The European Commission and the "European Interest": Institutions, Interaction and Preference Formation in the EU Context*

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Abstract

For both Haas and Deutsch, the concept of a European political community or of a "sense of Europeanness" were prerequisites for progress towards an integrated Europe. The "mutual relevance" achieved as actors entered into iterated transactions with one another would, it was argued, help to shape the preferences of these actors and their propensity to work together in the future. Recently, the question of how and why groups and individuals define their self-interest in a particular way, or how their preferences are formed, has once again come to the fore in integration studies. In this respect, the application of "historical institutionalist" approaches to the study of European integration has been an important development. Institutions to a large extent condition the choice of strategy selected by political actors but to what extent do they also condition the very goals pursued by those same political actors?

The decision to collaborate at the European level is, of course, made within the context of a set of opportunities facilitating cooperation and of a set of constraints inhibiting the prospect of collaboration. Thus it is important to identify what these opportunities and constraints are, how they are generated, and how they might affect the preference formation of those actors faced with the prospect of participation in the European venture. The hypothesis put forward in this paper is that: the institutional structure of the EU (the prevailing rules, norms and conventions); the activities of the EU institutions as purposive actors; and the symbolic or mythical dimension of EU governance, play an important role in explaining the propensity of actors both to embark upon and to sustain their collaboration at the EU level: thus contributing to the emergence of a political community at the EU level. In short, that the "political institutions organize these interactions in ways that shape interpretations and preferences" (March and Olsen, 1989:41) and that "not just the strategies but also the goals actors pursue are shaped by the institutional context" (Thelen & Steinmo, 1992:8).

1. Introduction

> It should be noted that the values and preferences of political actors are not exogenous to political institutions but develop within these institutions. The endogeneity of preferences is a major problem for theories of politics that picture action stemming from prior preferences." (March and Olsen, 1989:41)

In the late 1950s, Ernst Haas (1958:4), in "The Uniting of Europe", described Western Europe as a "living laboratory" for the study of collective action between European states. A wide range of organisations, which required the collaboration of European governments, operated in Western Europe[1]. Yet, as Haas (1958:4) noted: "detailed data on how - if at all - cohesion is obtained through these processes is lacking". The European Union continues to provide a fascinating example of the collaboration of an increasingly diverse range of actors each enjoying different resource bases, political capacities and relative leverage - hence different degrees of structural power (Young, 1991) - which has culminated in the formation and maintenance of a complex international regime.

Historically, the collaborative European project has been beleaguered by the complexities of finding collective solutions to shared problems and yet the EU has proved to be a remarkably resilient regime. Scholars attempting to make sense of the European integration process have sought to address Haas' criticism and to identify the process through which cohesion is (or is not) achieved through the collaborative activities of member states. However, as many have observed (see Greenwood et al, 1992; Mazey & Richardson, 1993; Andersen and Eliassen, 1993), there has also been a proliferation of interest group activity and collective action at the day to day level of EU policy-making, in

[1]Haas noted in particular: The Organisation for European Economic Cooperation; the Council of Europe; the Western European Union; and the European Coal and Steel Community.

addition to the collaboration between states which results in Treaty-based advances in the integration process. In the analysis of this more mundane, but equally vital, aspect of the European integration process, Haas' (1958:4) observation continues to hold true. While there have been numerous attempts to identify and map the activities of interest groups and lobbyists at the EU level, little attention has been paid to the logic behind this collective action or to the impact of this collaboration on the actors involved: thus- "how - if at all - cohesion is obtained" through these interactions.

The decision to collaborate at the European level is, of course, made within the context of a set of *opportunities* facilitating cooperation and of a set of *constraints* inhibiting the prospect of collaboration. Thus it is important to identify what these opportunities and constraints are, how they are generated, and how they might affect the preference formation of those actors faced with the prospect of participating in a collaborative venture. From a rational choice perspective, for example, the preferences of the key actors in European integration are viewed as exogenous[2] and "theorists assume a sovereign individual whose preferences are not of theoretical concern" (Friedland and Alford, 1991:251). In contrast, in this paper it is argued that "rationality as well as the appropriate contexts of its use are learned" (Friedland and Alford, 1991:251). Thus, building upon the analysis elaborated by scholars of historical institutionalism, the preferences of the actors choosing to embark upon collective action at the EU level are considered to be endogenous, or developed within the institutional framework of the European Union. If preferences are viewed as endogenous, "the meaning of rational action becomes unclear" (March and Olsen, 1989:41) and a crucial question is raised: where are

[2]"The idea that preferences are produced and changed by a process that is exogenous to the processes of choice is fundamental to modern decision theory...Conventional theories of markets, for example, picture advertising and experience as providing information about alternatives and their properties, not as affecting tastes. Similarly, conventional theories of politics assume that a voter's exposure to and choice of a candidate do not change that voter's preferences for various attributes that a candidate might possess, although they may change a voter's belief about which candidates possess which attributes" (March and Olsen, 1989:162-3)

the preferences and values, on the basis of which actors weigh up the cost and benefits of particular incentives, derived from[3]?

