

# LEARNING IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: THEORETICAL LENSES AND META-THEORY

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## Abstract

The European Union may well be a "learning organization", yet there is still confusion about the nature of learning, its causal structure and the normative implications. In this article we select four perspectives that address complexity, governance, the agency-structure nexus, and how learning occurs or may be blocked by institutional features. They are transactional theory, purposeful opportunism, experimental governance, and the joint decision trap. We use the four cases to investigate how history and disciplinary traditions inform theory; the core causal arguments about learning; the normative implications of the analysis; the types of learning that are theoretically predicted; the meta-theoretical aspects and the lessons for better theories of the policy process and political scientists more generally.

## INTRODUCTION

In public policy analysis, learning is often defined as a process of updating beliefs about policy based on lived or witnessed experiences, analysis or social interaction (Authors, 2013). Previous studies have categorized instrumental learning to suggest forms in which constellations of actors learn how to improve on public policy; social learning, when learning affects the whole of society, with paradigmatic changes reflected in policies as well in the socially dominant policy ideas; and political learning, when learning is essentially a by-product of competition for power and influence (May, 1992; Gilardi, 2010; Zito and Schout, 2009). However, learning as a *process* is often problematic for social scientists. Researchers have found it easier to observe the products of learning, such as exemplary policy lessons, the usage of new policy instruments, and dramatic changes in the direction of public policy. Measurement is also difficult in this field: how do we know that what we observe is learning and not something else?' (May, 1992).

In this article, we look at learning as one of the promising frameworks mentioned by the guest-editor in his introduction. Since the study of the European Union (EU) is characterized by prominent theories of integration, one could rather conventionally think that the learning framework can simply be extracted from the major theories of European

integration. However, these theories are concerned with the explanation of why Member States create, and maintain, the institutions of the EU, not with policy dynamics. Though we will encounter integration theories more than once in our journey through learning, we cannot pre-determine the essential features of the framework by starting from theories.

Previous research, and a full special issue of this journal edited by Tony Zito (Zito and Schout, 2009) alerts us on four important dimensions we should consider when theorizing learning in EU public policy. First, policy learning is intimately connected to governance. Consequently, we need to consider theoretical lenses on learning that shed light on the dimension of governance (Zito and Schout, 2009: 1115). Second, learning combines capacities and strategies at the individual level - what is often referred as the 'agency' dimension of public policy - with system-level characteristics. Capacity and strategies at the individual-organizational level are fundamental dimensions of learning (Schout 2009). But for learning to be a characteristic of public policy, we need to explore how complex organizations, and entire policy subsystems, learn and with what effects on policy. Third, previous research has often been biased because in the attempt to explain learning, researchers have neglected instances in which learning is stymied or simply does not occur (Zito and Schout, 2009: table 1 on p.1110). It follows that we also need theoretical lenses that explain blockages and hindrances to learning. Fourth, policy scholars engage with learning moving from different traditions. Zito and Schout (2009: 1111-1112) note that one can approach learning from different traditions, such as comparative public policy, diffusion studies and international relations (IR). Authors differ sharply in term of their understanding of learning as outcome or process (Zito and Schout, 2009: 1115), and whether they focus on reflexive social actors or 'bargainers'. Elaborating on this point, it seems obvious that the ontological and epistemological assumptions are not the same. In short, following Jupille (2005) we need to consider theory and meta-theory jointly.

This leads us to select perspectives that meet the four criteria, i.e., they situate learning in the context of governance, link individual agency to structure, cover the full spectrum of variation (including zero learning), and vary by ontological-epistemological foundations. In addition, we want our cases to provide explicit theoretical foundations and seem *prima facie* equipped to cope with the complexity described by Zahariadis (2013) in his introduction. To maximize variability, we select the perspectives from different time periods (to control for the effects of a given socio-political context on the development of

theory, see Wiener and Diez 2004: 13; Rosamond 2000: 10) and disciplinary traditions, in line with the editor's comments about pluralism in policy theory (Zahariadis, 2013).

