When multilateralism hits Brussels

Preliminary results on the influence of international institutions on the EU

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Introduction

The promotion of effective multilateralism is allegedly a key objective of the European Union’s foreign policy. Over the last twenty years, the relationship between the European Union (EU) and international institutions has become ‘more sustained and consistent’ (Jørgensen, 2009: 188), as it has become the related scholarly work. Scholars have studied the origin of the multilateral identity and preferences of the EU (Jørgensen, 2006a; Manners and Lucarelli, 2007; Groom, 2007) and the EU’s potential for shaping norms and rules of the multilateral system (Blavoukos and Bourantonis, 2011; Chaban et al., 2006). Others have focused on the role of the EU in specific international regimes and negotiations (Ahnlid, 2005; Kerremans and Gistelinck, 2008; Kissack, 2008; Mortensen, 2009; Würzel and Connelly, 2011).

Nevertheless, this literature has so far only addressed the bottom–up component of the interaction between international institutions and the EU. By and large, it has overlooked the possibility that international negotiations and agreements can have an influence on the EU. This is odd, particularly given the fact that both in International Relations (IR) and European integration studies, a neo-institutional revision of the second image reversed (SIR) research agenda (Gourevitch, 1978: 743) has emerged. This literature draws on Gourevitch’s work (1978) in that it focuses on the impact of international factors on domestic settings. In addition, it shares with Gourevitch the argument that this influence is strongly mediated by domestic factors (Gourevitch, 1978: 911). However, it differs from the classical approach in that it has narrowed the upper end of the top–down approach. While the more general SIR literature asks about the influence of the international structure, the international distribution of power or strong international actors upon states (Karns and Mingst, 1990), neoinstitutionalist SIR authors focus only on the impact of international institutions. Hence, a number of IR scholars study how and under what conditions international institutions influence domestic politics (Checkel, 1997; Cortell and Davis, 1996; Dai, 2007; Risse-Kappen, 1995). At the same time, some academics associated to European studies have twisted the usual focus in this field–concerned with the processes that drive integration – and wonder how the EU transforms its member states (Börzel, 2005; Sedelmeier, 2006; Radaelli, 2003).
This chapter summarises the emerging research on SIR processes that have the EU at the receiving end, i.e. the influence that international institutions have both on EU policies (including internal and external ones) and policy-making processes. More particularly, Section 2 of this chapter discusses the substantive and methodological risks inherent in any research on SIR processes. Section 3 presents three puzzling (yet preliminary) findings of this literature. In doing so, the chapter pays also attention to the consequences of these processes in terms of whether some actors (specific member states, institutions, sectoral bureaucracies, etc.) are systematically favored by the impact of international institutions. Section 4 lays out how the research has dealt with two basic questions, namely which are the mechanisms by which the influence takes place and under which conditions they are more likely to be effective. Finally, Section 5 briefly outlines an agenda for further research.

**Focusing on top–down processes**

The interaction between the EU and international institutions can comprehend both bottom–up and top–down processes. In other words, the EU can act both as a maker and a taker of international norms and policies. To be sure, the co-existence of (and probable interaction between) ascending and descending processes makes the research on the latter more demanding. International institutions and norms do not appear out of thin air, but are promoted by specific actors to serve particular interests, values or preferences, and actors can use them strategically (Kowert and Legro, 1996: 492). More to the point, EU domestic actors (or the EU itself) are on occasions responsible for taking an issue to the international level and promote the emergence of an international institution, and this needs to have some effect on the influence that this same institution has on the EU. The skeptical reader might have a couple of objections, in this regard. How puzzling is it that rules that the EU has been able to promote internationally find an easy way through the decision-making system of the EU? By focusing on the top–down process, are we not running the risk of forgetting a relevant part of the story and perhaps even taking instances of strong EU influence on international institutions as cases of precisely the opposite process?

These concerns are both about the substantive risk of irrelevance and about the methodological risk of endogeneity, and both are worth taking. From a substantive point of view, the available research suggests that the influence of international institutions can be significant. Under certain conditions (see Section 4), international institutions have been found to shape EU policies, sometimes strongly. They can also influence policy-making processes by triggering the emergence of new actors and coalitions or by differentially empowering some of them. On occasions, the reinforcement of the Commission or the facilitation of agreements among member states foster small-scale processes of EU integration. International institutions act also as a source of preferences and strategies for EU stances in international fora. Interestingly, sometimes these effects are unintended or even undesired by the states that created the international institution in the first place, which shows that top–down processes are at least on occasions independent from previous bottom–up ones. In other words, the research shows that international institutions constitute the EU, and not only the other way around.

