

Organisation Theory and the Study of European Union Institutions: Lessons and Opportunities*

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Abstract

Most scholarship in modern Organisation Theory maintains a near-exclusive focus on private-sector settings. In contrast, this article argues that complex public-sector organisational systems – such as the European Union (EU) – can provide a very relevant laboratory to *both* fine-tune organisation theoretical propositions *and* test them empirically. I thereby first draw attention to the value-added of Organisation Theory for the study of EU institutions. Then, I turn to these institutions' capacity to present a springboard for theoretical development in Organisation Theory, and bring forward a number of avenues for further research on the intersection of EU studies and Organisation Theory that can push forward *both* research fields.

Keywords: European Union, Organisation theory, Public sector organisations, Research agenda.

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Introduction

Organisation Theory takes as its “main object of study the complex or formal organisation” (Fligstein, 2001: 4), and thereby asks: “How and why do (members of) organisations behave as they do, and with what consequences?” (Greenwood et al., 2008: 1). The absence of any reference to *private-* or *public-*sector organisations in these expressions of Organisation Theory’s central research focus is noteworthy and deliberate. Both public- and private-sector organisations are indeed, in principle, valid objects of research for the general theoretical approach underlying Organisation Theory. Yet, while many classic contributions to the early development of Organisation Theory were based on observations taken from public-sector organisations (e.g., Weber, 1922/1978; Gulick, 1937; Selznick, 1949), the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a major shift in the Organisation Theory research agenda towards private-sector firms, markets, leadership, and management issues. As a result, since the end of the 1990s the very large majority of Organisation Theory scholarship has concentrated on private-sector organisations (March, 2007; Arellano-Gault, 2013). In fact, the focus on private-sector organisations is now so prevalent that – according to Fligstein (2001: 2) – non-Organisation Theory scholars “think most of Organisation Theory is about firms and [that] the theory does not seem to have much application to other kinds of social arenas”.

In this article, I explore the recently reinvigorated idea that public-sector organisations can still provide an important springboard for theoretical development in Organisation Theory (March, 2007; Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010; Arellano-Gault et al., 2013). My central argument is that complex public-sector organisational systems – such as, for instance, the European Union institutions (my empirical case in much of the discussion below) – can represent very relevant laboratories to *both* fine-tune theoretical propositions in Organisation Theory *and* test them empirically. Why is the European Union such an interesting case from the perspective of

Organisation Theory scholarship, and what is the intrinsic value of studying the EU institutions as organisations? Clearly, the European Union is a heterodox public organisation, which makes that it should ideally be studied using a variety of theoretical perspectives. Thus far, however, much of the academic attention awarded to the EU institutions derives from either legal scholars, or political scientists in the fields of International Relations (IR) and Public Administration (PA). Whereas legal scholars have tended to focus on the set-up, mandate and functions of the EU institutions (e.g., Shaw, 1996; Von Bogdandy, 2000; Schütze, 2014), scholarship in IR has been particularly concerned with the role and power of EU institutions in world politics as well as the motivations behind their establishment and maintenance (Caporaso, 1996; Jupille and Caporaso, 1999; Pollack, 2001). In the PA tradition of EU studies, the European institutions have been a fruitful ground to study the behavioural patterns of international bureaucratic staff (Hooghe, 2005; Suvarierol, 2011; Kassim et al., 2013; Suvarierol et al., 2013) and the representativeness and international socialisation of international civil servants (Gravier, 2008, 2013; Stevens, 2009; Beyers, 2005, 2010; Ban, 2013; Murdoch et al., 2014). This role-division across the IR and PA traditions reflects that while “IR usually is better in explaining why international organisations are created, (...) PA is better suited at analysing the policy-making role of international organisations and their bureaucracies in day-to-day politics” (Ege and Bauer, 2013: 135).

Although Organisation Theory scholarship has fruitfully contributed to recent developments in the PA strand of EU studies, and pushed forward our understanding of the internal workings of the EU institutions (e.g., Egeberg, 1996; 2001; Murdoch and Trondal, 2013; more details below), my key contention in this article is that the EU institutions can also offer important potential contributions to the development of Organisation Theory scholarship. This view is inspired by Schimmelfennig (2010: 39), who argues that “there are two general

sources of development and change in theories of European integration”. One refers to general “theoretical innovations and refinements” within political science or related disciplines, while the other “may reflect political developments in European integration itself” (Schimmelfennig, 2010: 39). He then goes on to claim that “enlargement has been the major real-world challenge for integration theory” (Schimmelfennig, 2010: 49), a line of argument likewise held by Jupille et al. (2003). This line of reasoning naturally extends to the promise held by the study of EU institutions for Organisation Theory scholarship. The underlying idea is that “the EU as an unsettled polity provides fertile empirical ground for theoretical development” (Bátora, 2010: 628-629; see also Olsen, 2010; Trondal and Peters, 2013) as well as empirical verification of theoretical propositions with respect to classic issues in Organisation Theory. This includes, for instance, the study of processes of organisational change and development; how specific organisational structures arise, develop, decline and are replaced by others; the conditions conducive to institutional entropy, institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation (Greenwood et al., 2008). Moreover, unstable systems “are especially likely to call attention to phenomena and mechanisms that are not easily observed in well-entrenched, stable polities” (Olsen, 2010: 12), such that the EU as a polity in transition can be particularly useful in developing answers to such key questions.

