Introduction:
Agency and influence inside the EU institutions[*]

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Abstract: The recent structural changes introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon exemplify the dynamic and constantly evolving nature of the European Union (EU)'s institutional system. Given the gradual empowerment of EU institutions, this Special Issue focuses on bringing agents and agency into the study of EU politics and influence. The objective is to explore the roles and activities of specific groups of actors inside the institutions and investigate actors' capacity to influence (policy-making) processes beyond the analysis of outcomes. To enhance our understanding of influence inside the EU institutions, we believe it is necessary to go beyond outcome-focused formal modelling and quantitative research. We propose an innovative range of theoretical approaches based on qualitative methods, which enable a detailed and in-depth exploration of EU institutions, processes, and the role of actors. This introduction proposes new avenues to conceptualise agency and influence inside the EU institutions – by paying more attention to hidden actors and processes of decision- and non-decision-making. We argue it is particularly important to open up and pursue a new research agenda now that the economic crisis has further underlined citizens' lack of knowledge of and declining trust in the EU institutions.

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Introduction

> 'Our understanding of EU politics – as it is conventionally described – is mostly limited to the picture created by political scientists, economists, and legal scholars. In this picture, the EU is either a depersonalised, self-sustaining institutional complex, or (⋯) a battleground of super-individuals (⋯) What is missing from our understanding of the EU is a human dimension. A sociological account makes clear what should be self-evident: the EU does not do anything by itself; it is people as everyday political agents who make the EU happen' (Kauppi 2011: 150).

The recent structural changes introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon exemplify the dynamic and constantly evolving nature of the European Union (EU)'s institutional system. The changes introduced to the way EU institutions decide have had direct repercussions on how influence is exerted by different actors inside them. However, despite the on-going importance of (the) institutions in our understanding of what the EU is and how it works, we still know little about the people working and operating inside these complex structures, and how they dynamically interact with structures and each other to exert influence and affect processes and outcomes. Most studies of institutional influence investigate structural factors to explain variance and changes over time. The focus on (official) structures and formal rules has resulted in a predominance of formal modelling, quantitative analyses, and a preponderance of rational-choice institutionalism. These studies have greatly contributed to our knowledge of decision-making procedures, inter-institutional relations, and institutional change. However, many existing studies have overlooked the role of actors and agency, despite their importance for understanding *how* influence is exerted inside EU structures and in policy-making processes.

The purpose of this Special Issue is to further open up the black box to bring agents and agency into the study of EU politics and influence inside the EU institutions. We aim to get closer to the actors 'making Europe' (Jenson and Mérand 2010: 75): their perspective on what they do, how

they pursue their aims, see their roles and activities, and how they exert influence *inside* the EU institutions and other European structures. We analyse dynamic relationships between structures and agents, as well as among different types of actors. The objective is to explore the roles and activities of specific groups of actors inside the institutions and investigate actors' capacity to influence (policy-making) processes beyond the analysis of outcomes. It is particularly important to open a new research agenda now that the economic crisis has further underlined citizens' lack of knowledge of and declining trust in EU institutions. It is therefore vital to embrace alternative approaches based on qualitative methods to better understand what goes on inside the institutions and how decisions are made among and by actors, to bring the human, 'real-world' side of politics into our analyses (Vromen 2010: 253; Crewe 2005; Schatz 2009).

To enhance our understanding of influence inside the EU institutions, we believe it is necessary to go beyond outcome-focused formal modelling and quantitative research. We propose an innovative range of theoretical and methodological approaches based on qualitative methods, which enable a detailed, in-depth exploration of EU institutions, processes, and the role of actors. We aim to find new paths to study EU institutions and raise fresh research questions that often go unnoticed by the particular ontological and epistemological position of mainstream political science. However, we wish to present a research agenda that interests and resonates with existing EU studies and can share the language as well as the theoretical and empirical rigour of the discipline but which takes a broader and more holistic approach to European integration as a social process. Consequently, our purpose is to show how focusing more on actors and agency is an endeavour that requires an epistemic shift that combines theoretical and methodological aspects.

This Special Issue is the result of a set of panels and workshops organised since 2009, which have brought together researchers from various disciplines (e.g. political science, law, anthropology, communication sciences, and European studies) interested in using qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of the EU institutions and their actors. This introduction takes stock of the existing literature and locates gaps to which it responds. It examines various options to close gaps in the study of agency and influence, discussing new ways to conceptualise them. The third section proposes alternative (qualitative) methodological approaches to produce fresh data which shed light on actors, their perceptions and practices, and their roles and typologies – rather than investigating only formal structures. The final section briefly summarises this Special Issue's articles, underlining their innovative approaches and contribution to the study of agency and influence inside the EU institutions.

