge.

Thus - Haas argues - 'many of the conditions facilitating a focus on power are absent. It is difficult for leaders to identify their potential political allies. Neither power nor institutional cues to behaviour will be available, and new patterns of action may ensue' (Haas 1992: 14). Uncertainty implies that actors puzzle over public policy. Actors offering interpretation are in a pivotal position because policy is first and foremost an attempt to understand and de-code a complex reality. Interestingly, Muller has defined public policy as 'the construction of a relationship with the world' and has noted the political analogy between prise de parole (production of meaning) and prise de pouvoir, or the structuration of power relations (Muller 1995: 164). Put differently, the production of meaning is the key to the definition of interests and to the institutionalisation of policy ideas.

Epistemic communities have power only when they are organically inserted into the policy process. Their role is constrained: often epistemic communities 'create reality, but not as they wish' (Adler and Haas 1992: 381). Haas (1992) argues that the ideas of an epistemic community have impact on policy when experts reach positions of bureaucratic power, for example via the institutionalisation of advisory committees that must be consulted before taking a decision. Richardson adds that the power of epistemic communities 'is

constrained by the need for policy-makers – at the EU and national levels – to involve other forms of actors, particularly conventional interest groups’ (Richardson 1996: 16). More generally, a strong case can be made for considering the members of a given epistemic community an actor (not the sole actor, and often not even the most powerful actor) in complex coalitions competing in functional policy areas. Of course, it all depends on the empirical case under examination. But, for example, it may well be that in a certain policy area there are two competing coalitions and one coalition is assisted by an underlying epistemic community (Radaelli 1997). The theoretical rationale for considering epistemic communities in their interplay with wider coalitions (Sabatier 1998) is that knowledge and interests are in a symbiotic relation.

In this section I introduced terms (such as technocracy and the politics of regulation, bureaucratic politics, and epistemic communities) which are all associated with the political role of expertise. Association does not mean identity, however. One should not conflate these elements into the concept of technocracy. It is not advisable to stretch the concept of technocracy so far as to cover epistemic communities, regulatory policy, and bureaucratic politics. For this reason I shall first assess the usefulness of technocracy and then situate the diverse manifestations of the politics of expertise.

Let us begin with the concept of technocracy. As a catch-all concept, technocracy is a broad term which fits in rather well with many aspects of the EU. But upon closer investigation, the literature on technocracy does not appear very useful. Technocracy means big state, big planning, rationalisation of the policy process along predictable lines, and stabilisation of the economy. However, the Union can be everything but big government (its budget fluctuates under 1.5% of total EU GDP). In addition, the EU policy process is considered very unstable (Peters 1994; Richardson 1996).

Another critical point is that concepts such as technostucture (Galbraith 1967), technocorporatism (Fischer 1990), the military-industrial complex (Rosen 1973) or the technocomplex (Williams 1971) do not cover the same actors who are pivotal in the EU.

Put differently, the sociological scope of technocracy does not apply to the EU easily. Policy-making in the EU is fragmented and pillarised: there is not such thing as a uniform bloc of power ruling the EU policy process (Peterson 1995).

Turning to the arenas of power, the EU policy process is comprised of a number of arenas. Studies of agenda setting in the EU have shed light on several entry points for political demands. The European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Court of Justice, but also national political institutions are major arenas of EU politics. So much so that actors engage in 'venue-shopping' (Richardson 1996; Sabatier 1998) and shift to the arena where they can best employ their resources. The question then arises how can a technocratic class control all of these arenas? The plurality of arenas is a very serious problem for technocracy<sup>iii</sup>.

As far as ideology is concerned, technocracy can proliferate under conditions of distrust of politicians. For technocracy to succeed, political decision-making must be perceived as slow, corrupt, and ultimately irrational. But the current ideological challenge in the EU is all about people distrusting the 'bureaucrats of Brussels'. If there is a demand coming from public opinion, it is for more politics in the EU policy process, not less.