These criteria do not pre-determine sample size – provided that the cases generate variation on each individual criterion, the inclusion of additional cases does not necessarily increase explanatory leverage. Thus, we selected a sample of four cases. They are the political community of Deutsch and his collaborators, Cram's purposeful opportunism, experimental governance (Sabel and Zeitlin), and the joint decision trap associated to the work of Fritz Scharpf. Of course, this sample is a drop in the ocean of articles on learning in the EU. We neglect the work of Ernst Haas (but we have Deutsch to represent connections with Haas) and the literature on experts and expertise in EU public policy (but see Montpetit 2009 in Zito's special issue). Further, Cram's paper is distinctively slighter and more idiosyncratic than the others<sup>i</sup>. Thus, ours is not a review of the field but rather an attempt to find cases that have the characteristics described by Zahariadis in his introduction, meet our criteria, and vary on the dimensions of interest here. To generate theoretical leverage, we raise the following research questions:

1. How do history and disciplinary concerns inform the emergence of the four cases?
2. What are the core causal arguments?
3. What are the normative implications of the analysis?
4. What do the cases tell us about learning as 'dependent variable'?
5. What is the role of meta-theory?
6. What are the lessons for the wider community of public policy analysts and political scientists, whether they engage with the EU or not?

We take these questions in order, and expose the core causal arguments, the normative implications (including arguments about the design of EU institutions), the dependent variable, the meta-theoretical features and the lessons for political scientists. Finally, we conclude on the pros and cons of our method and relate the contributions to the theories of European integration, and beyond.

## **HISTORY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

It is impossible to understand Deutsch's contribution without considering the context in which his analytical lenses were developed.<sup>ii</sup> For Deutsch, a Sudetan German born in Czechoslovakia who was adamantly opposed to Nazism and for this reason had to leave his country, history had presented political scientists with the major question of how to build and sustain communities that could leave in peace. The spectre of World War II and the presence of the Cold War shaped the way in which a new generation of scholars thought about their *explanans*, with the theme of peace dominating their scientific inquiry.

Instead, the Joint Decision Trap (JDT) emerged from reflections about the institutional hindrances to change that affect federal systems. Scharpf found the core features of his model in German federalism. The JDT of the EU, essentially, is a projection of some critical reflections on the sub-optimal performance of the German federal *Politikverflechtung*. The original piece (Scharpf, 1998, the original in German dates back to 1983) appeared during the period of slow pace in integration characterized by Caporaso and Keeler with the label 'the doldrums years' (Caporaso and Keeler, 1995, see also their qualifications). In this context of stymied integration, Scharpf's JDT provided a powerful explanation of why it was so difficult to reap the benefits of integration. Even when the pace of integration accelerated again, with the Single European Act (and later Economic and Monetary Union and enlargement) the JDT remained a cornerstone of explanations of decision-making. During the years, the development of veto players theory by George Tsebelis has provided yet another angle to observe some important JDT mechanisms, thus embedding Scharpf's model into broader political science models (Scharpf, 2011). Scharpf's actor-centred institutionalism is yet another more general framework to account for the JDT (Scharpf 2011: 221).

Yet again different, but always with high impact on the choice of *explanans*, is the context faced by Cram one decade later. In the 1990s the Commission looked increasingly capable of entrepreneurship and expansion of policy tasks. As a bureaucracy, the Commission became the natural object of attention of public policy scholars, well-equipped to analyse bureaucratic politics. Asymmetric policy developments also presented an opportunity for theoretical advances, exploited chiefly by Majone (1996). Redistributive and tax policies were not growing, whilst regulatory policy was on the rise – a structural feature of EU policy that is still present now. These developments were theoretically intriguing in

terms of timing too. Some policies remained dormant and effectively non-existent for long periods of time, after which they grew rapidly, even before the Treaties acknowledged them. These historical and intellectual conditions provided a window of opportunity for the take-off of the theoretical analysis of EU public policy, which, thanks to Majone's work, was re-directing its attention to the EU as 'regulatory state'.