1.   State of the art

New institutionalism has experienced steady growth in EU Studies. The thickness of EU institutions and their intense activity and outputs have led to a myriad of empirical applications, from integration theories, episodes of treaty change, policy and decision-making, to party politics (e.g. Hix 2002; Lindberg et al. 2008; Moravcsik and Nicolaïdis 1999; Moravcsik 1993; Tsebelis and Garrett 2000). However, the rapid expansion of institutionalist approaches has not prevented the appearance of empirical and theoretical gaps in the literature. These gaps are often a direct consequence of wider theoretical debates accompanying new institutionalism. Beyond

the belief that 'institutions matter', approaches differ substantially in their ontological and epistemological premises (Aspinwall and Schneider 2000; Hall and Taylor 1996). The in-fighting between rationalist and sociological proponents has obviated certain questions and created a bias both at the theoretical and empirical level.

At the theoretical level, debates between different institutionalist approaches (Checkel and Moravcsik 2001; Jupille et al. 2003) have served to reify certain conceptual cleavages – opposing strategies to norms; interests to ideas; and rationality to appropriateness (Jenson and Mérand 2010: 83–84). The tendency to use competitive testing – to prove one approach is more valid than the other – has led to oversimplified models and weak operationalisation of the least-preferred approach (e.g. Kreppel and Hix 2003; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005). However, these debates hide an inherent bias of new institutionalism towards structuralism. Both rational-choice and sociological proponents tend to obviate the role of agency and actors (Hay 2010: 66). Rational-choice institutionalism's ontological and epistemological premises have led it to under-theorise the faculties and role of actors (Kauppi 2010). Despite its individualist ontology, it considers interests as materially (i.e. structurally) given and is thus not interested in the process of interest formation and change (Klotz and Lynch 2007: 3). Meanwhile, sociological institutionalism[2] has often forgotten its ontological origins – based on socially constructed reality – and focused on the content of norms, ideas, and rules guiding the appropriate behaviour of agents (Jenson and Mérand 2010: 79), turning them into 'unthinking actors' blindly following structures (Schmidt 2008: 313–314).

The empirical investigation of influence in EU institutions also shows worrying gaps. First, theoretical debates have often lacked a practical application and an effort to translate the ontological and epistemological discussions into empirical evidence (Checkel and Moravcsik 2001). Most studies have tended to concentrate on formal institutional structures – often as a reflection of the widespread use of formal modelling and the preponderance of rational-choice institutionalism. Consequently, the concept of influence has been objectivised and treated as an observable phenomenon; studies concentrate on the search for proxies and variables to measure influence. The result has been an emphasis on formal rules and positive outcomes – that is, problems for which a solution has been found at the end of the policy-making process (e.g. Thomson et al. 2006). Sociological institutionalism, with its scarcity of empirical studies, has rarely addressed these shortcomings (for exceptions see Fouilleux et al. 2005; From 2002; Lewis 2003, 2005; Rittberger 2005).

In view of these gaps, we argue that the literature would benefit from rediscovering agency[3] and getting closer to the actors 'making Europe' (Jenson and Mérand 2010: 75). Agency-oriented studies could particularly contribute to answering three questions which have been left unexplored. Firstly, what are the everyday practices of European actors? How do they

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[2] 'Sociological' refers here to the strand of institutionalism proposed by Hall and Taylor (1996) and does not include more recent contributions coming from (French) political sociology (see also Mérand 2008; Saurugger 2008 Georgakakis 2011).

[3] As Jenson and Mérand (2010: 75) note, there seems to be a call for agency and the role of actors with each new generation of academics. The limited success of previous rounds may be partially due to the fact that its contributions have often come from the French-speaking academic field and the necessity to engage with political science debates and preoccupations by using concepts and language that are more familiar to existing EU studies (Menon 2008; Mérand 2008).

reflect/contribute to formal and informal policy-making processes? We are interested in exploring what Lawrence et al. (2011: 52–53) call the 'day-to-day equivocal instances of agency (···) successful and not, simultaneously radical and conservative, strategic and emotional, full of compromises and rife with unintended consequences'. These issues and questions have been taken up by a small number of anthropologists exploring European integration processes by conducting fieldwork in Brussels, particularly in the 1990's (see Abélès et al. 1993; Bellier and Wilson 2000; Shore and Abélès 2004; Shore 2000). Secondly, *how* do actors exert influence inside the EU institutions, and how do they interact with structures? Rather than further exploring *whether* and *how much* influence is exerted, EU studies would benefit from exploring the role and activities of specific actors *inside* EU institutions: how and where they enable actors to exert influence in processes. Thirdly, we can explore *who* the people 'making Europe' are and what they do. To address this question, the new agenda launched by political sociologists can contribute to our understanding of the actors building Europe, their activities, roles, and perceptions of what constitutes the process of European integration. As Favell and Guiraudon (2009: 569–70) say of this endeavour:

> 'We need to home in on the very real individuals who experience and live out at a micro level the consequences of macro-level regional integration. Our goal must be to show how their actions and embodiment of Europe as an everyday practice aggregate somehow into the familiar political, institutional and pan-European societal structures we already know'.