### Toward a conceptual framework

On balance, technocratic theory is more a point of departure than a point of arrival. Figure 1<sup>iv</sup> seeks to situate technocracy in a wider framework for the analysis of expertise and politicisation. The main thrust in this figure is not to highlight types of actors (such as bureaucrats, politicians or experts) but to pinpoint different modes of policy-making in an ideal-typical fashion. Moreover, it should be interpreted dynamically as issues can shift from one quadrant to another. The policy-making logic is not inherently political or technocratic. An important part of the conflict over policy problems is all about those who argue that there are technical solutions and those who push for a more political debate.

Consequently, politicisation is often the result of a successful attempt to break the walls of technocratic discussions.

The rationale in fig.1 is to show how uncertainty and political salience can facilitate the emergence of one type of logic (or 'mode') instead of another. The first dimension – salience – illustrates the difference between opaque or 'pillarised' policy domains and policies where the public opinion, diffuse interests, parliamentary oversight, and mass political parties make problems more visible and the logic at work more political. In short, the variable 'salience' differentiates between policies with a public and policies without a public. The second dimension is uncertainty. More uncertainty means more room for a problem- solving logic based on expertise.

#### FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The politics of expertise is extremely constrained in the south-west quadrant. When (a) policy problems are visible and (b) ideas-information are available at low cost, negotiations between self-interested political actors can take place without too many impediments. As shown by Moravcsik (1998), the analysis of supra-national policy entrepreneurship and epistemic communities must begin by assuming that knowledge and policy ideas are not available at low cost. Otherwise conflict resolution should be amenable to the primary stakeholders themselves (Moravcsik 1998:58). The typical 'mode' in this quadrant should be the political one. This is the domain of politicisation.

However, when information and ideas are not available at low cost, supra-national policy entrepreneurs and communities of experts can gain leverage through the manipulation of knowledge. The epistemic logic performs well under conditions of radical uncertainty and political visibility (south-east quadrant) because (a) there are barriers to classic political negotiation when interests cannot be defined easily and (b) experts or supra-national entrepreneurs provide interpretation and ideas that – via learning processes - focus solutions otherwise inaccessible. A result of the empirical literature, indeed, is that

epistemic communities have played an essential role in international environmental policy, a typical issue dominated by high political temperature amidst genuine uncertainty.

What happens when the political visibility of an issue is low and there is not much complexity? These conditions facilitate the competition for power, instead of learning. Organisations pursue reflexive goals, political salience is low and the logic of bureaucratic politics should prevail, as shown in the north-west quadrant. Bureaucracies will fight for expanding their competencies in a classic turf battle. In short, the politics of bureaucratic competition instead of the politics of learning.

What about technocracy? Although technocratic theory writ large is flawed (for the reasons illustrated above) the idea of a technocratic 'mode' could be still valid, especially when decisions are taken in a policy milieu where political exposure is low and expertise is needed to provide solutions. In the epistemic community approach, expertise provides orientation to actors struggling to understand their interest in extremely delicate issues, typically international policy dilemmas. The input of expertise in the technocratic 'mode' is different, being based on the idea of the 'one best way' reachable by the 'competent' professionals that know the means to an end. Instead of the tormented process leading to inspiration, interpretation and institutionalisation of epistemic paradigms, technocracy requires smooth and opaque policy areas, where a repertoire of solutions is combined to a repertoire of problems. The political implications of decisions are denied, the conflict over ends neglected, and technocracy proceeds as if problems were challenging (and intractable for the non-professional) yet ultimately computational.

To sum up the, the technocratic 'mode' should be contrasted with other manifestations of the politics of expertise and with politicisation. The next step is to undertake empirical analysis and show how different case studies fit in with the four ideal-typical cells. It is to this question that we now turn.

### 3. TECHNOCRACY OR POLITICISATION?

#### Evidence from case studies

This section illustrates the main results of case studies – on the negotiation of Economic and Monetary Union, direct tax policy, and media ownership regulation – discussed at length elsewhere (Harcourt and Radaelli 1999; Radaelli 1997; 1999)<sup>v</sup>. Case studies do not allow for statistical generalisation, yet they have potential for theoretical development (Yin 1994). In the second part of this section I will tackle the question how well does the cognitive perspective explain policy change?

