

# Developing and conducting research on the European Union: objects, methods and practices of investigation

Symposium for Young Researchers  
Saint-Louis University, Brussels  
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The objectivation of methods used while conducting a survey in the social sciences is a « necessary condition for the intelligibility of the materials collected » (Mauger, 1991). Research on the European Union (EU) is no exception. If some studies interrogate the evolution of the theoretical tools mobilized in the analysis of EU-related processes (Georgakakis, 2008, Lequesne, Smith, 1997), few have focused on the day-to-day research practices of the young researcher in social sciences. This symposium will hence explore the European part of the « social science laboratory » (Laferté, Pasquali, Renahy, 2018) in order to shed light on the conditions under which fieldworks and objects (referring to European integration) are set up. Thus, these two days will welcome young researchers (PhD candidates and young doctors), whose work deal with the the functioning of the EU, be it apprehended from Brussels or from more distant spaces. It will be an opportunity not only to engage in a collective reflection on the construction of survey protocols for EU-related researches, but also to think about the effects of the implementation of such protocols on research objects.

Multiple methods, deriving from political science, sociology or even anthropology, have been used to study the EU. But theoretical tools used to analyze European integration as well as methods of investigation have been widen in recent years (Saurugger, 2010). Is it because of the repeated calls for a « normalization » of European studies — meaning a more systematic use of traditional instruments of analysis of traditional political systems to grasp the functioning of the EU — that such a movement has been made possible? Or, on the contrary, has methodological inventiveness been stimulated by the *sui generis* dimension of European integration and both the relative autonomy and specificity of centers and peripheries of this politico-administrative space? Beyond the epistemological positions on the appropriate methods to construct a specific object, how can we deal with a fieldwork that might resist to the use of theoretical approaches (Weisbein, 2011)? This symposium will focus on « junctions between object construction and research practices » (Siméant, 2015), to improve our understanding of how, with which objectives, and for which results, we are studying the EU.

Papers should focus particularly on the methodological issues that young researchers are facing when grasping European integration. Papers detailing how the survey protocol is built and then implemented are particularly welcome. This symposium is open to all disciplines of the humanities and social sciences (sociology, political science, law, history, geography, etc.). The proposals may fall into one of the three axis presented below. However they do not constitute a binding framework and other questions related to the topic of these two days can be explored.

## **1. Where do we stand with the « normalization » of European studies?**

In the perspective of a « normalization » of European Studies (Hassenteufel, Surel, 2000; Weisbein, 2008), the use of analytical frameworks and methods from political science necessarily raises the question of their adaptation (or not) to the European Union (Zahariadis, 2013). Thus, this first axis aims to gather papers focusing on the methodological implications of such an endeavor. For instance, can European polices be apprehended as national policies? Is the *sui generis* character of the European system a sufficient argument to avoid any comparison with other national or federal systems? With regard to the implementation of European public action, papers could examine how to use the comparative method — for

example by focusing on the construction of the variables used (Engeli, Allison, 2014; King, Keohane, Verba, 1994).

We suggest three possibilities — not mutually exclusive — to tackle these issues. First, papers could examine the singularities of the configuration in which the various non-institutional actors, such as interest groups (Peterson, Bomberg, 1998; Saurugger, 2002; Radaelli, 1999; Lequesne, Rivaud, 2001; Robert, 2000), participate to the making of European public action. The development of a « Better Regulation » plan or the generalization of impact assessments has accelerated the development of a « peri-administration » of consulting, audit and evaluation firms. Is it for example comparable to the US case (Lepont, 2016)? What are the available tools to understand these actors and their action? Papers could also explore the singularity of European policies. Thus, the concept of « trans-sectoriality » (Halpern, Jacquot, 2015) of policies, particularly applied at European level (gender mainstreaming, health, environment, etc.) is today a particularly fertile ground for methodological interrogations — the notion of sector being deeply linked to public policies analysis. How does the tendency of many European policies to blur borders between social spheres and sectors have an impact on the way of conducting research on the EU? How and why working, in the same research, on actors from various administrations and organizations? Finally, the European field is particularly suitable for a renewal of conceptions of the links between law and politics. From its production to its articulation with national law, the question of the production of European norms and standards invites us to deploy new methods at the frontier of political science, sociology and law. For example, how can we effectively deal with specific forms of law at European level, such as soft law policies (Terpan, 2015), which may involve a wide variety of instruments?

## **2. Dealing *with* and learning *from* difficulties: reflexivity of young researchers working on the European integration**

This second axis will seek to appreciate trajectories of investigation and obstacles faced and to be overcome. Indeed, if the way a research is conducted has strong implications on the resulting analysis (Beaud, Weber, 2003), it seems useful to describe the set of operations conducted to delineate the field of investigation and the difficulties which the young researcher is likely to encounter.