The methodological risk, even if worth taking, needs to be dealt with, especially in the cases in which it is more acute – namely when the EU can be expected to be more successful in uploading its preferences to the international level. This is particularly the case when the international institution at hand and the EU have largely overlapping memberships. Fortunately, this problem has been encountered before. Authors who do research on Europeanisation and on SIR processes that influence states also face potential circularity problems and have also taken
pains to carefully bracket bottom-up processes. Three different but compatible strategies have been pursued, in this regard. First, authors have traced specific processes, actors, moments and ways in which influence mechanisms have been effective, i.e. they have taken causality seriously. Second, they have looked for instances in which international institutions have unintended consequences, particularly in cases of strongly coincidental memberships. Finally, some authors have identified variance in the dependent variable (the degree of influence of one single institution) along time and in different sub-issues, thus focusing on the factors that explain this variance and controlling for the influence that the EU might have had on the international institution in the first place.

**Preliminary findings and some puzzles**

The available empirical evidence is still scarce and patchy. In addition, it suggests the need to take generalisations as cautiously as possible. For reasons to be outlined in the next sections, the influence of international institutions on the EU depends on a number of variables and conditions that can or cannot hold in several different combinations. Therefore although tempting, it is risky to make much sense out of largely casuistic observations. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence on the influence of international institutions on the EU still presents three major and somewhat puzzling features.

The first thing to be said is that there is no apparent correlation between the strength of international institutions and their influence on the EU. International rules embedded in strongly legalised organisations equipped with compelling compliance mechanisms do not seem to be systematically more influential on the EU than, say, international regimes consisting of binding treaties and regular meetings of multilateral fora. In turn, the latter do not appear to be systematically more influential than non-binding norms or agreements. International norms might be influential even during its negotiation, before they have been ratified, or after they have been rejected by a particular (EU member) state. In other words, the leverage of the mechanisms influencing the EU does not seem to depend on the stringency of the constraints imposed by international institutions or the robustness and endurance of their institutional settings (Underdal, 2004: 29). The research on the governance of the internet (Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) in particular) (Christou and Simpson, 2012) and on the International Competition Network (ICN) (Delreux et al., forthcoming) shows how some of the instances of stronger influence involve international institutions that are only loosely formalised, have few (or no) substantive, binding commitments and contain no (or only toothless) compliance mechanisms. Similarly, the international institutions on climate change (Costa, 2008), anti-personnel landmines (Costa, 2010), and the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) under the International Labour Organization (ILO) (Riddervold and Sjursen, 2012) proved to be influential even at the negotiation stage, well before the relevant international treaties were adopted. In addition, and rather strikingly, the rules on hormone-treated beef, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and sugar under the World Trade Organisation (WTO) provide some of the cases of weaker (or even lack of) influence on the EU (Young, 2012). Even the influence of the UNSC on the EU counterterrorist financing rules is puzzling, given the fact that the latter is not a member of the UN and thus has no obligation, qua EU, vis-à-vis the UN (Léonard and Kaunert, 2012).

Second, neither member states nor the European Commission are always able to act as gatekeepers and control the influence of international institutions on the EU. This is puzzling, as they have the capacity to decide (according to their respective competences on the issue at hand) which international rules to endorse, and therefore which are to be complied with by the
EU. However, as said above, the influence of international institutions can take place well before the EC or member states have signed or ratified any related agreement, even during the negotiation process itself. In addition, sometimes international institutions influence the EU despite the opposition of (a relevant number of) member states. In the case of landmines, the Ottawa negotiations eased a change in the stances of no less than France, the United Kingdom and Italy, among others (Costa, 2010: 251). The influence of the norm on access to justice on environmental matters under the Aarhus Convention provides a particular twist to this argument: even an international institution with which the EU has a largely overlapping membership and a history of bottom-up influence can push the EU towards unexpected (or undesired) directions (Wetzel, 2012). The influence of the Council of Europe (CoE) on certain EU policies regarding human rights, although more nuanced, can also be read under this light (Schumacher, 2012).