Technocracy is a challenge in the three case studies, but it is not overwhelming. To begin with, the politics of expertise is not confined to technocracy. For example, epistemic communities have been influential in the design of the single currency (Verdun 1999), and bureaucratic politics pervades EU media ownership policy (Harcourt 1998), where different units of the Commission compete for setting the agenda. More importantly, a process of politicisation has ultimately counterbalanced the power of technocracy, bureaucratic politics, and epistemic communities.

Of the three cases, the monetary provisions signed at Maastricht provide the clearest example of the power of economic ideas and non-elected policy experts and professionals. On balance, the power of expertise in EMU is better captured by the category of epistemic community, rather than bureaucratic politics or technocracy. The evidence for this statement is provided by the power of the Delors Committee – responsible for the single currency blueprint. According to Verdun (1999, see also Cameron 1995) this Committee acted as an epistemic community. However, although there was an epistemic logic at work in the Delors Committee, this Committee was more than a network of bankers with a common policy goal, as it was chaired by the entrepreneurial leader of the Commission. Delors was not just yet another member of the central bankers' club! Thus the Delors Committee provides a manifestation of both the epistemic logic and of supra-national entrepreneurship.

More importantly still, can one assign the case of the monetary provisions signed at Maastricht to the south-east quadrant? Not entirely, as I argue that the political mode prevailed over the political power of expertise. This conclusion can be clarified by considering the difference between technical feasibility and political acceptability (Dyson and Featherstone 1999). The logic of supra-national entrepreneurship and epistemic communities should be assigned a premium insofar as it concerns the technical feasibility of EMU. This is the domain where the preferences of central bankers were incorporated in the treaty. More generally, the whole cognitive dimension of EMU was permeated by shared beliefs about central bank independence and policy credibility which (a) originated with the failure of Keynesian economic policies, (b) were sustained by a particular version of monetarism, and (c) found in German monetary policy an existing, desirable example to be imitated (McNamara 1998). This ideational dimension of EMU was strengthened by the role played by the Delors Committee. However, there is another dimension of the EMU policy process concerning its political acceptability. At Maastricht, the cognitive dimension of politics was accompanied by an intense strategic activity made of network building<sup>vi</sup>, political opportunities<sup>vii</sup>, and even secret negotiations<sup>viii</sup>. It was this eminently political dimension to define the boundaries of what was politically acceptable and, ultimately, to transform a set of ideas into a treaty. In conclusion, political factors played a large role.

Direct tax policy illustrates how the Commission itself can force stalemate by switching from technocratic policy to a more political discussion on harmful tax competition. The recent progress made in this policy area can be ascribed, indeed, to a renewed political interest in tax coordination. The Commission has shunned the previous approach based on a cautious, technical and non-political approach to tax efficiency in Europe and has pushed vehemently for a political discussion on the consequences of harmful tax competition in terms of unemployment and the degradation of the welfare state. Left to technocratic debates on the efficiency of the European tax systems, EU direct tax policy would have never gone further than minimal measures. The most interesting feature of the EU tax policy process is that bureaucrats (that is, the Commission) demand political decisions

rather than technocracy. In terms of fig. 1, I would stress the shift from the technocratic mode to politicisation.

Media ownership regulation (Harcourt 1998) supplies yet another manifestation of the politics of expertise, but also shows how politicisation is growing. The EU embarked on media ownership regulation by relying on the typical arguments for harmonisation (the level playing field argument), technical considerations on the future of the media industry, and the logic of the single market. A major preoccupation of the Commission was the avoidance of broader concerns of democracy. Yet politicisation is making progress. The anti-technocratic discourse is based on the arguments of pluralism (Humphreys 1996; Harcourt and Radaelli 1999) and has in the European Parliament and Directorate General X of the Commission the most ardent advocates.

Media ownership regulation does not fit in neatly with one of the four categories introduced above (technocracy, bureaucratic politics, epistemic communities and politicisation). A candidate to be excluded is epistemic communities. Policy-makers are not facing a situation where they puzzle over their interests and communities of experts assist (or provide) the definition of preferences. Bureaucratic politics, by contrast, is well alive in this policy area, as shown by the internal conflict within the Commission. If DG X looks at media regulation by using the paradigm of pluralism, DG XV opts for the single market, and DG XIII would like media to converge with the grandiose design of the information society (Harcourt 1998). As for the future, the increasing importance of the information society in the Commission's agenda could tilt the process towards technocratic regulation, although politicisation, once triggered, does not disappear easily. Judging by the current situation, I would argue that media ownership regulation contains elements of both bureaucratic politics and politicisation, with the shadow of technocracy still lurking upon the future.