2.   The way forwards: Agency and influence

Sociologists have rightly pointed to the mutually exclusive treatment of structure and agency in institutionalist studies. They tend to either rely on structuralist assumptions − thereby ignoring the nature of actors − or treat individuals as *ex deus machina* − more capable of acting than the average individual (Lawrence et al. 2009). To overcome this trend, we propose to employ some of the analytical and empirical tools proposed by political sociologists in the service of questions which have traditionally preoccupied political scientists (e.g. Beauvallet and Michon 2010; Egeberg et al. 2012; Fouilleux et al. 2005; Georgakakis 2011; Kauppi and Rask Madsen 2008; Winzen 2011). In turn, political science can ensure that debates and applications maintain the rigour which characterises our discipline. Political science is concerned, for instance, that ontological and epistemological choices are acknowledged and draws on sub-disciplines − such as comparative politics − to develop sound research designs and models that advance our theoretical understanding of agency and influence.

2.1.   On agency

One of the main misunderstandings that has led to the (virtual) disappearance of agency in institutionalist studies is the tendency to present structure and agency as opposed and ontologically separate − to resolve empirically whether structures or agents are more important in explaining social phenomena (Hay 2002). To overcome this polarisation in previous studies

as well as the entrenched debate on logics of action (consequentiality vs. appropriateness), we view structures and agents not as ontologically separate, but as relational concepts (Kauppi 2010). Agency is a 'constituent of structure' (Sewell 1992: 20), as much as structures are at the source of agents' behaviour (Hay 2002; Klotz and Lynch 2007; Wendt 1987). Understanding the interdependence of structure and agency can help us shed new light on traditional concepts such as interests, behaviour, and influence. We propose four key contributions a focus on 'embedded' agency could provide to the literature.

First, focusing on agency can help us overcome the divide between rational and norms-based behavioural motivations. Much ink has been spilt evaluating the validity (and superiority) of either a 'logic of consequences' or 'logic of appropriateness'. However, if agents are understood as conscious and reflexive actors embedded in a given (institutional and indeed social) context, it is possible to think of them as choosing strategies which better fit or are most appropriate in a given setting (Adler-Nissen 2008; Hay 2002, 2010; Kauppi and Rask Madsen 2008). Consequently, we can conceptualise 'rationality [as] socially constructed in the same way that norms have to be strategically deployed' (Jenson and Mérand 2010: 84). This perspective offers an interesting turn to the rationality/norms debate; a focus on agents and their interactions with their surrounding structures may provide alternative explanations of actors' behaviour. Smeets' article in this collection is a good example of such an approach as he explores Council actors' dynamic interactions with each other and at different institutional levels.

Second, focusing on agents can provide a more subjective understanding of interests – based on perceptions rather than on 'objective' material values (Blyth 2003; Hay 2010; Klotz and Lynch 2007; Schmidt 2008; Wendt 1987). If 'interests' are approached as social constructions, then we can empirically explore the (often ignored) process of interest and preference formation inside institutions (Hay 2010; Jenson and Mérand 2010; Powell and DiMaggio 1991). Once 'interests' are not based on material and exogenous factors, new questions open up about how actors form interests, their content (Jupille et al. 2003: 14), and why certain contents are prioritised. Such investigations call for problematising the definition of issues and ideas, starting by asking what is considered to be a problem, which different solutions are presented by different actors, and why certain solutions are deemed more effective or legitimate. As Blyth (2003: 702) noted, 'interests are something to be explained and not something with which to do the explaining'. Existing studies have tended to take problems and solutions at face-value; researchers have been more concerned about explaining an outcome than *why* it was privileged over other options. For instance, deciding that the European Parliament (EP) tends to prioritise long-term institutional interests over short-term policy interests might not be enough to identify on-going institutional processes; we need to understand *why* some EP actors put a premium on institutional interests – such as a move to more centrist solutions which will not provoke the Council (Ripoll Servent 2013).

Third, in order to appreciate what motivates behaviour and how interests are formed and prioritised, we need to pay more attention to actors' social practices and their understanding of the policy process (cf. Wedeen 2010: 267). This 'logic of practices' (Jenson and Mérand 2010: 84) can help us explain which ideas gain prominence, what constitutes legitimate behaviour, and why. As Klotz and Lynch (2007: 7) noted, 'people consciously *and* unintentionally replicate *and* challenge institutionalized routines and prevailing assumptions'. Therefore, institutions cannot be explained or understood without taking into account the point of view of those involved in

daily institutional work (Lawrence et al. 2009, 2011). It is actors' perceptions and 'frameworks of meaning' (Klotz and Lynch 2007: 44) which fill and shape concepts (such as power, influence and authority) which are the basis of most institutionalist research. We hear much about the consensual nature of EU policy-making and the effects it has for formal and informal practices (e.g. Farrell and Héritier 2003; Heisenberg 2005; Shackleton and Raunio 2003). However 'consensus' continues to be a relatively empty concept (Reh 2012). We need to investigate what consensus means for those involved in EU decision-making, how it is practised and achieved at the everyday level, and how actors make strategic use of it (Ripoll Servent 2012). Understanding how specific actors perceive 'what is feasible, legitimate, possible, and desirable' (Hay 2010: 68) has two practical implications. Firstly, it can help us gain a better grasp on the differential capacity of actors involved in the game to act and exert agency. For instance, whether someone seen as an expert or insider is better able to define what a problem is and shape debates (see Busby and Belkacem; and Field in this issue). Secondly, it enables us to go beyond the study of observable behaviour and concentrate on how individuals justify positions and actions (Klotz and Lynch 2007: 11; Wendt 1987: 359) – for example, the way members of the European Parliament (MEPs) see their role and the types of capital they accumulate and strategies they employ in order to pursue their aims successfully in the game being played in this transnational field (Busby 2013).