Finally, the influence of international institutions on the EU does not create a clear-cut pattern of winners and losers. There is no systematic empowerment or weakening of any specific EU institution or member state by international institutions or negotiations. The SIR literature has generally argued in favor of what can be called the diffusion hypothesis. According to it, the interaction between international institutions and the EU on one hand, and states on the other, has frequently the effect of empowering all sorts of societal and sub-national actors, by allowing them to build alliances with transnational or supra-national actors. The other side of the coin is, obviously, the subsequent disempowerment of executives. In the ‘spiral model’ formulated by Risse, Ropp and Sikkink (1999), domestic groups bypass their executive and ‘directly search out international allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside’. According to this argument, domestic actors join forces with international transnational, transgovernmental or intergovernmental networks, that empower them vis-à-vis their executives by providing them with ‘access, leverage, and information (and often money)’ (Risse, Ropp and Sikkink, 1999: 18). However, the opposite argument has also been made. The literature on ‘collusive delegation’ argues that international institutions and negotiations empower national executives. According to Wolf, state sovereignty is challenged ‘by an increasingly internationalizing society and by the disjuncture between the economic geography of globalization and the territorial political geography’ (Wolf, 1999: 339). Under these circumstances, executives try to secure their autonomy, both internal and external, by entering into mutually binding agreements (Wolf, 1999: 335). In other words, according to this approach, intergovernmental cooperation ‘can strengthen the executive by establishing an additional political arena which is dominated by government representatives’ (Wolf, 1999: 336), in spite of the fact that it is traditionally associated with a loss of state autonomy. More to the point, international cooperation empowers executives by redistributing domestic power resources and ‘permitting them to loosen domestic constraints imposed by legislatures, interest groups and other societal actors’ (Moravcsik, 1994: 1). Decision-makers can thus use the ‘approval of their policies by foreign politicians or international organizations against domestic critics’, present these policies as part of an international package deal, and ‘shift onto others the political costs of unpopular policies’ (Koenig-Archibugi, 2004: 151). In sum, these authors argue that SIR processes generally favor ‘those who participate directly in international negotiations and institutions’ (Moravcsik, 1994: 1). The normative upshot of this argument is that the democratic deficit that emerges from international cooperation – or European integration – is not only ‘a by-product of the transfer of powers to supranational institutions’, but ‘one of the purposes of this transfer’ (Koenig-Archibugi, 2004: 151). Other authors have used a two-level-games language to make the same point (Goldstein, 1996: 562; Featherstone, 2003: 9).

Transferring these findings to the EU is a tricky business, as more often than not the boundaries of the EU executive are blurry. Nevertheless, on closer inspection several cases point
to the reinforcement of rather loose, trans-institutional, trans-governmental networks of bureaucrats, experts and mid-level policy-makers. This finding is rather pervasive, among the cases in which international institutions do have an influence on the EU. Such networks play a role in the influence of international climate institutions (Costa, 2008), the Ottawa Convention on anti-personnel landmines (Costa, 2010), rules regarding access to justice under the Aarhus convention (Wetzel, 2012), the Council of Europe (Schumacher, 2012) and the institutions on internet governance ICANN and IGF (Christou and Simpson, 2012). The same conclusion can be drawn from the analysis of EU agencies as links between different levels of governance (Groenleer, 2012). To be sure, the rather straightforward empowerment of the Commission by the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) shows also that there are cases in which international institutions do reinforce specific EU institutions (Riddervold and Sjursen, 2012).

These three features do not fit with what one would expect if influence was just the direct product of compliance with rules derived from or embodied in international institutions. The process that brings influence about is both potentially more meaningful and less certain concerning the actual degree of impact, and is strongly dependent on the interplay between international institutions and certain features of the EU’s governance structure.

Influence mechanisms and the EU as the target of influence

According to the SIR literature, international institutions exert their influence by improving the chances for success of policy entrepreneurs that support them. In other words, the basic mechanism is the alteration of the ‘domestic balance’ (Dai, 2005: 388), which may involve a change in the interests and preferences of domestic actors, or in their ability to influence decision-making.