In conclusion, the cases under examination presented the ideal pre-requisites for the development of technocracy in terms of regulatory policy-making, lack of an attentive



public, and the level of expertise needed to handle these issues. The power of expertise is indeed considerable, but does not go so far as to cancel a general trend toward politicisation.

### The knowledge structure

In a word, 'considerable' does not mean 'overwhelming'. But of course, the cognitive dimension of politics cannot be neglected only because it is not overwhelming. Knowledge always enters the policy process in combination with interests, never alone. In this connection, the theoretical challenge refers to the explanation of policy change. It is therefore useful to turn our attention to the more general issue of the theoretical leverage of the cognitive perspective.

In doing so, I will go beyond specific concepts such as technocracy and epistemic communities and look at the role of knowledge utilisation in the policy process comprehensively. One of the conceptual frameworks developed for addressing this very issue is the advocacy coalition approach (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). The approach draws attention to a fundamental element of structuration, i.e. coalitions which amalgamate interests and knowledge. It also provides a series of causal propositions that can be empirically tested. However, the advocacy coalition approach – at least in its original formulation Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993- is not fully satisfactory when it explains non incremental change as a consequence of substantial modifications of the policy environment. Policy change, indeed, is ultimately explained exogenously by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith. When the policy environment changes, the resources available to actors are modified and this triggers different relationships between one coalition and another.

Of course, policy change is often the result of exogenous shocks, but one should not underestimate how the interaction among actors can in itself produce policy change. The exogenous view should be complemented by the consideration of how learning within the

policy process produces policy change. Recent reflections on advocacy coalitions are addressing this very issue (Sabatier 1998). The policy environment (for example, the Single Market Programme in the case of media policy, the liberalisation of capital movement in relation to tax policy, or the dynamics of domestic monetary policy in the case of the single currency) played an important role in forging the political context in which proposals for new EU initiatives became plausible and necessary. Moreover, policy change is facilitated by the emergence of epistemic communities which ground policy paradigms into the policy process (Verdun 1999).

Nevertheless, change occurs when actors become capable of critically reflecting upon their interpretation of policy dilemmas, and consequently actively pursue a different representation of policy problems. Therefore learning and frame reflection are endogenous elements that have to be carefully considered in the explanation of policy change. Models based on social interaction (Lindblom 1990), the *référentiel* (Muller 1995) and frames (Schön and Rein 1994) have potential in locating the sources of change. Actors involved in policy controversies can and sometimes do discover innovation directly, via a learning process. A conclusion can be drawn at this point. In order to gain explanatory power, knowledge-based explanations of policy change must include both exogenous and endogenous elements. Rather than contrasting endogenous elements of the policy process with the exogenous elements in which contingent choices are entrenched, it is useful to stress the interaction between the two.

Another argument outlined here is the rejection of a view implicit in some threads of research, i.e. the 'anthropomorphic' view of knowledge. The tendency to define knowledge in relation to certain actors (e.g., experts or bureaucrats) is not entirely convincing. To posit a bi-univocal correspondence between the political role of knowledge and the participation of specific actors to the policy process is not fruitful. On the contrary, I would argue that knowledge has less to do with specific actors than with the structure in which actors act. Actors operate in the knowledge structure of the policy process, taking for granted certain rules and norms and using shared paradigms. At the

same time, actors modify the cognitive resources available in the policy process through their action.

The cognitive structure of the policy process provides interpretation, representations of political events, learning opportunities and 'lenses' that give focus to interests and behavioural codes. In turn, learning can be a powerful catalyst for the modification of the cognitive structure and, ultimately, for policy change. The cognitive structure contains professional knowledge produced by the social sciences, but it also includes interactive knowledge, i.e. knowledge one actor has about other actors' strategies. Knowledge is produced - not only reproduced - through the interaction in the policy process. This is the deeper meaning of knowledge endogeneity. A corollary is that preferences are not exogenous. They are defined and modified through social interaction.