Fourthly and finally, we need to concentrate on the mechanisms which underline and facilitate the relational nature of agency and structure. Such mechanisms need to be embedded and reflect the 'everyday interaction' of actors in their context (Goffman 1959). They do not need to focus on 'dramatic actions' but practices which 'reproduce [actors'] roles, rites, and rituals at the same time that they challenge, modify, and disrupt them' (Lawrence et al. 2011: 57). In order to reveal the links between actors' actions and both the maintenance, reproduction, and disruption of institutional structures, we need to look at active and passive mechanisms in conjunction. Indeed, while some actors use active mechanisms such as discourse or framing to modify the collective understandings of a problem or an acceptable form of behaviour, other actors are on the receiving end to either accept, learn, copy, or contest the new definitions or practices being proposed. In the course of the first international negotiations under the Treaty of Lisbon, EP leaders actively re-interpreted the meaning of 'being informed' and successfully transformed it into a new right to be 'involved' in international negotiations. However, the efforts of EP actors would have gone unnoticed if other actors engaged in negotiations (Commissioners, Presidency and international partners) had not considered the claims of the EP as legitimate and reasonable (Ripoll Servent and MacKenzie 2012). This understanding of mechanisms is more fluid than causal mechanisms; it allows us to better capture the shifting processes of sense-making and legitimation that go on in day-to-day institutional practices.

2.2. On influence

In EU policy-making studies, influence has often been associated with power without thinking through the meaning of these concepts; consequently we have hardly ever reflected on *what* we are studying and *how* we proceed to do so. As Bachrach and Baratz (1963) noted, power and influence are not equivalent; while power is a relational concept that implies B bowing to A's

wishes, influence relates to the capacity to change B's course of action without threats. More interestingly, they identify a second face of power, looking at non-decisions as well as positive outcomes (Bachrach and Baratz 1962, 1975). Lukes (2005: 59) adds a third face of power, namely 'a sociological perspective within which to examine, not only decision-making and nondecision-making power, but also the various ways of suppressing latent conflicts within society'. Bringing in the three faces of power could bring several unexplored areas of EU policy-making to light (cf. Rasmussen 2013).

First, the three faces of power open a door to investigating *non-decisions* (Bachrach and Baratz 1962) and *inaction* (Lukes 2005). Much attention has been paid to agenda-setting in the EU (e.g. Peters 1994; Princen 2007; Tallberg 2003), but existing studies have generally overlooked those instances where issues have been excluded from the policy process. It is important to understand why certain issues are excluded from the agenda. It is equally necessary to ask why certain matters do not succeed. By focusing on how actors mobilise certain biases[4] (or refrain from doing so), we can better understand the paths taken in policy-making and the formulation of specific problems as a (non-)issue at the EU level. In this sense, it is important to understand the actions of both 'drivers' and 'brakemen' (Schimmelfennig 2001) but also of 'actors' and 'inactors'. What are their motivations? Are their actions undertaken consciously or unconsciously (Lukes 2005: 52)? What mechanisms do they use to foster/avoid debates? In order to understand the different faces of power, we need to focus on which actors promote specific ideas as well as on those who resist, contest, and even ignore or miss the implications of using a particular bias (Klotz and Lynch 2007: 94). Good examples might be studies of the EP's dual seat and the battle for a statute in the EP (Priestley 2008; Vandecasteele et al. and Smeets this issue).

This leads to a second point, and back to our argument that research should investigate processes as well as outcomes. As Lawrence et al. (2011: 57) underline, sometimes we can open new fields of inquiry by 'asking "why" and "how" rather than "what" and "when"'. Certainly the study of processes may lead to less parsimony but it might also give us a better idea of who decides and how inside the EU and paint a richer, more holistic picture of what happens day-to-day inside the institutions. Exploring the processes of policy-making might help us uncover new terrains which could not be appraised by looking only at outcomes; this approach stresses the activities of actors rather than their accomplishments, which can help us expose not just success, but also failure and unintended consequences (Lawrence et al. 2009: 11). Historical researchers have underlined the importance of agents in the process of European integration – examining certain typologies of actors, for instance, the career paths of parliamentarians or EU officials (Cohen and Knudsen 2012; Georgakakis 2008). Explorations of internal (and inter-) institutional practices over time have pointed to the predominance of battles and confrontations over procedural matters (Priestley 2008; Ripoll Servent 2009, 2013; Smeets this issue). As a consequence, debates inside the EU institutions have tended to relegate policy-making to the background and have focused on who is legitimate to speak, take part, who has access to information and decision-making fora, or when certain issues should be put on (or off) the table.