In the first part of this article, I discuss the key questions and assumptions underlying Organisation Theory. These will (presumably) be broadly familiar to most readers, but this discussion helps set the stage for the arguments and examples provided subsequently. Moreover, to put this in historical perspective, I also illustrate how certain social developments have impacted the development of the Organisation Theory field and its locus of interest. This historical contextualisation is imperative for my argument because it allows

me to draw attention to the potential opportunities embedded in opposing developments in the study of complex trans-national public administrations.

The second part of this article then turns to the value added of Organisation Theory for the field of EU studies. This section is not meant to be exhaustive in any sense, and predominantly relies on two specific EU-applications of the theory: i.e. *i)* the behavioural decision-making of EU bureaucrats, and *ii)* the differentiated nature of EU integration (understood, following Schimmelfennig and Holzinger [2012: 1] as the “territorially fragmented validity of EU rules”). The examples provided serve two closely related purposes. On the one hand, they more clearly illustrate how we can move from a broad theoretical framework, over the generation of testable hypotheses, to empirical evaluation within an Organisation Theory approach. On the other hand, they further clarify the theoretical discussion in the first part of this article, and thereby prepare the ground for the observations made during the third and final part.

In the final section, I explore how in-depth studies of the EU institutions can provide important springboards for theoretical development in Organisation Theory. This can be viewed as one particular application of Axelrod’s (2014, 91) recent argument that “political scientists have gained tremendously by borrowing from established disciplines, but also have quite a lot to offer”. Although I specifically focus on the potential embedded in the study of complex public-sector organisational systems such as the EU, the discussion in this final section will continuously stress how insights from transnational public-sector governance can carry over to research on private-sector firms in a globalised economy (and vice versa).

1. Organisation Theory: A brief history and overview

Organisation Theory studies formal organisations, defined as “the goals to be achieved, the rules the members of the organisation are expected to follow, and the status structure that defines the relations between them (...) [which] have been consciously designed *a priori* to anticipate and guide interaction and activities” (Blau and Scott, 1962: 5). It might immediately be noted here that this definition specifically requires the ‘goals’, ‘rules’ and ‘status structures’ to have the specific aim of guiding individuals’ interaction and activities, but remains agnostic about the final outcome of these interactions and activities. At the heart of the Organisation Theory approach thus lies the idea that it is impossible to fully understand organisational decision-making without analysing the structural aspects of organisations. Although such structures are not all-important and individual agents retain at least some discretion (a situation often referred to as ‘embedded agency’; Garud et al., 2007), individuals’ capacity to make decisions is argued to depend “on the routinization of practices within the structures and the availability of common decision-premises among the members” (Peters 2011: 85).

This is a key conceptual starting point in Organisation Theory, where scholars rely on the concept of bounded rationality (Simon, 1945; March and Simon, 1958) to stress the primary role of structures in relation to actions. Applied to an organisational setting, Simon’s bounded rationality idea implies that “members of organisations have limited knowledge or cognitive capacity”, such that the design of organisational structures becomes “vital for channelling attention and decision-making behaviour” (Christensen et al., 2007: 10-11). That is, from the perspective of Organisation Theory, “organisational design, the setting of goals and the creation of standard operating procedures all work to solve problems of bounded rationality” (Fligstein, 2001: 17). The central focus thus lies on organisations as a ‘mobilisation of bias’

(Schattschneider, 1975) that contributes to a systematic patterning of cognitive search processes among organisation members.

Note, however, that decisions and outcomes always remain the result of the interplay between agency and structure, rather than the outcome of either one of these independently (see also DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). Scott (2008: 78), for instance, argues that viewing “behaviour as oriented toward and governed by rules need not imply (...) that behaviour is ‘unreasoned’ or automatic”. Similarly, Powell and Colyvas (2008: 277) recognize the role of individual agents within the structures when maintaining that “members of organizations engage in daily practices, discover puzzles or anomalies in their work, problematize these questions and develop answers to them”. As such, Organisation Theory aims to recognise both the “enduring importance of laws and structures” (Bevir 2011: 9) and “the ways in which individual actors take action to create, maintain and transform institutions” (Scott 2008: 76). Such interplay between structure and agency is arguably especially relevant since “many features of organizational life are uncertain (...) [and] wrought with ambiguity” (Powell and Colyvas 2008: 283). These uncertainties and ambiguities indeed not only complicate a clear-cut mapping from preferences to decisions by organisational structures (assumed to exist under a purely structural approach), but also open up space for human agency and interpretation.