The relationship between agency and structure is dialectic. At a given moment in time, actors are immersed in the cognitive structure, but the latter comes into life only through actors' behaviour. Put differently, the structure has to be enacted and interpreted (Giddens 1984; Wendt 1987:359). This has important implications. Indeed the cognitive component of public policy is reproduced and institutionalised only if it is reproduced by policy-makers who, say, conform to shared interpretative paradigms, stick to a common view of political, social and economic realities, and perceive the same meaning attached to action. But through action actors contribute to the development of the cognitive structure, for example by modifying an interpretation, or, alternatively, by discovering previously unforeseen meanings and outcomes of public policy. The cognitive structure is constant only in a static perspective. This is tantamount to saying that in a given moment the cognitive structure is taken for granted by actors because it is institutionalised. It becomes however variable when the analysis shifts from the static mode to a dynamic perspective. In a given moment the institutionalisation of knowledge has constitutive value in respect to action as it provides meaning attached to action. But 'the individual (unlike the behaviourist's rats) shapes the maze while running it' (Thompson, Ellis, Wildavsky 1990:22).

Giddens' notion of 'duality of structure' is extremely useful here (Giddens 1984). Structure is both the medium and unintended outcome of social practices - Giddens asserts. Actors draw on elements of the structure (e.g., rules or resources<sup>ix</sup>) in the enactment of social practices, and by using these elements simultaneously contribute to the reproduction of structure. Social structures do not exist independently of agents, but require agents in order to be re-produced. As Wendt, drawing upon Bhaskar and Giddens, has put it, 'social structures have an inherently discursive dimension in the sense that they are inseparable from the reasons and self-understandings that agents bring to their actions (...) Social structures are ontologically dependent upon and therefore constituted by the practices and self-understandings of agents' (Wendt 1987:359, emphasis in original). Accordingly, at each point of the process of structural reproduction actors have potential for change.

These notes on structure and agency chime with the argument presented above about the necessity to integrate endogenous and exogenous elements. In conclusion, it is not by isolating and contrasting exogenous structures and endogenous agency, but by looking at their interaction, that knowledge-based explanations of policy change gain theoretical leverage.

#### **4. CONCLUDING REMARKS: INTEGRATING EXPERTISE AND POLITICISATION**

How can one assess the politics of expertise in the EU from a normative point of view? The EU is a political system wherein expertise matters considerably. The presence of bureaucratic politics, epistemic communities, technocratic public policy-making is not unique to the EU. But the specialisation of the EU in regulatory policy-making accentuates the thorny issue of integrating expertise and democracy. The solution devised by national political systems in the previous centuries – that is, strengthening the role of

parliaments in the control of the executive – cannot be a panacea. Of course, the European Parliament has been extremely influential in recent policy developments. In the case of media ownership policy, the European Parliament has been instrumental in bringing pluralism back in the debate. Further, in tax policy it has endorsed the politicisation of the initiatives against tax competition. In the future, the European Parliament will seek to raise its voice in EU macro-economic policy, by arguing that the European Central Bank should not be left in splendid isolation when crucial economic decisions are taken. The European Parliament will perhaps become the ‘conscience of EMU’ (Agence Europe, 31 October 1998). Yet the EU needs to strengthen the accountability and the responsiveness of its whole institutional network. Strengthening one player against the others could be wrong. A study of EU bureaucratisation has concluded that:

‘Bringing more players into the system, whether through a stronger role for the European Parliament or national or regional legislatures and, perhaps even more importantly, their staffs, might not reduce the democratic deficit. Increasing the range of interests and bodies that have to be squared might increase the difficulty of identifying accountability, turning a democratic deficit into a less democratic surfeit of institutions, groups, and individuals, all with some sort of valid claim to represent European citizens’ (Page 1997: 163).