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[4] The mobilisation of bias can be understood as 'the prevailing norms, precedents, myths, rituals, institutions and procedures that operate "in favor of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others"' (Schattschneider in Bachrach and Baratz 1975: 900).

The focus on process rather than outcome is particularly important in times of uncertainty, such as in a period of deep economic crisis, when it is almost impossible to foresee the solutions or consequences of partial decisions made under (time) pressure[5]. However, most existing studies of EU policy-making have focused on confrontations over the content of policies rather than over procedural rules and norms.

We also highlight the importance of going beyond formal frontstage (decision-making) venues to explore what happens backstage (Goffman 1959). This does not mean exploring the lowest levels of decision-making (such as EP committees or Council working groups), but rather unveiling a new set of hidden actors operating behind frontstage performances, often to help prepare and/or pre-cook final performances and decisions. Opening up the black box of EU institutions enables us to explore the role and activities of non-traditional actors, such as experts, EP assistants and staff, and national seconded officials who control resources such as information and, therefore, participate in shaping the definition of problems and range of possible solutions. Looking only at the (final) frontstage performances of senior actors (MEPs, ministers, Commissioners) gives us a particular, partial answer, distorting our understanding of processes and norms. We need 'studies that flesh out EU institutions [and] show power struggles between insiders and outsiders, lines of cleavages, and rules of entry and interaction (…) how fields are institutionalized, and roles are scripted there' (Favell and Guiraudon 2009: 22–23). In this issue, Busby and Belkacem explore the backstage role of EP assistants as information managers in preparing MEPs' credible frontstage performances and thus their everyday part in exerting influence inside this institution.

Finally, a focus on processes and backstage actors and activities requires a more flexible understanding of policy-making and the policy cycle. Traditional studies have tended to divide policy-making into stratified phases. However, a more flexible understanding shows that practices are more fluid and less hierarchical. Field, in this issue, shows how the influence of expert groups is not limited to the agenda-setting phase but extends to all phases of policy-making. Simultaneously, the membership and use of expert groups often overlaps and crosses the neat borders of specific Commission DGs. Therefore, it is important to problematise hierarchy and the role of actors in positions of influence. Dobbels and Neuhold (2012) have shown that EP officials can escape the control of MEPs and political groups, and consequently are able not just to produce but also steer problems, especially when there is a perceived need for expertise or 'technical' knowledge. In this issue, Brandsma also explores the role of technical and political information and expands upon this distinction.

A new focus on agents and agency opens up original research questions for the study of influence in the EU institutions. Although the ontological and epistemological bases might differ from mainstream approaches (Kauppi and Rask Madsen 2008; Kauppi 2010), the latter can profit from our findings by helping to develop theoretical assumptions and hypotheses, narrowing down conditions and factors, ruling out specific explanations that do not find empirical backing, revealing deeper understandings of processes occurring at the everyday level, and therefore adding flesh to generalisations and models.

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[5] Thanks to the *Institute for European Integration Research* team for raising this point over recent discussions about the state of EU studies.

3.   Methodological approaches

> 'Unless we believe that agents have no bearing on political outcomes, we must employ tools that uncover, rather than presuppose, individuals' motivations and behaviours. By examining how actors themselves view the myriad political situations in which they are involved, we bring to the fore their influence on political outcomes, constrained as it is by structural factors' (Bayard de Volo and Schatz 2004: 268).

To enhance our understanding of who decides in(side) the EU and how – go beyond outcomes, see who takes part, and what they do backstage – we need to further open up the institutional black-box to shed light on (power) struggles between different actors and their dynamic and strategic interactions with structures occurring inside. Research is required that begins to fill the theoretical gaps and answer the empirical scarcity outlined above with agency-focused explorations. This will produce fresh data and perspectives, therefore creating the opportunity for innovative suggestions and solutions by opening up new avenues of discussion on stalling or stagnant debates. Agency-focused research can increase our grasp on EU processes, resources, interests, and motivations, and what actors are doing inside EU structures, how they do it, and how they understand what they are doing. Agency-focused research draws our attention to informal aspects of institutional life, whether these are conceptualised as informal norms, mechanisms, organisational culture, strategies, or rituals. The current prioritisation of structure and modelling and dominant ontological and epistemological positions in the literature are partly due to wider theoretical and meta-theoretical disputes among political scientists about the discipline's core assumptions and the objectivist truth claims traditionally pressed by political science[6] (Favell and Guiraudon 2011: 6; Wedeen 2010).

New methods (procedures) and methodological approaches (the principles which guide the choice of methods) are required which enable agent-focused research to explore the (agency and influence) issues and questions which have been raised here. Following the qualitative theme of the conference panels which led to the inception and production of this Special Issue, we argue that qualitative methods have much to contribute to the endeavour. Whilst qualitative methods continue to be used in political science, because of epistemological differences, they have tended to be marginalised in some sub-disciplines (Vromen 2010: 250).