From the above discussion, it appears natural that organisational structures in Organisation Theory studies act as independent variables, while the substantive ‘outputs’ of organisations – i.e. decision-making behaviour directed towards clients, user groups, and so forth in the case of private-sector organisations, or public policies in the case of public organisations – are the dependent variables. This has indeed been the dominant approach throughout much of

Organisation Theory history (Scott, 2008). However, organisational decision-making can also be directed *inwards*, and relate to the administrative decisions that affect the institutional structure of the organisation itself. One could thereby think of mergers, reforms, reorganisations, or changes in procedural rules or organisational locus. Organisational structures under this viewpoint are naturally subject to change, and become the central dependent variable. This viewpoint largely arose in the literature on institutional and policy entrepreneurship (for a review, see Battilana et al., 2009) and has become central to the more recent research agenda on institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2011). Naturally, both conceptions of structures – i.e. as dependent and independent variable – need not be mutually exclusive. That is, the general nature of the ‘decision-making’ concept within Organisation Theory leaves space to study both perspectives, even though previous work in the Organisation Theory tradition that focuses on *both* the effect of structures *and* their design has been surprisingly scarce.

Similarly, as mentioned above, references to ‘organisations’ in Organisation Theory’s central research focus deliberately refrain from specifying these as *private-* or *public-*sector organisations. Both types of organisations – as well as intermediate forms arising from, for instance, public-private partnerships – are open to investigation within Organisation Theory. From this perspective, it is interesting to observe that early contributions to the field tended to study *public* organisations. Indeed, Arellano-Gault et al. (2013: 146, italics added) argue that “public organizations have offered a fruitful ground for *the emergence of* modern knowledge about organizations”. A pioneering work thereby remains Max Weber’s (1922/1978) study of the Prussian state and its administration. Other classic contributions to the early development of Organisation Theory include analyses of the US public administration by Luther Gulick (1937) and Philip Selznick (1949). However, the increasing financial power of American

business schools in the 1960s and 1970s lead many “promising Organisation Theory scholars (...) to migrate to business school positions” (Arellano-Gault, 2013: 150; March, 2007). This migration induced a shift in the research agenda within Organisation Theory, as business schools naturally prefer their research and teaching output to concentrate on *private*-sector firms, markets, leadership, and management issues.

Given the origins of much Organisation Theory scholarship in studies of public-sector organisations (see above), the remaining two sections of this article explore the idea that public-sector organisations can still provide an important springboard for theoretical development in Organisation Theory. As mentioned above, I thereby particularly focus on the intrinsic value to Organisation Theory scholarship of studying the EU as an organisation. The next section first presents EU studies as a research field, and indicates how Organisation Theory can provide an important theoretical value added in this field. Then, I assess the potential role EU studies can play for Organisation Theory. This section specifically brings forward a number of avenues for further research on the intersection of EU studies and Organisation Theory.

2. The Value of Organisation Theory to Public-Sector Research: The Case of European Union Studies

The field of EU studies is by now very large, and has covered a broad field of topics including the study of EU institutions *an sich* (often referred to as studies into ‘the nature of the beast’; e.g., Nugent, 1992, 2010), EU institutions’ legitimacy and the democratic deficit often attributed to the EU (e.g., Follesdal and Hix, 2006; Kohler-Koch, 2010; Schmidt, 2013), European integration and the differentiated nature thereof (e.g., Holzinger and Knill, 2002; De Neve, 2007; Holzinger and Schimmelfennig, 2012), different types of Europeanization (e.g.,

Olsen, 2002; Cowles et al., 2001; Featherstone and Radaelli, 2003; Knill et al., 2009), EU governance (Kohler-Koch, 1996; Kohler-Koch and Rittberger, 2006), and so forth. In stark contrast to modern Organisation Theory scholarship, EU studies is becoming increasingly characterised by a dominance of European scholars with affiliations in social science departments (Kreppel, 2012; Andrews, 2012). I will return to the potential implications of these diverging developments below.

Putting legal scholarship focusing on the set-up, mandate and functions of the EU institutions aside (see above), most existing research in EU studies relies heavily on theoretical frameworks drawn from the fields of Public Administration and International Relations. The latter scholarship tends to treat international organisations as epiphenomena of state interaction and views (member) states as the key actors (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999; Anderfuhren-Biget et al., 2013). The theoretical focus thereby often lies on more normative theories discussing the legitimacy challenges of EU integration (Eriksen, 2009; Eriksen and Fossum, 2012) – sometimes referred to as the ‘normative turn’ in EU studies (Bellamy and Castiglione, 2003). This literature thus often ignores what happens inside the EU institutions, and can be linked to the prominent role of International Relations scholars such as Karl Deutsch, Ernst Haas and others in the early stages of EU studies (Sverdrup, 2010; Jupille et al., 2003). The Public Administration branch of EU studies instead focuses on the internal workings of the EU institutions, and often has theoretical foundations in social-psychological research on socialisation processes (Johnston, 2001; Beyers, 2010) or theories of bureaucratic representation (Gravier, 2013; Murdoch et al., 2014).