Both influence mechanisms allow for different interpretations, depending on the theoretical approach adopted in the research. Thus, rational choice institutionalism takes actors’ interests as given and sees institutions as mediating between them and policy outcomes. According to this view, by way of material rewards and punishments international institutions can change the behavior and relative power of intra-EU domestic actors, thus shaping the decision-making process and eventually EU policies (Johnston, 2001: 487; Groenleer and Van Schaik, 2007: 973; Dai, 2007). Alternatively, sociological institutionalists endogenise actors’ identities and preferences and argue that they are structured by the institutional setting within which actors are socialised (Hall and Taylor, 1996: 15; Barnett and Finnemore, 2004: 7; Finnemore, 1996: 333). In this way, international institutions can ‘constitute’ the identity of the EU and thus its internal and foreign policies (more specifically international institutions can constitute the key EU-internal actors that decide upon them). International institutions also participate in the attribution of legitimacy to certain actors’ proposals, shifting the burden of proof onto other actors (Bernstein, 2002: 206). Finally, historical institutionalists focus on how ‘prior [international] institutional commitments conditions further action, limit the scope of what is possible, and cause agents to redefine their interests’ (Aspinwall and Schneider, 2000: 16; Ikenberry, 1994: 2). They ‘point to the ways that institutions structure [the broad political forces that animate politics] and in so doing, influence their outcomes’ (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992: 3). They are thus more prone to pay attention to the unintended effects of international institutions, their stickiness, and their impact in terms of power (Immergut, 1998: 28; March and Olsen, 1998: 954). Each of these approaches sheds light over different aspects of SIR processes. However, the research about the influence of international institutions on the EU has not, until now, intended to address the analytical debate between the three branches of institutionalism or assess their respective explanatory value. Given the fact that it is a ‘problem-driven, empirically oriented’ research, it has usually proceeded not from an ‘either/or’, but from a ‘both/and’ starting point (Jupille, Caporaso and Checkel, 2003: 16).
Moreover, scholars working on SIR processes have concluded that the effectiveness of these influence mechanisms depends critically on some domestic conditions, and have focused a great deal of attention on them. The institution’s impact is ‘highly variable’ and is mediated by intervening factors that ‘vary across nations and across policy sectors’ (Howlett and Ramesh, 2002: 32; Radaelli, 2003: 48). In this regard, the general literature on SIR processes has pointed to the existence of a certain paradox. On one hand, when the domestic setting is such that a good number of actors play a role in decision-making, the policies and norms derived from the international institution are more readily included in the agenda. On the other hand, sometimes they have fewer possibilities of actually having an influence when a multiplicity of actors participate in the policy-making process, as it becomes more difficult to build a winning coalition in order to change the decisions in the desired direction (Börzel and Risse, 2000: 7; Risse-Kappen, 1995: 25). Admittedly, these broadly defined domestic factors need to be specified in a context-dependent way. This is all the more important for the analysis of the influence of international institutions on the EU, given the fact that the specificity of the EU’s governance structure (Héritier, 1999) provides a sui generis set of domestic conditions. In this regard, one feature emerges as particularly relevant, namely, the character of the EU as a fragmented and open-ended political system.

The first step for an international institution to influence the EU is to gain the support of a domestic policy entrepreneur. This is no trivial step (Dai, 2007: 138; Cortell and Davis 1996: 451), but the EU provides an unusual abundance of access points to the policy-making process for interested actors (Jönsson et al., 1998: 328). It is a hothouse for networks of policy advocates (Peterson, 1995: 71; Peters, 1994: 21). Therefore, conditions are favorable for international institutions to influence the agenda. At least two factors account for this. The first is the lack of formal institutions which can adequately manage the policy dialogue and facilitate the bargaining between actors (Wallace, 1997: 19; Kohler-Koch, 2002: 4). Most notable among these absent ‘off-the-shelf’ institutions are political parties and party government (Peterson, 1995: 69; Peters, 1994: 15). In addition, the presence of denser and more diverse networks of actors is related to the specialization of the EU as a political system producing regulatory policy (Radaelli, 1999: 759), which favors those actors that can offer technocratic or scientific expertise like technocrats, advisory boards and epistemic communities (Zito, 2001: 585).