The qualitative tradition is an inquiry field that cross-cuts disciplines and which has seen a resurgence in recent years after quantitative methods have dominated the social sciences since the 1950s (Ybema et al. 2009: 3). Broadly speaking, qualitative research aims to enhance the understanding of social processes and phenomena by studying actors in their natural setting, paying particular attention to contextual factors, and seeking to understand phenomena and actors on their own terms (known as seeking the *emic* rather than *etic* perspective) (Denzin and Lincoln 1998: 1–5; Eriksen 2001: 36). Qualitative research is characterised by *how* questions, an inductive approach, unstructured context-sensitive methods, rich data, and explanations at the level of meaning and micro-social processes (Spencer et al. 2003: 3). They thus offer an alternative to reductionism (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007: 17) by retaining the richness of

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[6] However it is likely also due partly to methodological issues such as access to elite spaces and actors; more methodological reflection on conducting research in Brussels is required in the European Studies literature (Ball 1994; Busby 2011; Walford 1994).

everyday social experiences, interactions, and struggles. As multiple methods are often employed, Denzin and Lincoln (1998: 1–5) suggest qualitative research can be viewed as a *bricolage* and the researcher as a *bricoleur* – a jack-of-all-trades who uses whatever tools are at hand to explore their question in the context as fully as possible, understanding that research is an interactive process shaped by themselves, the setting, and the participants at that moment. The emergent *bricolage* connects parts to the whole and stresses the meaningful relationships operating in the context. Qualitative research thus has the potential to help us understand the meaningful relationships, actions, and interactions occurring inside EU institutions as well as the way actors understand and negotiate their institutional and social context to achieve their aims.

Conventional (positivist) political science has tended to value parsimony but qualitative methods appreciate detail, nuance, and that 'there is never *nothing* going on' in the social world – that is, political behaviour cannot be understood independent of its context (Wedeen 2010, emphasis added). Qualitative research attends carefully to concept formation, theory development, and (causal) complexity in context. These three tasks concern qualitative judgements and this (qualitative) work is foundational to statistical testing (Thomas 2005: 858). Other authors have sought to lay out the stand for qualitative methods. Klotz and Prakash's edited volume (2009) offers an extensive overview of what qualitative methods offer international relations. Meanwhile, Vromen (2010: 249–255) argues that, when we seek to understand or explain how and why a political institution, event, issue, or process came about, we are necessarily asking questions that can be (best) answered through qualitative methods. Their offering to political science lies in the centrality of meaning, context, and history to politics and political behaviour.

Some scholars have called for political science to combine qualitative and quantitative methods and move beyond this (false) dichotomy (Bryman 1988; Burnham et al. 2004; Read and Marsh 2002; Rihoux and Grimm 2005). Mixed methods facilitate 'coming at things differently' when data gathering with one method is not adequate for answering complex questions (Hesse-Biber and Johnson 2013). Mason (2006) discusses the value of mixed-methods for researching questions about social experience and lived realities; arguing that it is ultimately most helpful to think in terms of multi-dimensional research strategies which transcend the qualitative-quantitative divide. Whilst it raises questions about reconciling epistemologies, she says mixing methods helps researchers to think creatively and 'outside the box'. Bryman (2006) has investigated how these approaches have been combined in practice. Meanwhile, however, Lunde et al. (2013) argue that more attention should be paid to power relations as an aspect of collaboration between researchers from different epistemic cultures, or disciplines.

Political science has seen calls for (more) methodological pluralism. Marsh and Smith (2001: 539) state that formal modellers often seem more interested in the elegance of their models than the substance of politics and, as Joseph et al. (2007: 2) note; 'in concentrating almost exclusively on the models, charts, regressions, and correlations of standard political research, social science has missed a significant aspect of the on-going reality that is politics: namely it has missed the nitty-gritty details of politics'. Hilmer argues that quality political science can be done through a variety of different methodologies (2011: 101; see also Bayard de Volo and Schatz 2004; Schatz 2009; Vromen 2010). Tilly offers ethnography as a possible solution because 'to the extent that politics actually consists not of big structures and prescribed roles but of dynamic, contingent interactions among persons, households, and small groups (⋯) political

ethnography provides privileged access to its processes, causes, and effects' (in Hilmer 2011: 100). However, we agree with Putnam that 'the prudent social scientist, like the wise investor, must rely on diversification to magnify the strengths and to offset the weaknesses of any single instrument' (1993: 12). Diversification and pluralism could help to fill the gaps discussed by producing a richer and more dynamic literature, and encouraging productive dialogue between various approaches to co-produce a lively *bricolage,* rather than unproductive dichotomies which reify conceptual cleavages and stifle empirical ambition by focusing efforts on these debates instead of data collection and analysis (see Laitin 2003; Pachirat 2009). We argue that qualitative methods have much to offer but, as Hilmer (2011: 100) says of political ethnographers, 'the goal of political scientists who seek to promote more ethnography in their discipline is to contribute, rather than radically transform' – perhaps as opposed to Flyvberg's view that the social sciences should re-orient away from the natural sciences and towards *phronesis* instead (in Vromen 2010: 252).