For both these branches of EU scholarship, however, there lies significant potential in approaching the European institutions from an Organisation Theory perspective. One of the

reasons behind this argument could be derived from Hix' (1998: 62) lamentation that the European "environment is so complex and unpredictable [that] institutional and structural factors are more influential than calculating rational action in determining policy outcomes". Although mainly intended to point out the apparent irrationality of EU policy-making, the stress on the importance of 'institutional and structural factors' indicates that EU studies may have a lot to learn from Organisation Theory. It indeed highlights that our understanding of the internal workings of the EU institutions may well benefit from a more in-depth analysis of the role played by their specific structural design. In similar vein, the same argument also suggests that taking into account (cross-country differences in) the design of member state institutions might advance our understanding of (cross-country differences in) maintained support for EU institutions and the introduction/application of EU rules. The remainder of this section illustrates this using two specific examples: namely, studies explaining the behavioural decision-making of EU bureaucrats, and studies analysing differentiated integration.

2.1. Bureaucratic decision-making within the EU institutions

From an Organisation Theory perspective, the study of bureaucratic structures is critical to a correct understanding of the decision-making behaviour of public officials. Based on a careful study of the organisational design, we can infer hypotheses about its influence on individuals' identities, roles and decision-making behaviour. To give one very specific example, consider the potential role of an organisation's structure, which consists of its 'vertical specialisation' (i.e. the organisation's hierarchical design and assignment allocation) and its 'horizontal specialisation' (i.e. "how different issues and policy areas (...) are supposed to be linked together or decoupled from each other"; Egeberg, 2003: 159). Within the latter, there are four fundamental ways in which horizontal specialisation can take place: i.e. according to *purpose*

(sector), *process* (function), *territory* and *clientele served* (cf. Gulick, 1937). The important thing to observe here is that drawing such horizontal “organisational boundaries might affect information exchange, coordination processes (...) and conflict resolution” (Egeberg, 1999: 157-162; Christensen et al., 2007). The reason is that these boundaries will focus “a decision-maker’s attention on certain problems and solutions, while others are excluded from consideration” (Egeberg, 1999: 159). Consequently, they are likely to have direct and important effects on organisational members’ identities, roles and decision-making behaviour.

Such predictions appear particularly relevant in the European context because the myriad of EU institutions and services display substantial heterogeneity in terms of their basic structural design features. Some EU institutions are “structured according to territory [such as the European Council], according to a non-territorial principle of specialisation such as sector or function [as in the Commission]” (Egeberg, 2003: 162), or according to a combination of political party and function (as in the European Parliament) (Egeberg, 2001; Egeberg et al., 2013, 2014). As such, an Organisation Theory perspective is likely to significantly improve our understanding of differences in the patterns of organisational decision-making across these diverse institutions. This, in turn, carries direct policy relevance. For instance, insights gained from organisation-theoretical studies of the EU institutions can help reveal how its administrative and institutional environment can be most effectively designed to achieve certain aims. This issue clearly has high political and societal salience, and is closely linked to Weber’s view that bureaucratic structures are “a rationally designed tool, deliberately structured and restructured in order to improve the ability to realize externally determined goals” (Olsen 2006: 12; Weber 1922/1978).

Interestingly, there is already some empirical evidence supporting the value-added of a rigorous Organisation Theory approach in EU studies. For instance, as predicted by an Organisation Theory approach to organisational decision-making, the contact networks, perceptions of power relationships, and configurations of cooperation and conflict of European Commission and Parliament officials – both contracted and permanent – have been shown to be systematically patterned by the vertical and horizontal organisation of their respective organisations (Egeberg, 1996, 2001; Murdoch and Geys, 2012; Egeberg et al., 2013, 2014; Murdoch and Trondal, 2013). The behavioural patterns within the European Council, on the other hand, are much more driven by national preferences, reflecting the dominant territorial principle of specialisation there (Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace, 2006; Egeberg, 2012).

Still, as much previous work in this field relies on survey-based evidence – and thus analyses of individuals' *self-perceptions* of their behaviour – the link to actual decision-making should be explored in more detail. Future research should also give more careful attention to potential (re)socialization processes of EU officials by developing panel-based research designs where EU officials are 'followed' at various stages throughout their career (see also Beyers 2010; Suvarierol 2011; Suvarierol et al. 2013). Such longitudinal design not only allows studying the "processes through which a sense of administrative identity and role is developed, lost and redefined" (Olsen 2003: 522), but also provides the means to at least partially overcome the problems of recruitment (or selection) bias, pre-socialisation and self-selection that cross-sectional datasets are, by construction, unable to address (Martin and Simmons 1998; Beyers 2010; Suvarierol et al. 2013).

2.2. *Differentiated integration*

Since the 1990s, an increasingly prevalent feature of European integration is “the territorially fragmented validity of EU rules” (Schimmelfennig and Holzinger, 2012: 1). While the six founding states initially intended to “establish a united Europe in which all member states take part to the same extent” (Koller, 2012: 3), this so-called ‘final objective’ has gradually been set aside in subsequent Treaty reforms – and is now all but abandoned. Instead, it is increasingly the case that EU rules apply in *some* member states, but *not* in others – and opt-outs for particular countries on specific policies have become a recurrent point of discussion during the legislative process.