However, this is only one side of the coin. While the EU provides a multitude of access points for interested actors (Jönsson et al., 1998: 328), the EU system is a chain of institutions that act not only as access points, but also as veto points (Zito, 2001: 586). In the EU ‘vetoes are abundant and distributed widely’, thus making it ‘frequently difficult, sometimes impossible, to shift the EU in any one (especially new) policy direction’ (Peterson and Bomberg, 1999: 31). The most important consequence is that coalition building becomes more necessary and at the same time more complex (Hix, 1998: 40), which makes the adoption of policies derived from international institutions more difficult. Obviously, this situation can be expected to be more acute in the areas in which the Council decides by unanimity (Tsebelis, 2000: 466). If the EU is a setting in which policy entrepreneurs endorsing international institutions might have a hard time building coalitions to get their proposals adopted, then the question that needs to be answered is under what conditions can influence mechanisms be effective in spite of the character of the EU as a fragmented political system.

Facilitating conditions

When and how can policy entrepreneurs that endorse an international institution overcome this hurdle and build a winning coalition in the intra-EU decision-making process? There are a number of different answers to this question, and some of them are casuistic enough as to make
generalisations virtually impossible. However, there are two possibilities that are worth paying attention to and that shed light over the above-mentioned features of the influence of international institutions on the EU.

First, it seems easier to forge coalitions in what Peterson calls the ‘meso-level’ of the EU (Peterson, 1995). That is, within and among the myriad of Council working groups, comitology committees, directorates of the Commission and so on, which are generally run by specialised middle-ranking policy-makers and bureaucrats. On this level technocratic and expert rationality tends to prevail, in that decisions are approached technically even when they are of a political nature. This frames the way proposals are assessed, triggers self-restraint and shapes debates in terms of joint problem solving (Lewis, 2005: 943). Furthermore, despite belonging to different member states or EU institutions, similar functional agencies can share the desire to cut slack and push their preferred options forward, at times ‘against the wishes of other agencies in their own national administration’ (Peterson, 1995: 78). Also, the stability of the composition of these bodies facilitates processes of socialisation and learning among its members (Héritier, 1999: 156), leading to multiple embeddedness (Beyers, 2005: 910) and ‘Janus-faced’ national officials (Lewis, 1998: 483). In a more rationalist vein, it eases the appearance of the shadow of the future and certain related behaviors, like a veto economy and a consensus culture (Elgström et al., 2001: 115).

In sum, recurring interactions between national and EU administrative elites can lead to transgovernmental cooperation (Peterson, 1995: 78). Therefore, policy entrepreneurs are more likely to build winning coalitions, i.e. networks able to successfully push for the adoption of norms embodied in international institutions, at the meso-level of the EU. In turn, it is usually these same networks that can be empowered by international institutions. They both push for international institutions domestically and are empowered by them. Thus, the WPIEI/CC (Working Party on International Environmental Issues/Climate Change) was instrumental for the influence of international climate institutions on the EU (Costa, 2008), and a coalition on landmines emerged after 2001 that allowed the EU commitment with Ottawa to translate into specific policies (Costa, 2010). But at the same time, these coalitions would not have been so relevant, were it not for their empowerment by the relevant international institutions in the first place. Similar networks, although variously institutionalised, have been identified in other cases. Christou and Simpson (2012) have described in such terms the European Community Panel of Participants in Internet Organisation and Management (EC-POP). Anne Wetzel has also argued that, in the field of access to justice on environmental matters, transgovernmental and transnational networks induced and pushed a dynamic ‘that the EU and the Member States could not escape without risking internal and international credibility’ (Wetzel, 2012). Similarly, Groenleer has argued that it is ‘through the actions based on their distinct informational capacities and embedded in networks of political and especially bureaucratic support’ that some EU agencies can act as policy entrepreneurs in favor of international institutions and influence policy-making processes (Groenleer, forthcoming). Finally, Schumacher has defended the idea that the influence of the Council of Europe on the European Commission travels via social networks based on bureaucratic cultures and the similar character of the actors involved, i.e. the international staff of both institutions, as well as their long-term relations with each other (Schumacher, 2012).