The hypothesis put forward in this paper is that: the institutional structure of the EU (the prevailing rules, norms and conventions); the activities of the EU institutions as purposive actors; and the symbolic or mythical dimension of EU governance, play an important role in explaining the propensity of other actors both to embark upon and to sustain their collaboration at the EU level: thus contributing to the emergence of a political community at the EU level. In short, that the "political institutions organize these interactions in ways that shape interpretations and preferences" (March and Olsen, 1989:41) and that "not just the *strategies* but also the *goals* actors pursue are shaped by the institutional context" (Thelen & Steinmo, 1992:8).

2. Interests, Interaction and Learning at the EU level

> "And as with all learning processes, they need not merely use this new information for the guidance of their behaviour in the light of the preferences, memories and goals which they have had thus far, but they may also use them to learn, that is, to modify this very inner structure of their preferences, goals and patterns of behaviour" (Deutsch, 1953, 1966:117)

The process through which key actors would come to mobilise at the EU level and the impact of increased interaction between interests and institutions at the EU level on the

[3] The historical institutionalist approach views "the question of how individuals and groups define their self-interest as problematical" (Thelen and Steinmo (1992:8). Conflict over the process of preference formation has been identified by Thelen and Steinmo (1992:9) as perhaps the core distinction between rational choice institutionalism (exogenous preference formation) and historical institutionalism (endogenous preference formation).

process of preference formation has long fascinated scholars of European integration. For both Haas (1958) and Deutsch (1968), the concept of a European political community or of a "sense of Europeanness" were prerequisites for progress towards an integrated Europe. The "mutual relevance" achieved as actors entered into iterated transactions with one another would, it was argued, help to shape the preferences of these actors and their propensity to work together in the future. Haas (1958, 1970), for example, emphasised the importance of **interests, learning and authority-legitimacy transfers** for the formation of a European-level political community. Haas's pluralist-based neo-functionalism recognised the continuing importance of national political elites, and emphasised the key role played by interest-based politics, in driving the process of political integration at the European level. National political elites might, for example, become more supportive of the process of European integration as they learned of the benefits which might ensue from its continuation. Although they might equally, Haas recognised, become opposed to the integration process as they recognise its costs (Haas, 1958: 287-288). In either case, a **reevaluation of the preferences** of the political elite (whether in favour of, or in opposition to, the European project) would result, ultimately, in the transformation of traditional nationally-centred belief sytems:

> "As the process of integration proceeds, it is assumed that values will undergo change, that interests will be redefined in terms of regional rather than a purely national orientation and that the erstwhile set of separate national group values will gradually be superseded by a new and geographically larger set of beliefs." (Haas, 1958:13)

In its focus upon the learning of integrative habits, as a result of prior cooperation, neo-functionalism displayed a clear link with both the functionalist (Mitrany, 1943)[4] and

[4]For the construction of a "working peace system" it was only, Mitrany argued, through cooperation in technical/functional organisations that it might prove possible to "set going lasting instruments and habits

communication (Deutsch, 1966)[5] schools. Crucially, however, for Haas this was not a one-way process. Although the attitudes of national political elites would influence the development of the integration process, **supranational political elites** also had a role to play in encouraging the process of integration. Thus, "decision-makers in the new institutions may resist the effort to have their beliefs and policies dictated by the interested elites and advance their own prescription" (Haas, 1958:19). It was through a **complex interaction of belief systems** that Haas envisioned the reorientation of the activities of national political elites, in response to European-centred interests and aspirations, would take place. Interestingly, Haas had found the ECSC legislature rather wanting in this respect - it had clearly not lived up to the expectations Monnet had of a federal executive - Haas felt, however, that the Assembly[6] might prove to be a more "faithful prototype" of a federal parliament" (Haas, 1958: 311).

Thus, while, Mitrany (1943) had specifically warned against the creation of territorially-based supranational authority structures: "for an authority which had the title to do so would in effect be hardly less than a world government; and such a strong central organism would inevitably tend to take unto itself rather more authority than that originally allotted to it" (Mitrany, 1943, 1966:75). In contrast, in Haas's neo-functionalist approach, the very propensity of supranational organisations to maximise their powers, was identified as an important element of the process through which a political community is formed. Indeed, the supra-national institutions were allotted a key role as potential "agents of

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of a common international life" (Mitrany 1943, 1966: 58). Without these habits, political/constitutional action could not be contemplated: while with these learned habits of integration such political/constitutional action may ultimately prove superfluous (Mitrany 1943, 1966: 97).