In summary, qualitative methods offer our endeavour the opportunity to gather rich data which gets closer to EU actors and their activities, and enables us to analyse contextual and informal factors, and explore actors' (emic) perspective on what they are doing. As well as through the employment of more traditional methods such as interviews, observation, and focus groups, EU studies could benefit from wider use of more recent innovations in the qualitative field; e.g. the development of QCA (Rihoux and Ragin 2008; Schneider and Wagemann 2012); social network analysis (Kadushin 2012); and process tracing (Bennett and George 2001; Checkel 2009; Finlayson et al. 2004). Tools and approaches more traditionally associated with other disciplines (or sub-disciplines of political science) can also be brought in to offer an alternative perspective and expand how we understand the boundaries of the political; e.g. ethnography (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007; Joseph et al. 2007; Schatz 2009; Wedeen 2010); discourse theory and analysis (Diez 2001; Risse 2000; Schmidt 2008); prosopographic (Beauvallet and Michon 2010; Kauppi 2011) and historical studies (Kaiser et al. 2009; Knudsen 2009); and performative approaches (Rai 2010). All the authors in this Special Issue have employed innovative methodological and/or theoretical approaches to the EU institutions and research puzzles they explore, to get closer to a particular group of actors and their activities in Brussels and therefore offer new insights and a fresh perspective to the literature

4.   Contributions to the Special Issue

Busby and Belkacem's article uses ethnography to explore backstage political processes inside the European Parliament. They highlight the importance of MEPs' assistants in managing information and providing MEPs with essential tools to give credible (frontstage) performances and thus shape and influence processes by successfully convincing other actors of their position. The article opens up the black box of the EP, going beyond traditional actors and structures to explore influence processes at the everyday level. It provides an original take on assistants, their relationship with parliamentarians, staff, and political groups and national party delegations. By focusing on assistants' everyday practices, they underline the wide scope that they enjoy when choosing, filtering, ignoring, or even quelling information. Their capacity to act backstage is, therefore, informed by their own understanding of their role as an assistant as well as their own

approach to the issues which land on the MEP's desk. Consequently, the article points to an alternative, less visible, source of influence and bias-mobilisation inside the EP. If we want to understand how and why some MEPs are more influential than others and why they vote the way they do, it is worth investigating who their assistants are and what they do in the backstage of this political field.

Vandecasteele et al. embrace Bachrach and Baratz's two faces of power to develop a more accurate definition of influence inside the Council, which does not rely only on material resources. They propose an innovative qualitative method based on triangulation, which goes beyond the assessment of outcomes. The EAR method (Ego/Alter perception, Researcher's analysis) allows them to explore various stages in the process of policy-making in order to more faithfully assess the extent of influence both during the introduction/formulation of the problem and the definition of its content. It also allows them to better situate the various fora and levels of influence, both inside the Council and external parties. Their exploration of the Polish Presidency's role in the EU's Eastern Partnership policies reveals that those chairing meetings were better able to influence the definition of problems at earlier stages of the policy-making process. The comparative analysis of the different negotiation dossiers gives us a better idea of the conditions under which the Presidency can exert different types of influence as well as the importance of individual actors in successfully framing specific issues.

Smeets' contribution discusses the role of agents and how they exert influence inside the Council of Ministers. It uses a distinct typology (drivers and brakemen) to explore the mechanisms that different actors use to put issues on and off the table, as well as postpone or ignore them. In this sense, it clearly builds on both (formal and informal) decision- and nondecision-making, exploring areas and concepts that have remained overlooked by most traditional studies of the Council. His use of participant observation allows him to unveil processes and roles that are often difficult to grasp. The analysis of daily practices inside the Council Working Party on the Western Balkans breaks free from theoretical assumptions on levels and fora of decision-making. The case study, looking at the opening of accession negotiations with Croatia, gives a compelling reconstruction of events and helps us understand actors' strategies within the different levels of Council decision-making and the interplay between them. The focus on the role of individual actors shows the capacity of drivers and brakemen to frame issues and mobilise certain biases that help us to understand the negotiation process. Therefore, it underlines the indeterminacy of outcomes and the importance of looking at the mechanisms used by both successful and failed actors.

Field's article presents an interesting take on the hidden faces of EU policy-making with an innovative take on Commission expert groups. It anatomises their composition and role; considering their function in shaping policies and framing problems in the legislative backstage. Therefore, this 'community of knowledge' exerts influence backstage; their position as experts offers them an opportunity to manage and filter information and imbues them with a particular functional legitimacy over the content of problems. These definitions are taken up by other institutional actors in frontstage performance and used to legitimise their (political) choices. His exploration through qualitative interviews of experts' self-perceptions reveals a fascinating range of characterisations on what their role and appointment ought to be. It highlights the importance of examining appointment processes in order to understand potential biases in the definition of policy problems that bear a direct influence on the later stages of the policy cycle.

His careful examination of the composition and structure of expert groups also reveals the impact that experts have beyond the agenda-setting stage – intervening even during the process of implementation – and their influence beyond the borders of their formal institutional affiliation. The importance of information management (and production) allows us to widen our understanding of who influences the Commission's frontstage performances – relativizing its claims of transparency and the diversity of its backstage actors.