Naturally, not all issues are equally suitable for such processes. Some decisions are shaped by very different actors, arenas and logics: ‘choices preoccupy the highest political levels in Europe’, like national cabinets and prime ministers, and are driven by political and legalistic rationalities (Peterson, 2001: 294). Here, the positions of states are expressed in a less filtered way and are less exposed to processes that can transform them. These issues can be expected to be less permeable to the influence of international institutions. Therefore, the more politicised an issue
becomes, the less permeable to the influence of international regimes. The lack of impact of the WTO regarding rules on hormone-treated beef, GMOs and sugar (Young, 2012), the strategies deployed by foreign policy agents when trying to assert their autonomy vis-à-vis the principals (Delreux et al., 2012), as well as the limits of the influence of certain international regimes on intellectual property rights (Costa and Meier, 2011) are cases in point.

The second condition that can facilitate the impact of international institutions on the EU is linked to its character as an open-ended, unfinished polity (Héritier, 1999: 7; Jönsson et al., 1998: 320). The fact that the EU is a political system in the making may give the organisational consequences of policies a relevant explanatory role. When looking for endorsements, policy entrepreneurs must ‘convince decision makers that a problem and a ready solution exist that fit the policy-makers’ interest’ (Zito, 2001: 587; Peters, 1994: 10). Given that the range of policies within the purview of the EU is not clearly defined, an entrepreneur ‘may be able to expand the range of issues under consideration and with it expand the scope of Community action’ (Peters, 1994: 20). Farrell and Héritier have shown how ‘substantive issues may be instrumentalized to establish informal institutional gains’, and how in their turn the latter can create a new status quo that might eventually lead to changes in formal institutions (Farrell and Héritier, 2003: 580). Therefore, the norms and policies derived from an international institution that promise an increase in policy powers for the EU can be expected to find supporters more easily among those who favor a greater degree of European integration. Similarly, new issues, i.e. issues that the EU first deals with because of international institutions or negotiations, are less likely to present well-articulated interests and preconceived views, which makes it easier for actors to redefine their position and adopt an external rule, as shown by the cases of climate change (Costa, 2008), anti-personnel landmines (Costa, 2010), internet governance (Christou and Simpson, 2012) and, a sensu contrario, hormone-treated beef, GMOs and sugar negotiations under the WTO (Young, 2012).

The same argument applies to opportunities to build the international actorness of the EU (Peterson, 2001: 303). Part of the revised research has identified a quid pro quo, in the relationship between the EU and international institutions. Christou and Simpson have showed how the influence of ICANN on the EU has been, in part, ‘a function of the attempt by the latter to establish itself and exert its preferred positions on Internet governance’ (Christou and Simpson, forthcoming). Similarly, if the EU has been forced to endorse previously rejected rules on access to justice on environmental matters, it is because of the rhetorical trap (Schimmelfennig, 2001) it got into by trying to export its acquis to Eastern European countries via UNECE (Wetzel, 2012). Groenleer has advanced a similar argument. According to this author, often EU agencies must, in order to be able to act as a partner of international institutions and realise their objectives, align with the goals and interests of such institutions (Groenleer, 2012). The EU seems to offer openness vis-à-vis the influence of international institutions in exchange for a role, particularly a leadership role, in international negotiations. In other words, the influence in international institutions seems to be, in part, a function of the attempt by the EU to establish itself as an actor before them.

**Concluding remarks**

This chapter has overviewed some of the main arguments put forward by the nascent research about the influence of international institutions on the EU. International institutions shape EU stances and trigger the expansion of its policies towards new issue areas by way of certain influence mechanisms, the effectiveness of which depends on some domestic conditions. Importantly, the character of this influence indicates that it cannot be reduced to the direct effects of complying with international institutions.
Though rarely an issue addressed explicitly, some authors seem to suggest the existence of yet another interaction between the EU and the multilateral system: on occasions the EU appears to increase the exposure of its member states to international institutions. For instance, Schreurs and Tiberghien have argued that EU climate policies are ‘the result of a dynamic process of competitive multi-level reinforcement among the different EU political poles’ (Schreurs and Tiberghien, 2007: 22). In addition, as mentioned before a certain trade-off has been identified by which the EU would offer openness vis-à-vis international institutions in exchange for its recognition as an actor. Should this pattern be found to hold more generally, it would mean that the EU is more prone to be influenced by international norms than non-EU states. Both approaches would offer an explanation of the seemingly diverging results provided by the literature reviewed in this chapter and the literature on SIR processes that have the US at the receiving end (Karns and Mingst, 1990; Foot, MacFarlane and Mastanduno, 2003). This is thus an interesting avenue for further research.