[5]For Deutsch (1966:96-97), mutually responsive transactions resulted from a complex learning process from which shared symbols, identities, habits of cooperation, memories, values and norms would emerge. Deutsch's vision of political integration did not insist on the presence of any specified institutional structure but rather depended on "a historical process of social learning in which individuals, usually over several generations, learn to become a people" (Deutsch, 1966:174).

[6]Later to become the European Parliament.

integration" (Haas 1958:29). The supra-national institutions were expected both to facilitate the transfer of elite authorities to the European level and to play the role of "honest broker" facilitating decision-making betweeen recalcitrant national governments (Haas, 1958:524).

Ultimately, Haas argued, that as "beliefs and aspirations" were transformed through the interaction of supranational and national belief systems " a proportional dimunition of loyalty to and expectations from the former separate national governments" could be expected (Haas, 1958:14). A shift in the focus of national loyalties, and importantly of expectations, towards the new supranational authority structure would similarly be expected. The central importance of the transfer of loyalty in early neo-functionalist explanations of the process of political integration is undisputed. However, in his later work, Haas (1970:633) recognised the difficulty of measuring this transferral and welcomed the contribution of Lindberg and Scheingold (1970) who stressed the importance of the extent to which authority for decision-making had been tranferred to the European level. The degree to which "authority-legitimacy" transfers had taken place would, they argued, provide a measurable indicator of progress towards a new political community.

The authority-legitimacy transfer was not, however, the sole defining criterion of political integration identified by Haas. Crucially, the process of political integration encompassed not only a change in the focus of the "loyalties" of the political elite but also in the focus of their "expectations and political activities"[7] (Haas, 1958:16). The reorientation of the preferences of the political elite, Haas argued, may result as much from their opposition to, as from their support for, the integration process. It is the reorientation of national-based expectations and political activities in response to supranational developments in Europe, or to the pull of the new centre, which are crucial for the process

[7]emphasis added

of political integration, not simply the extent to which the political actors are in support of the process of integration. Haas (1958:288) considered that although elites with "long-run negative expectations" of supranational activity might appear irreconciable to the "unification pattern", in fact, "even the consistently negative-minded may be persuaded to adjust (Haas, 1958:296). Meanwhile, groups with short-run negative expectations who mobilise in response to specific supranational policies which they oppose: "may, in self defence, become a permanent institution with a common - albeit negative - body of expectations" (Haas, 1958:288). Any shift in loyalties, in response to the activities of the new centre, need not be absolute or permanent. Multiple loyalties may continue to exist. Hence, for Haas (1958:15-16), it is was more likely to be the convergence of a very disparate set of interests which would drive the process of integration and result in the establishment of a new political community, than any mass conversion to the doctrine of "Europeanism". Ultimately, a self-interested shift in loyalty, or in the focus of political activities, by the political elite would increase the dynamic towards the development of the new political community whether it results from positive or from negative long-term expectations of the integration proces (Haas, 1958:297). It is this process which is usually referred to as political spill over[8].

Thus not only the sectoral expansion of competence at the EU level or major alterations in the constitutional structure of the EU would facilitate cohesion amongst the

[8]For the purposes of this chapter the process identified by Haas as political spill over is most relevant. However, Haas, also recognised the importance of functional or technical spill-over which, he argued, was based on a quite different logic from that which drove political spill-over: "sector integration... begets its own impetus toward extension to the entire economy even in the absence of specific group demands and their attendant ideologies" (Haas, 1958: 297) . In neo-functionalist terms, the process of functional or sectoral spill-over, referred to the situation in which the attempt to achieve a goal agreed upon at the outset of cooperation, such as the harmonisation of coal and steel policy, becomes possible only if other (unanticipated) cooperative activities are also carried out, for example harmonisation of transport policy or economic policy. In this way cooperation in one sector would "spill-over" into cooperation in another, previously unrelated, sector.
Similarly, Haas (1958:317) identified a process of geographical spill-over. Haas recognised that cooperation between one group of member states was likely to have some effect upon excluded states: not least by altering existing patterns of trade. In turn, the responses of non-member states might, he argued, influence the process of integration. (For greater detail see Cram 1997,, Chapter 1)

actors involved. The growing public perception of the EU as key actor was seen to be important, as was the role played by the supranational institutions in encouraging the reorientation of traditionally nationally-based value structures and preferences. Crucially, the learning process, focused upon by Mitrany, Deutsch and Haas, was expected to play a key role in explaining the reevaluation of the traditional preferences of key actors in the integration process. As will become clear below, many of these insights remain useful for our examination of the process through which key actors take the decision to collaborate at the EU level today.