There is a large academic literature mapping the development of such ‘differentiated integration’, but Holzinger and Schimmelfennig (2012: 293) recently pointed to the lack of “theory-oriented research” in most of this existing work. In my view, Organisation Theory could provide one theoretical perspective that has the ability to help explain territorial variation in integration across member states. Olsen (2002: 934) has, for instance, argued that differentiated domestic responses to EU-level influence “are likely because the (West-)European political order is characterized by long, strong and varied institutional histories, with different trajectories of state- and nation-building, resources and capabilities”. Clearly, such observation is also valid, if not more so, for the new member states that have joined since 2004 – as well as for the comparison of ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ European countries. Extensive cross-country differences thus continue to exist in terms of goals, rules and status structures of member state institutions (terminology taken from Blau and Scott, 1962; see above). As a result, an Organisation Theory perspective highlighting the importance of pre-existing structures would effectively predict that European legislative developments will significantly affect some spheres and countries, but remain largely absent in others.

Empirical studies reviewed in Trondal (2007: 967) appear to substantiate such hypothesis, since he finds evidence in existing work that “adaptation towards Europe is considerably mediated through and conditioned by existing domestic institutions” (see also Hartlapp and Leiber, 2010). Clearly, this is only a starting point, and more work should be done on moving “from mapping to providing an explanation of the EU’s growing and considerable variation” (Paterson et al., 2010: 10). A more rigorous integration of Organisation Theory scholarship is thereby likely to further develop our explanatory power with respect to (the drivers of) the territorial fragmentation of EU rules. Such insights would again carry significant policy relevance since it will help clarify the particular bargaining stances of EU member states with respect to specific policy issues, and reveal how countries’ administrative, legal and institutional environment motivates their actions. Such knowledge is evidently of central importance to achieve mutually profitable progress in complicated inter-institutional negotiations.

It might be noted here that the empirical and theoretical importance of focusing on ‘existing domestic institutions’ in inter-organisational settings would naturally carry over to international settings beyond the EU. One can think, for instance, of explanations of countries’ bargaining stances in international fora (such as the Kyoto and Copenhagen environmental summits, the negotiation of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, or the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the US and the EU). Moving beyond the public sector, it is likely to bear important implications also for research on mergers and acquisitions (M&A). Most research by economists and management scholars in this field has concentrated on the strategic and financial fit between merging firms (Nahavandi and Malekzadeh, 1988), and social psychologists tend to focus on potential difficulties induced by cultural differences

between the organisations (Gleibs et al., 2008; Ball and Garcia-Lorenzo, 2013). An Organisation Theory perspective, however, would suggest that merger success or failure will also be considerably mediated through, and conditioned by, any differences in the organisational structures of the merging firms. This idea is in line with Lin's (2012, 1832) recent argument that "successful acquisitions are argued to rely on effective *organizational integration* of both target and acquirer" (Lin, 2012, 1832).

3. The Value of Public-Sector Research to Organisation Theory: Foundations of a Feedback Loop

While EU studies thus has successfully imported concepts and ideas from Organisation Theory, the last paragraph of the previous section already hints at potential feedback loops – with insights gained from studying EU institutions feeding back into broader organisation-theoretical frameworks. This section shifts attention more directly to such potential for a feedback loop from EU studies to Organisation Theory. One key reason behind such feedback potential lies in two characteristics of scholars engaged with the study of EU-level public-sector organisations. As mentioned, there is not only an "increasing prevalence of Europe-based scholars engaged in EU studies" (Kreppel, 2012: 636; Andrews, 2012), but these are also primarily affiliated to social science departments rather than business schools. This development is in direct opposition to that observed in Organisation Theory, where US scholars located at business schools have taken a leading role since WWII (March, 2007; Arellano-Gault et al., 2013). This is an important observation, because social scientists are likely to have a stronger interest in, and knowledge of, public-sector organisations compared to business school scholars. This provides an ideal setting for unlocking the capacity imbedded in the study of public-sector organisations for theoretical development and empirical verification in Organisation Theory.

A second key reason, however, lies in the nature of the EU itself. As argued more extensively in the introduction, the unsettled nature of the EU polity is likely to provide a particularly fertile environment for theoretical development and empirical validation with respect to classic issues in Organisation Theory scholarship. Unstable systems are indeed “especially likely to call attention to phenomena and mechanisms that are not easily observed in well-entrenched, stable polities” (Olsen, 2010: 12). This includes, as I will argue in detail in the remainder of this section, the drivers and consequences of processes of organisational change and development, insights into structure-versus-agency debates, the role and influence of leadership approaches for organisational performance and development, and so on.