There would be two different ways to account for this. According to the first possible line of argument, the EU could act as an amplifier (and a re-interpreter) of international institutions because of its governance structure. In this vein, the EU would add extra pressure on those member states that otherwise might have not aligned their policies or international stances with specific international institutions, or not to the same extent, because of the action of supranational institutions or because of less hierarchical processes. For instance, the research suggests that if enough normative pressure can be mobilised by policy entrepreneurs, international institutions can emerge as a powerful reference for discussions between member states, or as an opportunity for the Commission to push for well-legitimised, EU-wide policies (Costa, 2008, 2010; Costa and Meier, 2011).

The second approach is of a sociological kind and argues that ‘the more problematic an actor’s identity, the more readily it should embrace the institutional forms prevailing in the script of modernity’ (Jupille and Jolliff, 2011: 16). More to the point, the problematic identity of the EU as an international actor makes it both: (a) harder for the EU to pursue the ‘first interest’ or problem of the modern actor, which is ‘not to accomplish prior goals of some sort, but to be an actor’ (Meyer, 2009: 160); and (b) more important to be recognised as such, as this recognition, ‘even ad hoc’, may be sufficient to enhance the legitimacy of the EU (Jupille and Jolliff, 2011: 9). Accordingly, the EU might be particularly willing to engage in the ‘ritual enactment of the structure and content of world political models’ (Meyer, 1987: 57), or to ‘embrace the institutional forms prevailing in the script of modernity’ (Jupille and Jolliff, 2011: 16).

Comparative, cross-national studies would be needed to test the hypotheses put forward by these two analytical approaches. Both the governance and the sociological approaches can claim experience on large-N methods. Quantitative studies could make it possible to design researches systematically comparing the influence of international institutions on major international players, including the EU. On a more qualitative note, research could focus on the opportunities and behavior of policy entrepreneurs in specific issue areas but under different domestic settings. Relevant arguments have already been put forward, in this regard. For instance, Jachtenfuchs has argued that, due to its multi-level character, the EU is particularly prone to network governance, although network governance is far from exclusive of the EU (Jachtenfuchs, 2001). Similarly, Slaughter (Slaughter, 2004) argues that the transgovernmental governance is a pervasive feature of international politics, but often highlights the EU as a hothouse for such networks.

The research has until now reserved the usual second image explanations of the EU’s commitment to multilateralism, complementing it with an account of how international institutions impact the EU. Now, it does look feasible to put the influence of international institutions on the EU on the broader perspective of SIR processes in general and assess the relative openness to this influence of the EU, as compared to other big international players.
Notes

1 There are some partial and often tangential exceptions, nevertheless. See Jørgensen, 2006b; Reiter, 2005; Varwick and Koops, 2009; Biermann, 2008.

2 Institutions are here defined as ‘persistent and connected sets of rules (formal and informal) that prescribe behavioral roles, constrain activity and shape expectations’ (Keohane, 1988: 383). Hence, an international agreement or an international regime (negotiated or otherwise) are international institutions (Martin and Simmons, 2005), while international organisations can embody international institutions, but can also be (only) a part of them.

3 Cortell and Davis classify domestic structures by means of two variables: ‘the organisation of decision-making authority’, which varies along a continuum from decentralised to centralised, and the ‘pattern of state-societal relations’, that ranges ‘from close to distant’ (Cortell and Davis, 1996: 454). Rise differentiates also between decentralised and centralised political systems, as well as between state- and society-dominated ones (Risse-Kappen, 1995). Checkel points in this same direction by distinguishing between ‘liberal, corporatist, statist and state-above-society’ domestic structures (Checkel, 1997: 477). Finally, these authors share the conclusion that given the importance of these mediating factors, neither the impact of international institutions, nor Europeanisation necessarily trigger more cooperative behaviour or convergence between states (Börzel, 1999: 574; Cortell and Davis, 1996: 452; Radaelli, 2000: 6).

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