Democratic control and accountability are concepts in search of new meanings even at the national level (Majone 1999). The proliferation of non-majoritarian institutions and networks of private and public actors points toward post-parliamentary governance (Andersen and Burns 1996). The EU constitutes a peculiar accentuation of this trend. This situation requires a leap forward, rather than a journey back to the past of parliamentary control. In perspective, the increasing role played by politicisation over expertise is indicative of a positive maturation of the EU. Politics generates conflict, structures cleavages, and polarises public opinion but at the same time frees policies from the trap of technocracy and makes room for a more benign utilisation of expertise. Democracy is all about conflict, and perhaps a certain degree of inefficiency in the policy process is the price that has to be paid for a wider participation and a more mature debate, as the case of

media ownership regulation (where a proposal has not as yet been approved, although the Commission released its first Green Paper on the issue in 1992) typifies. Politics can also force the impasse of technocratic policy-making: the challenge of tax competition can be addressed only by shifting the policy discourse to the political level, not by recurring to sterile technocratic approaches. And the Euro will require political decisions, such as whether to respond to the problem of unemployment with lower interest rates or not.

Politicisation, in short, aids the maturation of the EU as a polity, and perhaps it will make it less different from national political systems. All the same, the problem of controlling regulatory bureaucracies and policy experts will not be solved automatically as time goes by. The question is not if and when the ‘mandarins of Europe’ will be substituted by democracy – no doubt that expertise in the EU is here to stay – but whether and how EU public policy will become more accountable. The conclusion is neither that technocracy has disappeared in the EU, nor that de-politicisation is feasible and desirable, but that expertise (in various guises) is operating in an increasingly politicised environment (see Majone 1999 for a different opinion).

Various authors have proposed different solutions (Andersen and Burns 1996; Majone 1999; Schmitter 1999). From the particular, limited perspective chosen for this study, the main recommendation is that solutions should face the specificity of EU public policies<sup>x</sup>. A policy process based on expertise, on the one hand, and a more politicised context, on the other, can be either an explosive combination or a corroborating alchemy. In this respect, and considering that this article has covered only one dimension of the problem, the EU should look at the best practices of regulatory reforms (OECD 1997; Radaelli 1998) and refine the institutional design of the Euro (Majone 1999). A diffuse culture of accountability, transparency in monetary policy, a more robust dialectic between monetary and economic governance, procedural legitimacy<sup>xi</sup>, healthy competition among different regulatory bodies, the improvement of consultation and judicial review should provide the macro-trajectories (Majone 1996). At the micro level of instruments, the quality of the EU policy process could benefit from regulatory impact analysis, regulatory budgets and the

systematic use of policy evaluation within a new culture of democracy by results. A more responsive and responsible Union is feasible, and the process of politicisation could assist, rather than hinder, the development of accountability. Whether this will become reality depends on the institutions of the EU, but also on the priorities that national political leaders will assign to EU reform, and ultimately on the growth of an attentive public. I hope that research in this field will be part of this growing awareness.