3. Institutions and the EU Policy Process

> "Preferences are neither clear nor stable. They develop over time. they are shaped not only by forces exogenous to politics and decision-making but also by the processes of politics themselves. Thus, the current interests of citizens are only a fraction of their interests as they unfold over their lifetimes, and that unfolding is affected by choices along the way" (March and Olsen, 1989:146)

As structural explanations of the integration process came to dominate the field of integration studies in the 1970s and 1980s, academic preoccupation with the institutional aspect of EU governance, begun with Haas (1958), dwindled accordingly. Recently, however, this focus of study has been revived. Scholars studying the process of European integration have increasingly come to ask the question:"what consequence does the process itself have for forming and reforming - perhaps for inventing or discovering interests and values?" (Lindblom, 1965: 15). Thus the focus on the learning of "integrative habits" as a result of prior cooperation, emphasised by functionalist (Mitrany, 1943), communication school (Deutsch, 1966) and neo-functionalist scholars (Haas, 1958), has once again begun to come to the fore. The learning process undergone by actors involved in interactions at

the EU level, and the impact of this learning process on the preferences of the actors involved has again begun to come under scrutiny (Sandholtz, 1993, Bulmer, 1994, Pierson, 1996). As Sandholtz (1993:3) argues:

> "membership in the EC has become part of the interest calculation for governments and societal groups. In other words, the national interests of EC states do not have independent existence; they are not formed in a vacuum and then brought to Brussels. Those interests are defined and redefined in an international and institutional context that includes the EC".

National political and administrative elites, business elites and judicial elites have all had to learn to come to terms with the EU as an aspect of their daily lives: "socializing new actors is therefore a central component of the Community-member state relationship" (Sbragia, 1994:75). There is, likewise, increasing evidence of the mobilisation of transnational business elites at the EU level which have, in turn, pushed for further integration in the EU (Sandholtz & Zysman, 1989, Sandholtz, 1992, Cowles, 1995). Sandholtz (1996) has summed up this process rather neatly in the phrase "membership matters". A range of studies, which recognise the role of EU institutions in the integration process, has, meanwhile, begun to emerge both from authors favouring an intergovernmentalist perspective and from those who emphasise the central role of semi-autonomous supranational institutions. Institutions have been characterised in a number of ways: as passive structures; as actively shaping expectations and norms; and as purposive actors seeking to influence the development of the EU.

The notion of institutions recognised as passive structures, that is as providing the norms, values and procedures, alterable only with unanimous consent, within which the day to day policy choices and major "constitutional" decisions are taken, is quite consistent

with the intergovernmentalist perspective which focuses predominantly on the structural leadership exerted by national governments in international negotiations (see for example, Moravcsik, 1993:509). Following international regime theory, the critical role played by EU institutions in providing a passive structure which enhances the efficiency of intergovernmental decision-making is recognised. EU institutions provide a framework within which to negotiate major "history-making" decisions by ensuring a shared negotiating forum, joint decision-procedures, a set of shared legal and political norms, institutions to monitor co-operation and defection and, not least, by disseminating ideas and information (Moravcsik, 1993:508).

However, it is increasingly recognised that EU institutions also play an active role in the EU policy process. Thus, while emphasising the crucial role which national governments play in selecting between available alternatives when taking decisions in the EU, Garrett and Weingast (1993) have argued that EU institutions also play an important role in co-ordinating expectations and in shaping a "shared belief system". Analysing the role of institutions and ideas in EU policy-making, they have argued that "by embodying, selecting and publicising particular paths on which all actors are able to co-ordinate, institutions may provide a *constructed focal point* ". In this way, "institutions not only provide individuals with critical information about defection but also help to construct a shared belief system that defines for the community what actions constitute co-operation and defection"(Garrett and Weingast, 1993:176).