Finally, Brandsma's contribution looks at the sharing of technical and political information *between* the EU institutions. In this sense, he develops a more refined understanding of information as a source of relational influence that aims to uncover the preferences and positions of other institutional actors in the field. This is a fascinating and innovative way to approach the analysis of power relations and influence in *and* between the EU institutions. The article looks at formal rules and inter-institutional agreements and discusses actors' strategies to bend formal rules and gain access to (political rather than technical) information. This article takes a fresh approach to the study of inter-institutional agreements, going beyond specific classes of agreement and investigating, instead, how these arrangements impact the balance of powers between the institutions. Hence, it investigates dynamic power processes occurring between multiple institutional actors and the inter-dependence between structures and agents. His account shows how actors inside the EP have proven particularly skilled at improving their position through creative interpretation of formal rules. Their capacity to bolster the EP's position across the policy process through new semi-codified informal practices has resulted in a slow *parliamentarisation* of the EU by stealth.

Conclusion

This introduction has identified gaps in the literature and proposed alternative ways to investigate agency and influence inside the EU institutions. It has shown how, in order to gain a better understanding on how the EU works and decides, it is important to focus on actors, their practices, and self-perceptions. The shift towards agency-based explanations requires a more dynamic conceptualisation of agency and structure – namely, as interrelated concepts which cannot be understood in isolation.

The contributions to this Special Issue provide three main findings. Firstly, looking at 'embedded agency' can help us broaden our understanding of interests, actors' behaviours, and motivations for their actions. It can also unveil hidden processes and particular biases in the formulation and development of issues. It provides, thus, a more fluid understanding of the policy process, where influence is not just the result of formal and informal rules but depends on wider contextual elements. Therefore, in order to understand the capacity of actors to exert influence, it is essential to situate their actions in time and space. The findings evidence how the setting in which actors perform is crucial in determining the type and success of influence. The backstage(s) of the policy process (working groups, offices, preparatory meetings, etc.) is equally important in explaining decisions and non-decisions as is the frontstage (ministers' meetings, plenary sessions, European Councils, etc.). Similarly, the timing of negotiations has to be brought to the fore, examining when an event takes place in the policy process but also how it is situated in the wider environment. Here, we can see how deadlines or institutional cycles such

as the six-month presidency can shape the performance of actors or their sense of obligation towards reaching (or avoiding) an outcome. Ultimately, what these findings show is that a more fluid and contextualised understanding of the policy process helps us to focus on (institutional) change as a permanent fixture of EU institutions. Change (and resistance to it) is thus an endogenous element that has to be integrated into our study of EU institutions and not treated as an anomaly.

The second broad finding of this Special Issue is the necessity of adopting an agency-focused approach which pays attention to a wider range of actors and those acting in the backstage(s) of the policy-making process. The articles gathered here provide new empirical material on groups that had been disregarded or gone unnoticed by previous studies. However, situating backstage actors – such as MEP assistants or technical experts working for the Commission – at the core of our investigations has revealed the central role which information, knowledge, and expertise play in the everyday practice of EU politics. In the context of the EU, where technical matters have become the focus of political games, influence relies on actors' capacity to produce, gather, manage and frame knowledge. (Policy) outcomes depend on who is successful at framing (acceptable) solutions for a given problem, who can gather more and better information on the position of other actors in the game, or who can keep issues (or definitions thereof) off the negotiating table.

Finally, this issue shows that it is necessary to emphasise qualitative methods and inter-disciplinary research to reach actors, their practices, perceptions, and the mechanisms that legitimise behaviour and interests. Innovative methods and theoretical concepts allow us to explore new fields of research and open up fresh questions which have been overlooked by existing research. Certainly, we argue, more depth can come at the expense of less parsimony. However, the answers and insights gained with qualitative methods can also contribute to furthering models or the identification of proxies for formal modelling and quantitative research. It can help to identify core players, select indicators or even reject scenarios or specific hypotheses for their implausibility in empirical reality. The use of qualitative methods can also make it easier for practitioners and non-academic audiences to understand how the EU works as well as relate to our research questions and findings.

We use this occasion to suggest some research questions that should be explored further in future studies. First, we recommend going beyond the entrenched debate on logics of action (consequentiality vs. appropriateness) to develop new forms of studying and comparing the conditions under which embedded actors develop particular strategies and exert influence. Second, it is necessary to develop a much stronger research agenda revolving around information and knowledge as political tools. Who produces knowledge? How are political problems framed and re-framed? How do specific actors make use of information to shape and influence policy outcomes? Why are certain solutions more successful than others? Third and finally, we encourage attention towards the embeddedness of actors in space and time. How do particular decisions or activities fit into the career paths of actors? What roles are actors performing? Do they develop multiple roles and strategies and how does their behaviour vary backstage and frontstage, and why? How do actors practice their roles and functions across space? Do they use different strategies depending on the level of governance (e.g. when moving (back and forth) from the national level to the EU level)?

We hope that this Special Issue will appeal to a broad range of academics working in the field of EU studies, and particularly those interested in policy-making. The focus on agents and agency proposed coupled with more diversity in our theoretical and methodological approaches can provide a breath of fresh air to blow open the door to new questions and deeper understanding.

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