3.1. Micro-foundations of embedded agency

The **first** of these opportunities links to the micro-foundations of embedded agency within organisational change processes (Powell and Colyvas, 2008; Suddaby, 2010). Organisation Theory scholars traditionally concentrate predominantly on the organisational field, and tend to pay somewhat less attention to organisations as such, or actors within these organisations. Yet, several scholars have recently pointed towards “the desirability of multilevel analysis that include looking at micro processes as well as macro contextual factors” (McAuley et al., 2007: 459). A similar sentiment is also voiced by Greenwood et al. (2008: 29): “We see considerable promise in this change to an intra-organisational level of analysis for expanding insights into institutional processes”.

Such approach naturally requires a pivotal role for agency within organisational structures (i.e. ‘embedded agency’; Garud et al., 2007). The continuous modification and transformation of the European polity creates an environment ideal for enriching our understanding of the

micro-foundations of such embedded agency. Admittedly, this is not an entirely novel proposition. Olsen (2003: 511), for instance, likewise argues that “during periods of transition, conceptions of the exemplary administration are challenged and can be dramatically refined”. Yet, only few studies have thus far taken up this challenge. One recent exception is Murdoch and Geys (2014), who exploit the EU’s complex and changing institutional framework to analyse *how* institutional entrepreneurs managed to drive developments in the organisational structure of the European External Action Service.¹ The key insight is that institutional entrepreneurs’ *interpretive efforts* induce a diversity of opinion with respect to agents’ understanding of existing institutions. This then results in a bargaining situation – or ‘discursive struggle’ (Maguire and Hardy 2006: 7) – that lies at the heart of institutional development (Maguire and Hardy 2006: 8; Schmidt 2008; Saurugger 2013). It is important to observe that this study not only generates important insights for EU scholars, but also for Organisation Theory more generally. It indeed seems reasonable to assume that similar processes may likewise arise in private-sector settings with respect to, for instance, the continuous proliferation and (global) circulation of new management tools (e.g., Management by Objectives and Results (MBOR), Supply Chain Management, Project Management, Knowledge Management; Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005).

Another instance where EU studies may contribute to the study of embedded agency in organisational change processes comes from the observation that reliance on seconded national experts (SNEs) – i.e. national public officials temporarily hired by an international organisation for their expertise in a specific field – has in recent years increased considerably *within* the EU institutions (Murdoch and Trondal, 2013; Trondal et al., 2015). Within the EU

¹ The European External Action Service is at the heart of the new institutional framework of the European Union’s foreign policy, and was created as a *sui generis* service to assist the EU’s ‘foreign policy chief’ (i.e., the so-called High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) in the execution of his/her mandate. The service obtained formal approval in July 2010 (i.e., Council decision 11665/1/10 of 26 July 2010), and is operational since January 2011.

legal framework, this expansion in the number of SNEs automatically also increases the number of officials that will return home *after* such term-limited postings (which requires their compulsory re-integration into member state institutions; Murdoch and Trondal, 2013). Given their multiple affiliations and ambiguous embeddedness, SNEs are often considered as potential agents of change in both the EU institutions (i.e. as a carrier of member-state opinions; Geuijen *et al.*, 2008), and the national administrations (i.e. allowing EU institutions to extend their influence in the national administrations through a process of ‘Europeanisation’). While existing empirical evidence on their actual influence remains mixed, SNEs clearly represent an interesting case to analyse *whether* and *how* influence is carried between different organisational structures by specific (individual) agents. Moreover, the substantial variation in the share of SNEs working *across* the EU institutions – i.e. they typically represent less than 10% of staff with policy-making competencies in the EU institutions, but make up more than one third of policy-making staff in the European External Action Service – allows gaining some insights as to potential threshold values above which such temporary staff can, or might, become an agent of change.

Importantly, the multiple affiliations and ambiguous embeddedness faced by SNEs in the EU institutions can often likewise be observed among temporary staff members in the private sector. One could hereby think of, for instance, individuals employed via temping agencies. The same multiplicity of affiliations can, however, also exist at the top of firms’ hierarchy through the common practice of interlocking directorates (Mizruchi, 1996). Insights from studying *whether* and *how* influence is carried between different organisational structures by specific (individual) agents in the EU setting could thus carry important insights also for private-sector settings – and Organisation theory scholarship on embedded agency more generally.

3.2. *Meta-organisations and comparative Organisation Theory research designs*

Ahrne and Brunsson (2008, 2010) recently developed the concept of ‘meta-organisations’, which can be (somewhat loosely) defined as organisations where the members are not individuals, but other organisations (see also Malets, 2010; Kerwer, 2013). They thereby explicitly refer to international organisations – such as the World Trade Organisation, European Union, United Nations, International Monetary Fund, and so on – as key examples. Current Organisation Theory scholarship, however, has tended not to address these kind of organisations. Ahrne and Brunsson (2010: 2) explain this lack of interest by noting that organisation theories “almost always are based on the assumption that the members of organisations are individuals” – such that the perception arises that traditional theories may simply not apply to meta-organisations (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010: 2). Yet, rather than ignoring such meta-organisations altogether (as in, for instance, neo-realist accounts of state interaction; Mayntz, 2009) or treating them as equivalent to organisations with individuals as members, there is a significant theoretical and empirical benefit to taking this “special form of organization seriously” (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010: 3)