Garrett and Weingast's (1993) emphasis on the development of a shared belief system is consistent with recent studies which, drawing on new institutionalist perspectives (March and Olsen, 1989; Di Maggio and Powell, 1991; Thelen and Steinmo, 1992), present institutions as more than simply "arenas within which political action is played out" (Bulmer, 1994a:357) but as actively playing a role in shaping norms, values and

conventions. March and Olsen, (1989:165) identified the role played by institutions "as agents in the construction of political interests and beliefs" as an important aspect of integrative politics: of "building community and a sense of common identity within which decisions are made". Analysts applying the tools of new institutionalism in the EU context have also emphasised the dual role played by institutions (Bulmer, 1994; Peterson, 1995). Thus, institutions are also presented as playing an independent role as actors in the policy process, able to "develop their own agendas and act autonomously of allied interest groups" (Peterson, 1995:81) and not simply as a structure in which other actors pursue their goals. Perhaps most importantly, from a historical institutionalist perspective, EU institutions have been recognised as able to "generate endogenous institutional impetuses for policy change that go beyond the usual representation of institutional mediation" (Bulmer, 1994a:372[9]).

The agency of the EU institutions is increasingly recognised and studies reveal how EU institutions have influenced the agenda-setting, policy formulation and implementation processes. There is considerable evidence that institutions, as purposive actors, have an important role to play. Analysts have begun to examine how EU institutions have influenced the agenda-setting, policy formulation and implementation processes. Studies have highlighted: the role of bureaucratic politics in the EU (Peters, 1992); the role of the Commission as agenda-setter (Peters, 1994; Pollack, 1995); and the Commission's role in the promotion of the EU regulatory regime (Majone, 1989, 1991a, 1991b, 1992a, 1992b, 1993; Dehousse, 1993; Cram, 1993; Bulmer, 1994a). Likewise, the role of the European Parliament as "conditional agenda-setter" has been examined (Tsebelis, 1994). Increasingly too, scholars have begun to assess the important political role played by the European Court of Justice (Weiler, 1991; Garrett, 1992; Shapiro, 1992; Garrett and Weingast, 1993; Burley and Mattli, 1993; Wincott, 1995a) and, importantly, to examine the critical

[9]Paul Pierson (1996) adds to the growing scholarship on new institutionalist approaches with his recent article: "The Path to European Integration: A historical Institutionalist Analysis"

interactions between the Court and other institutions within the policy process (Alter and Meunier-Aitsahalia, 1994; Wincott, 1995b).

Increasingly the leadership potential of EU institutions has come to be re-examined. In this context, for example, the role played by the CEU as an entrepreneurial leader during the negotiations over the Single European Act has been recognised (Sandholtz (1993), Sandholtz and Zysman (1989)). In the classic style of an entrepreneurial leader, the Commission officials displayed the characteristics of "(i) agenda setters shaping the form in which issues are presented for consideration at the international level, (ii) popularizers drawing attention to the importance of the issues at stake, (iii) inventors devising innovative policy options to overcome bargaining impediments, and (iv) brokers making deals and lining up support for salient options" (Young, 1991:294).

The EU institutions have often played a critical role in bringing particular groups of interests together in the EU context and in creating policy networks. The Commission, in particular, may have an important role to play in providing the "catalyst for collective action", whether amongst member states (Sandholtz & Zysman, 1989), big business (Sandholtz, 1992a, 1992b, Cowles 1995) or amongst broader social interest groupings (Cram 1996: 7). The Commission has, for example, frequently offered "selective incentives" (Olson, 1971) (ranging from funding opportunities to the opportunity to play a role in policy formulation) to encourage collective action. Likewise, the Commission plays an important part in initiating research and promoting particular sets of ideas which may encourage collective action amongst the various trans-national and domestic interests. Critically, "analysis and ideas are needed to discover opportunities of collective gains and to elicit support in favour of the most efficient way of exploiting such opportunities" (Majone, 1994: 5). Recently, the role of the Court in encouraging the mobilisation of individuals at the EU level has also been highlighted (Alter & Meunier-Aitsahalia, 1994).

Thus, an important aspect of the involvement of domestic and transnational interests in the EU policy process may be the critical role which supranational institutions or political leaders at the supranational level have played in encouraging and promoting the mobilisation of these interests (see Sandholtz, 1992a, b &c, Cowles, 1993).

2. Interaction and Preference Formation at the EU Level

There is increasing evidence of the involvement of a wide range of actors at the EU level and a significant expansion in the number of collective fora through which these actors may concert their activities. There has been a rapid increase in the number of Euro - groups operating at the EU level, many seeking to gain information about, or to influence, the European policy process[10]. It is widely recognised that "changes in the distribution of power between the Member states and the European Community have prompted a proliferation of interest group lobbying at the EC level" (Mazey & Richardson: 1993a:3). The growth of EU competence and enhanced decision powers for EU institutions in certain policy areas (such as those concerning the Single Market) may help to explain the increase in the volume of lobbying at the EU level, in response to the pull of the "new centre" (Haas, 1958: 16). However, explaining the logic behind the collective action of traditionally nationally-based interests at the EU level remains problematic.