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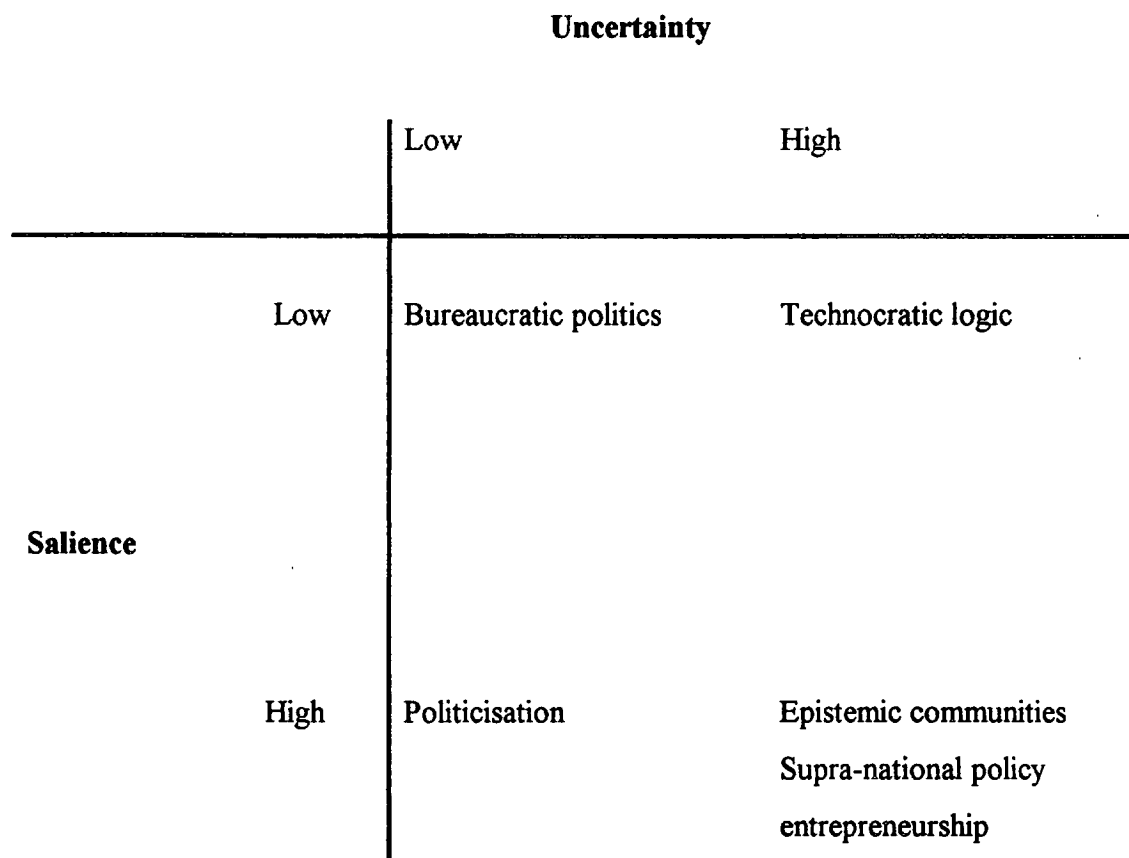
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**Figure 1 – The prevailing logic in the policy process when uncertainty and salience vary**



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<sup>i</sup> Fulvio Attinà and an anonymous referee reminded me that, from the outset, technocratic ambitions were antagonised (albeit with different degrees of success) by politicisation. The tension between technocracy and politics, therefore, can be endemic and cyclical.

<sup>ii</sup> Typically, regulatory policy is a response to market failures. Its main rationale is to re-establish efficiency when market failures operate.

<sup>iii</sup> Page (1997:3-4) observes that 'in the decision-making structure of the European Union it is very difficult to talk of any one body, group, or individual holding power, if the term power refers to a long-term capacity to determine what laws the EU should pass or on what EU money should be spent'.

<sup>iv</sup> The typology proposed in figure 1 is only an initial step in order to present my arguments as clearly as possible. It should be considered as a device for stressing the need to differentiate among technocracy, bureaucratic politics, epistemic communities and political processes in the EU.

<sup>v</sup> The reader interested in the empirical evidence should refer to these two studies and the other EU policy literature cited in this section, as in this article attention is confined exclusively to the conceptual implications of empirical analysis.

<sup>vi</sup> Think of the relationship between the German and French foreign ministries for an example. Another example is the construction of a coalition of monetarists-institutionalists and the breakdown of the economists' front (with Spain defecting) following the decisions taken at Ashford Castle.

<sup>vii</sup> German re-unification, presumably, was the greatest political opportunity sustaining the EMU deal at Maastricht. Another political opportunity was represented by the possibility to lock-in the Bundesbank in the EMU policy process by setting up the Delors Committee.

<sup>viii</sup> For example, the British government was not made aware of the strategic implications of the establishment of the Delors Committee. Further, the institutionalisation of Franco-German relations was buttressed by a series of secret bilateral discussions during the inter-governmental conference.

<sup>ix</sup> Indeed, Giddens considers three main elements: structure, resources, and morality.

<sup>x</sup> The Treaty of Amsterdam epitomises the maturation of the debate, by including provisions inspired by the regulatory model alongside traditional provisions based on the parliamentary model (Dehousse 1998).

<sup>xi</sup> Majone (1996 chapter 13) argues that procedural legitimacy implies, among other things, democratic procedures for the specification of the goals and power of the regulators, and the requirement that regulators provide reasons for their decisions. This giving-reasons requirement – contained in art.190 of the Treaty of Rome – stimulates public participation, peer review, and a systematic use of public policy analysis. It also makes the regulator's decisions amenable to judicial review.