For instance, taking a meta-organisation seriously *as an organisation* directly implies the recognition that such an organisational form is likely to affect its members (for instance, in terms of their autonomy). However, as convincingly argued by Ahrne and Brunsson (2010: 4), the extent of this “impact varies among meta-organizations, (...) and it is important to find explanations for this variation”. The concept of meta-organisations thus inherently creates the important possibility – and requirement – to engage in a *comparative* organisation-theoretical research programme. From a theoretical perspective, exploiting this comparative leverage is important to assess the idea that “everyday behavioral dynamics inside international

bureaucracies may reflect *less* the IO in which they are embedded and much more the *organizational architecture* inside international bureaucracies themselves” (Trondal, 2014: 22). As such, we can exploit comparative research designs to develop crucially important ‘scope conditions’ for the validity of theoretical hypotheses, and insights into how, for instance, cultural and personal aspects impact the relevance of organisational structures. From an organisational design perspective, such insights are fundamental for understanding when, and how, organisations’ structures have behavioural implications – or, reversely, under which conditions differing structures can evoke the same outcomes. This, in turn, provides the necessary tools to think about how one could shape organisational structures most effectively such as to achieve pre-specified aims.

The European Union and its institutions – as a meta-organisation – thus provide one venue for such comparative research from an Organisation Theory perspective. This may initially sound odd because the EU has often been perceived as *sui generis* – a case so special that it defies comparison and results obtained in studying it defy generalisation (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010: 3). Yet, such view ignores what Kreppel (2012) and Wille (2013) refer to as the ‘normalisation’ of European Union and the European Commission, which arose around the turn of the millennium. Jupille et al. (2003: 8), for instance, have convincingly argued that the EU allows studying “a variety of economic, social, political and institutional developments, *none of which is unique to it*”. Johnston (2005: 1037) mirrors this view when arguing that “some Latin American institutions are as formally complex as some European institutions, yet the practice of solving disputes inside them often tends to rely on informal elite interaction”. He also sees “potential similarities between the ASEAN Regional Forum and COREPER in

terms of the effects of small group interaction” (Johnston, 2005: 1037).² Both observations clearly call for more cross-regional comparative research building on insights from an Organisation Theory perspective.

It is important to observe at this point that such value added of *comparative* public-sector research can be expected to likewise benefit private-sector scholarship. One prominent example thereby concerns our understanding of the relations between, and organisational behaviour of, different firms within one conglomerate. Indeed, while Ahrne and Brunsson (2008, 2010) have international organisations consisting of a set of member state organisations in mind when defining meta-organisations, multinational corporations at least appear to fit the same mould. So do conglomerates consisting of a multitude of related, but partly independent firms. Also in these cases, therefore, it will be of substantial theoretical and empirical benefit to study such meta-organisations as organisations using an Organisation Theory framework.

3.3. Leadership

A **third** opportunity for a feedback loop from EU studies to Organisation Theory exists with respect to studies of organisational leadership. It has been more than 55 years since Selznick’s (1957) path-breaking book on *Leadership in Administration: A Sociological Interpretation* appeared. Reviews of this book clearly reflect its public-sector inspiration and were published predominantly in social science and public administration journals (e.g. *American Political Science Review*, *American Sociological Review*, *Public Administration Review*, *Public Administration*, and *Public Personnel Review*). Yet, its subsequent influence has been mainly felt in the fields of management (189 citations in Thomson Reuters’ Web of Science) and

² COREPER stands for Committee of Permanent Representatives. It ‘consists of the Member States’ ambassadors to the European Union’ and is ‘chaired by the Member State which holds the Council Presidency’ (cited from http://europa.eu/scadplus/glossary/coreper_en.htm).

business (106 citations), rather than public administration (76 citations). This not only once again reveals the dominance of business school scholars within modern Organisation Theory, but also exposes an important bias in the type of knowledge we have collected about the concept and functions of leadership.

More specifically, while we have learned much about the pure day-to-day *management* aspect of leadership, much less is known about leadership from a macro-level perspective; that is, with respect to the role of leadership patterns for the development, legitimacy and survival of organisations and their core values (Washington et al., 2008). Yet, it was arguable the latter aspect of leadership that lay at the heart of Selznick's work, since he conceived of leadership as "far more than the capacity to mobilize personal support; it is more than the maintenance of equilibrium through routine solution of everyday problems" (Selznick, 1957: 37). The distinction is important because the functions expected of leaders as "managers" and leaders as "statesmen" (Selznick, 1957: 4) are substantially and substantively different. In effect, the former principally aim to "provide guidance, support and feedback to subordinates" in order to achieve organisational goals (Boal and Schulz, 2007: 412), while the latter should be predominantly engaged to "define the ends of group existence, to design an enterprise distinctively adapted to these ends, and to see that the design becomes a living reality" (Selznick, 1957: 37). Despite the obvious social and political relevance of the latter set of activities, few scholars have dealt in detail with this aspect of Selznick's original ideas (Washington et al., 2008).