> "Alliances are the product of political processes not preexisting preferences... policy interests can be defined in different ways so that several distinct policies may be compatible with a group's interest. Potential group members do not always know their interests in a specific policy area, moreover, existing groups may be ambivalent or divided about their policy interests" (Weir, in Thelen and Steinmo, 1992:194)

[10]see Aspinwall and Greenwood (forthcoming), see also Cowles (forthcoming) for the changing role of big business in this context.

Many of the Euro-groups operating at the EU level have emerged from earlier organisations founded at the national or international level (see contributions to Greenwood and Aspinwall, forthcoming). Clearly shifts in traditional behaviour patterns were in part a response to the changed institutional context in Europe. For example the establishment of European level consumer organisations immediately after the signing of the Treaty of Rome (see Young, forthcoming) or of the newest European-level environmental organisations after the signing of the SEA (see Webster, forthcoming). Even in policy areas where there has been a clear expansion of EU competences, however, actors continue to have **choices** concerning the course of action/level of activity most appropriate to achieving their desired ends.

As McLaughlin, Jordan & Maloney (1993:) have argued, far from placing all of their eggs in one basket, large firms seeking to influence the EU policy process, or to gain more information about EU activities, continue to pursue "multiple strategies". These may include collaboration at the EU level but may equally include direct unilateral action at the EU level or, indeed, unilateral or collective action at the national or international levels[11]. Thus even where there is a clear shift in competence to the EU level, the decision to cooperate at the EU level is not inevitable. Similarly, the question of which collective forum to join and which partners to ally with can be influenced by a wide range of factors: from past experience of collaboration to political expediency or, indeed, may be a reponse to institutional incentives at the EU level. These reflect perhaps, a convergence of disparate interests rather than a shared set of preexisting fixed preferences. Importantly, it has been argued that "cooperation does not emerge self-created out of the soup of failed unilateral strategies. Some political actor (or actors) must propose cooperation and sell the idea to potential partners" (Sandholtz, 1992a:3).

[11] See also Sidenius (forthcoming) with respect to the range of options available to national level interest organisations seeking to achieve their desired ends.

It is clear that EU institutions, viewed as rules, norms and conventions provide constraints upon and opportunities for collaboration at thr EU level; provide the parameters within any interaction between key actors might take place; and have an important influence on the environment within which their preferences are formed. As Pierson (1993: 598) has argued, "incentive structures influence the probability of particular outcomes and the pay-offs attached to those outcomes. Individuals choose, but the constraints that frame their decisions provide strong inducements to make particular choices". Crucially, however, the development of particular norms and standard operating procedures does not come about purely by chance but may actively have been encouraged by the semi-autonomous EU institutions. Indeed, the promotion of particular policy developments at the EU level may have a significant impact upon the process of coalition formation at the EU level:

> "where groups have multiple, often conflicting interests, it is necessary to examine the political processes out of which political coalitions are formed... new ideas can cause groups to rethink their interests; consequently, the way in which various policies are "packaged' can facilitate certain coalitions and hinder others" (Thelen & Steinmo, 1992:8)

Most interesting, in this context, are those actors which have mobilised at the EU level, have altered their traditionally nationally-based behaviour patterns, and are working together at the EU level, in policy areas where there is little evidence of an increase in EU competence. For example, while the EU is becoming an increasingly important legislative force in the area of social policy, its regulatory power has been strictly circumscribed[12]. There is no binding EU legislation in the areas of homelessness, poverty, family policy, old-age or disability - to name just a few of the areas in which a proliferation of Euro-

[12]Binding EU regulations in the area of EU social policy are restricted to the areas of Health & Safety, Equal Treatment of Men and Women, Protection of Workers and Social Security for Migrant Workers (Cram, 1993; 1997: chapter 4).

groups has emerged. Yet, in 1992 more than 100 networks of voluntary or community organisations were identified in Europe (Harvey, 1992: 277). Many of these operate in areas in which the EU could hardly be said to wield power. Indeeed, these have often been the very areas in which national governments have jealously guarded their national prerogatives. The challenge is clearly to explain why interests are mobilising around an institution with relatively little power in the policy area. Thus, why groups are apparently shooting where the ducks are not?