This axis intends to explore investigation tips that have been developed in recent years. Confronted with the heterogeneity of the categorizations of national statistics, the articulation of a plurality of political systems, fragmented professional networks or facing « elites » with no time and few words for them, researchers must be resourceful. Whether recoding databases to make them comparable (Hugrée, Pénissat, Spire, 2017), using multi-situated ethnographies (Loisel, 2016) or archives material to support retrospective interviews (Dimier, 2014), breaking with consecrated chronologies (Kaiser, Schot, 2014) or studying and following actors via types of sources relatively unused (Laurens, 2015), the proposals abound to diversify researchers' toolbox. These few examples obviously do not exhaust the strategies that can be deployed when working on the EU. The papers could insist on the arbitrations, combinations and triangulation of methods used. Thus, if networks of sociability are highly developed within the « European Bubble » (Baisnée, 2007) and can sometimes facilitate the work of the investigator once he/she has entered it, this same relational density can slow down research — this being, in itself, a part of the research object. Beyond the ethnographic method and its limitations, therefore, the use of focus groups (Duchesne et al., 2010) or the questionnaires administered by the interviewer (Kassim et al., 2013) may prove to be essential assets to reveal the positions or preferences of the actors (Hooghe, Marks, Schakel, 2010), or to attest the emergence of a common culture (Faure, 2016).

Yet, the ingenuity of the researchers may not be enough: it is then necessary to question the knowledge and ignorance effects caused by resistances and black boxes in Brussels (and the

efforts to deal with them), and which theoretical framework are then paralyzed. Moreover, even when the field seems to be open to the researcher, it is necessary to analyze at what price. Papers may for instance explore two directions. First, if the University has always maintained strong links with the European institutions (Robert, Vauchez, 2010; Mudge, Vauchez, 2012), they may question the kind of knowledge that it produces, especially when researchers are potentially embedded in the studied field (Alam, Gurruchaga, O'Miel, 2012). Second, papers may question the type of « transparency » promoted by the European institutions over the past fifteen years (Robert, 2017): if the information seems available to the researcher, it is necessary to ask under what form and with what consequences.

### **3. European integration as a vector of connexions between different social spaces: what methodology for which fields?**

In this axis, papers will explore the issues, interests and possible specificities of the methods used to investigate the refractions of the community process outside the European capital. One of the consequences of the call for standardization of methodologies and approaches has consisted in multiplying the investigations on the construction of Europe as it is « far from Brussels » (Lebrou, 2015), and thus tackle the multi-scale nature of the EU. But does this normalization, by moving the focal point from Brussels microcosm towards new objects, imply a standardization of the methods applied to them? While the spaces concerned can be particularly disparate, communications will question how taking these spaces into account contributes to a better understanding of European integration. Several tracks can be explored, from the formulation of national positions (Eymeri-Douzans, 2002) to the spaces of socialization of local or national elites in charge of European issues (Eymeri-Douzans, 2010), through the modes of appropriation of European standards in space local (Mischi, 2007).

Papers could also pay attention to methods used to analyze changes in the perceptions of EU citizens. In a period of legitimacy crisis in the EU, the quantitative or qualitative study of opinions, votes and attitudes of European citizens and their effects on the « Brussels bubble » is particularly important. However, the difficulties to grasp this type of object are numerous: polarization, ambivalence, politicization, complexification (Van Inglegom, 2014; De Wilde, 2011) tend to reconfigure issues that were previously more structured. Thus, several methodological questions arise: which method, or combination of methods (mixed-method researches), are the most appropriate? Is the use of quantitative tools the only way to measure the degree of legitimization and entrenchment of the Community political order? On the other hand, what are the most adapted tools to identify and evaluate the work of « small entrepreneurs of Europe » (Aldrin, Dakowska, 2011) who work daily towards European integration, although located at a distance from the main institutions of Brussels? Do these democratic issues contribute to a redefinition of certain practices or configurations on a Brussels scale, and if so, how to precisely identify their effects?

Finally, if Brussels is the center of a European nervous system, the capital is connected to other institutions that are not located there (European Central Bank, EU Court of Justice, numerous EU agencies and authorities), as well as international organizations. These are all points to study distributed power configurations that affect the EU's « centers » and « peripheries ». The survey can therefore focus on the interactions and interlinking of these different actors (Patel, 2013), and the structural effects of a polycentric power. But what are the methods used to investigate institutions sometimes classified as in a « second circle », or as apparently disconnected from Brussels? Studies on the links between various international organizations and the EU, for example, are particularly important for methodological interrogations, in particular because of the difficulty to identify transfer mechanisms and measuring their effects. Methods from different traditions can be used and combined: policy transfer studies (Dolowitz, Marsh, 1996), learning approach (Dunlop, Radaelli, 2017) and uses

(Jacquot, Woll, 2004) among other examples.

#### Schedule :

November, 15th: deadline for submitting a proposal (500 words max.) Propositions will detail the research object and empirical material used. They will present a clear problematic, linked to one of the axis of this call.

December, 15th: selection of propositions.

May, 20th (2019): deadline for submitting papers (further instructions to come).

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