This observation is particularly relevant when thinking about complex public-sector organisational systems because it indicates that the concept of 'leadership' in such public-sector framework has remained under-developed – even though the efficiency ideals of New

Public Management are heavily influenced by leadership conceptualisations taken from the private sector. Yet, it is not altogether self-evident that public- and private-sector leadership have a sufficient overlap – or deal with the same type of leadership requirements – to validate such transfer of the leadership concept from private- to public-sector settings. Recent developments within the European Union again can provide an important possibility to address this gap in the literature. One can thereby, for instance, turn to the ongoing “presidentialisation” and Executive Order Formation in the European Commission (Kassim 2010; Bauer and Ege, 2012). The terms ‘presidentialisation’ and ‘executive order formation’ refer to a trend observed within European parliamentary democracies as well as the EU institutions towards the empowerment of chief executives (i.e. the prime minister, the president of the European Commission, and so on). That is, it reflects a shift in the “institutional balance of power between the executive and the legislature” in favour of the former (Johansson and Tallberg, 2010: 208; see also Heffernan, 2003). Evidently, this requires leaders to be much more ‘statesman’ than ‘manager’, and thus allows studying the difference in organisational behaviour involved with such transitions.

Studies of the Kinnock reforms in the European Commission have already taken some steps in this direction.³ Evaluations of this reform have, for instance, argued that they “improve[d] the possibilities (...) to assert political influence” (Dijkstra, 2010: 528; Murdoch, 2012). This links directly to Moe and Wilson’s (1994) claim that players’ capacities for exercising power are a function of their ‘bureaucratic structure’ – which brings us back to a central role for Organisation Theory in these discussions. It should also be noted here that the lessons learnt from EU institutions in this respect could carry important possible implications also for

³ The Kinnock reform of the European Commission “implemented a programme of far-reaching change, involving the simultaneous overhaul of personnel, financial management, and planning systems in six years between 1999 and 2005” (Kassim, 2008: 648; see also Commission of the European Communities, 2000; Bauer, 2008). It was precipitated by a deep crisis following the resignation of the Santer Commission in March 1999 due to serious allegations of financial mismanagement.

private-sector organisations. Successful leadership *of* one firm may indeed provide important benefits also externally – for instance with respect to merger or takeover processes.

5. Conclusion

Early contributions to Organisation Theory were often based on close observation of public-sector organisations. As a result, Organisation Theory has been highly visible in various parts of political science, not least through the work of influential scholars such as James G. March and Johan P. Olsen. More recently, however, the very large majority of Organisation Theory scholars study private-sector organisations. In this article, I have argued for a re-integration of research on public-sector organisations into Organisation Theory scholarship. I thereby specifically pointed to the study of the European Union and its multifaceted institutional framework as a promising springboard for both theoretical and empirical development. The central argument is that complex public-sector organisational systems (such as the EU) can be a very relevant laboratory to both fine-tune organisation theoretical propositions and test them empirically. As highlighted in the specific examples provided throughout this article, such in-depth analysis of EU institutions as organisations is likely to carry important insights *also* for private-sector settings. For instance, insights from transnational public-sector governance can be expected to carry over into research on private-sector firms in a globalised economy. Furthermore, work into the micro-foundations of embedded agency and, more broadly, the evaluation of institutional change and its drivers in public-sector settings will no doubt enrich our understanding of such processes across public and private sectors. Overall, as recently also argued by Axelrod (2014, 91), we should keep in mind that “political scientists have gained tremendously by borrowing from established disciplines, but [they] also have quite a lot to offer”.

Clearly, however, the EU institutions are best seen as one specific example within public administration / public-sector studies where the study of public-sector organisations can present an important springboard for theoretical development in Organisation Theory. The same line of argument can easily be applied to other complex international public-sector organisational systems such as those of Mercosur or ASEAN, or to ‘hybrid’ situations where both public- and private-sector activities are going on (e.g. health care, transport, education, and so on). In fact, the latter, hybrid organisational settings effectively raise the interesting possibility that properly accounting for the diversity and breadth of private- and public-sector research – and how these can contribute to the development of Organisation Theory – requires developing a continuum from private- to public-sector research.⁴ This naturally requires developing theoretical models and approaches with the fundamental ability to take into account *both* sectors.

Finally, my focus on the EU institutions is not meant to overlook the inherent promise of other fields of public-sector research that closely link with Organisation Theory research: e.g. public management studies, (public service) motivation, administrative leadership, political-administrative relations, and so on. While many scholars have to various degrees tapped into this potential by testing predictions from Organisation Theory modelling on public-sector organisations (e.g., Korunka et al., 2003; Bordia et al., 2004; Rafferty and Jimmieson, 2010; Ibsen et al.; 2011; O’Reilly and Reed, 2011), more could be done to fully exploit the exciting laboratory offered by public-sector organisations for Organisation Theory scholarship. My discussion about EU studies is thus likely to similarly apply to other areas of public-sector research, and I hope it can stimulate future research also in such other fields of public administration / public-sector research.

⁴ I am grateful to two anonymous referees for pointing this out to me.

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