Once again it appears that some actor (or actors) must perform the leadership role of "educator, stimulating and accepting changing worldviews, redefining meanings and exciting commitments" (March and Olsen, 1989:163). Analysis of the activities of Euro-interests in the area of EU social policy, for example, reveals a close relationship between the activities and incentives offered by the European Commission and other EU institutions and emergent the pattern of interaction at the EU level. Advisory committees, networks, observatories and EU programmes all facilitate the participation of traditionally domestic interests at the European level. A range of powerful selective incentives (Olson, 1965) have been offered by the EU institutions, and by the CEU in particular, to encourage the participation of Euro-interests at the EU level and the development of transnational cooperation in the social field (Cram 1996; 1997). Similarly, Greenwood observes that in the area of the professions, where consensus concerning the the competence of the EU is lacking, "the principal peak organisation in the domain arose not from the efforts of interests themselves but from the initiative of a Commission official" (Greenwood, forthcoming).

Even in those cases where the emergence of a Euro-group or a new collective forum was a clear response to the increased institutional authority of the EU, the European institutions have often played a significant role in "massaging" the form in which these

groups develop. In general, the Commission's preference for dialogue with representative organisations at the European level has provided a clear incentive for disparate groups to act collectively. More specifically, Commission support for the creation of organisations such as BEUC[13] or the EEB[14] has had a clear impact upon form which cooperation by consumer and environmental groups has taken and on the impact of this interaction in these fields. Crucially, "institutional arrangements not only determine who decides, but also influence what is decided" (Majone, 1989:102).

The impact of EU institutions on collective action is not, of course, limited to the areas of consumer, environmental and social policy but extends to key areas of industrial policy and the encouragement of collective action between major industrial actors. Today representatives from Information and Communication Technology (ICT) firms (whether as individual actors, in committees or consultation groups, or as group members in industry federations and national and European standards bodies) are an omnipresent force in the EU ICT policy process.[15] DGXIII[16] now enjoys a rather symbiotic relationship with industry which is involved at almost every stage of policy deliberation in the area. Yet, this did not come about without some effort on the part of the Commission. The involvement of major ICT firms in EU research programmes and ultimately in the administrative infrastructure for the development of EU ICT policy was, in part, a response to the "selective incentives" offered by the European Commission in the late 1970s (Sandholtz, 1992a; 1992b) . Crucially, at this early stage power could not be said to lie in Brussels in the ICT sector. Although ICT firms proved willing to forge their own collaborative alliances and industrial cooperation had already begun to emerge in the early 1980s, prior to the main thrust of EU policy, the direction this cooperation took lacked a particular EU

[13]see Young (forthcoming)
[14]see Mazey and Richardson, 1993 and Webster (forthcoming)
[15]See Cram 1997, chapter 5 for the range of ways in which the ICT industry seeks to influence EU ICT policy.
[16]The Directorate General responsible for Information and Communications Technology

focus. Although a small number of EU firms had begun to cooperate with each other, cooperation with extra-EU firms was, in fact, far more common (Mytelka and Delapierre, 1987: 241). This gives some indication of the global direction which the development of the ICT sector might have taken of its own accord if firms were left as entirely independent actors, untramelled by regulation or by incentives. Once again, a variety of choices were available to both firms and national governments: the question remains, why did ICT firms choose to work collectively at the EU level in the late 1970s and early 1980s? Did the decision to act collectively at the EU level really coincide with the shift of the "ducks" to Brussels or with the shift of incentives to the European level?

It is important to ask how the participation of key actors in the EU policy process, or in Euro-groups, has affected the activities and preferences of those participants. Indeed, "if interest groups shape policies, policies can shape interest groups. The organisational structure and political goals of groups may change in response to the nature of the programmes they confront or hope to sustain or modify" (Pierson, 1993:598). Thus, interaction between actors in a EU context may have important spill-over effects or unintended consequences. Not least of these being the fact that many of the collective fora in which Euro-groups participate (for example: inter-groups; advisory boards; standards bodies; networks) themselves become part of the EU institutional structure. Just as Haas (1958:19) argued that "once the institutions associated with the step of integration are established, [however] a change is likely to take place" so too collective fora at the EU level can be viewed as emergent institutions: contibuting to the creation of new norms and standard operating procedures. Thus it is no longer only formal EU organisations such as the Commission, the Parliament or the Court or formal EU legislation which "shape[s] how political actors define their interests and that structure their relations of power to other groups" (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992:2). The impact of prior cooperation on the actors involved may become an important variable when examining the logic of collective action

over time. Thus, it is vital to explore the learning processes undergone by the actors involved, the impact of collaboration on communication patterns, and to recognise the importance of the institutionalisation of collective action.

The role of EU institutions, both as structure and as agent, can be seen to have important implications for the development of the strategies and to some extent the goals of actors embarking on collective action at the EU level. Yet, the symbolic or mythical dimension of EU governance may play an equally important role in shaping the goals of the actors and altering their preferences: "by most reasonable measures, the symbolic consequences of political decision-making are at least as important as the substantive consequences" (March and Olsen, 1989:52). A crucial question remains to be answered: **do actors choose to act at the EU level to influence new powerful EU institutions or does the EU become a central actor in any given policy area because actors have been persuaded to operate at the EU level or at least had been persuaded of the importance of the EU?** The examination of the symbolic aspect of politics may be crucial in this respect, offering an "insight into both the logic of collective action and the dynamics of political behaviour" (Elder and Cobb, 1983: 1). Indeed, the ability to create at least a myth of the importance of the EU in a diverse range of policy areas may have a significant impact on the propensity of actors to collaborate at the EU level.

5. Conclusion: Symbolic Politics and the "European Interest"

> '...judgement and decision, though mental activities of individuals, are also part of a social process. They are taken within and depend on a net of communication, which is meaningful only through a vast, partly organised accumulation of largely shared assumptions and expectations, a structure

constantly being developed and changed by the activities which it mediates.'

(Vickers, 1965:15)

For the most part, "people don't stop at every choice they make in their life and think to themselves, 'Now what will maximise my self-interest?'" , rather, "most of us, most of the time, follow societally defined rules, even when so doing may not be directly in our self-interest"(Thelen & Steinmo, 1992:8). This of course is rather reminiscent of Mitrany (1943), Haas (1958) and Deutsch's (1966) focus on the learning of integrative habits. Indeed, Galtung (1973: 25), building on Haas' point, argued that even opposition to the EU in itself only reinforces its position as an important actor. The central importance of the EU in policy debates was, he argued, only likely to be strengthened further as opposing interests began to organise on a trans-national basis.

Students of politics tend to "underestimate the diffuse, interactive way in which meaning, intentions and action are woven together" (March and Olsen, 1989:52). The construction of even a "symbolic" appearance, or a myth, of EU centrality in key issue areas may have important implications for the formation of prefences on the basis of which interests/groups take decisions upon the utility of collective action from their perspective. It has become clear that leadership has played a crucial role in explaining the particular pattern of activity which has emerged at the EU level. Once again, in providing the leadership required for cooperation, a key aspect of a leaders role is the relationship the leader:

> "has, or can forge, with the ideological aspects of the state - its pattern of legitimacy, its cultural image and structure, its myths. A leader who can manipulate myths - who can deconstruct and construct the culture of the [nation state][17] itself - is in a very different position from one who is

[17]Instead of 'nation-state', in this case, read 'polity'.

restricted to conforming to the text and playing out the scipt" (Cerny, 1988:134)

Although as Mazey and Richardson (1994:178) note, much of the "pressure" exerted by Euro-interests is, in practice, pushing at an open door. The collaborative activities encouraged by the EU institutions are not, of course, solely concerned with creating a consultative partner, establishing a constituency of support or with a piecemeal expansion of competences Nor, as has become clear, is this their only effect. A less tangible outcome may be equally important. The general rules concerning the co-financing of activities organised by NGOs in the Framework of HELIOS II state, for example, that:

"during the activity, the Commission contribution and the European Dimension should be highlighted in the opening and closing addresses. The EC flag should also be used as well as the European anthem when appropriate" (HELIOS II, Nov. 1993: 4).

This symbolic aspect of EU activities may be critically important in the sense of establishing some sense of a European identity. The close collaboration of actors at the EU level may contribute to a changing policy environment in the EU. Indeed, in the ICT field, the importance of participation in the various collective fora connected with the EU, in generating a technological community of individuals who know and trust one another, cannot be underestimated (Sharp, 1990). Similarly, many of those interviewed in the social field, have observed a growing sense of Europeanness amongst their members or, at least, a growing propensity to adopt a European approach to problem solving and a greater willingness to work together with their European counterparts:

"Certainly when I talk about this European Disablility movement, it was very evident, as you might imagine, at the European Day of Disabled People at the European Parliament. That's a very tangible example. Not necessarily in a militant way but in a way that is linked to a sense of identity and a sense of pride as well, a certain pride in being part of a specific culture or group."

It appears that the effect of the catalytic role played by the EU institutions may have contributed to some extent towards the development of a set of "shared assumptions and expectations" (Vickers, 1965:15) on the part of those actors drawn into participating at the EU level. This, in turn, appears to have had some impact upon the interests and activities of, not only the Euro-groups, but also of their national member organisations and even of national policy-makers (see Cram, 1997:136-137). As Vickers (1965: 29) has argued, "policy-making assumes, expresses and helps to create a whole system of human values". It is on the basis of these assumptions and preferences, developed in part at least within the institutional structure that is the European Union, that vital decisions concerning what goals to pursue and how best to pursue them are taken by actors operating within the EU context.

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