Let us yet again move the clock one decade forward. Whilst Cram in the 1990s was concerned with the capacity of the Commission to foster task expansion and exercise entrepreneurship, Sabel and Zeitlin wrote in 2008 that “the EU is today in crisis, and will likely remain so for several years to come” (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008:272). However, underneath this prolonged state of crisis, these authors saw “the institutional equivalent of a Cambrian explosion of life forms” (p.278), that is, a formidable process of innovation affecting the whole governance framework of the EU. They called this framework ‘experimentalist governance’ or directly deliberative polyarchy. The essence of the framework is to ‘learn from difference’.

This interest in innovative modes of governance is a product of the EU history of the time. But like in the other cases we can also trace back this *explanans* by considering the evolution within specific fields of the social sciences. For reasons of limited space in a journal article, we can only refer to Sabel’s reflections on learning – leaving aside Zeitlin’s own intellectual progress. An important strand in his research is the balance between learning and monitoring (Sabel, 1994). On the one hand, complex organizations need to monitor the behaviour of their units. On the other, monitorability may destroy the conditions for learning. The latter requires innovation, the possibility to make mistakes, and explorations that, if monitored and disciplined in their early stages, may not blossom into learning but retreat into perfunctory compliance or conformism. Thus, for Sabel, organizational and social behaviour is very much a matter of tackling the trade-off between learning and monitoring.

Sabel, however, went further and showed how the trade-off between monitoring and learning can be overcome. Information - gathered in networks (Piore and Sabel, 1984) and generated by monitoring (Sabel, 2006) - can be used to improve performance, to create and sustain performance, and ultimately to feed into learning processes. Drawing on both organizational theory and socio-legal studies, Sabel was interested in explaining how

learning is produced under strategic uncertainty, when the solution to the problem is not known in advance. In these conditions, governance structures must work like radars that collect and distribute information and problem-solving (hence the importance of monitoring), because solutions cannot be found at the centre. This is reminiscent of Deutsch's observation about communication networks that see ahead ('lead'), implement their decisions quickly ('lag'), and deal with elements competing for attention in the system ('load'). In his intellectual progression, Sabel then generalized these intuitions about monitoring and learning to governance, and in two co-authored articles (Cohen and Sabel, 1997; Gerstenberg and Sabel, 2002) added democracy to the equation. He argued that in deliberative polyarchies the experience of a multiplicity of actors provides a repertoire of responses to current problems. It is this concrete experience thus generates innovation and change – not the classic representative that responds in an assembly governed by majority rule on the basis of abstract problems of which she has no direct experience. Directly deliberative forms are therefore based on learning from experience and deliberation. The network radar observed at the level of firms (Sabel, 2006) mutated into democratic governance.

### **THE CORE CAUSAL ARGUMENTS**

To illustrate the diagnostic modes of analysis, we focus on the core causal arguments in our four cases. For Deutsch, two strands of his work of interest here, concerning integration theory and learning respectively, have attracted slightly different communities of scholars. His major contribution to the problems of peace (his *explanans*, see previous section) is his 1957 co-authored book on *Political Community and the North-Atlantic Area*. Yet it is in his 1963 *The Nerves of Government* that we find a model of learning. If the former is often cited by scholars of the EU in the context of European integration theories (although the book was not concerned with the European Community)<sup>iii</sup>, it is the latter that was celebrated for having provided a new theoretical lens based on learning (Hecló, 1972).

For our purposes, however, it is useful to keep the two strands together. In *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area*, the analysis of ten historical processes leads Deutsch and his collaborators to identify the conditions for the creation of security

communities – i.e., a group of people who have become integrated, sharing an expectation that the resolution of social problems requires peaceful means and institutions. Some of these conditions revolve around identity – the sense of community that binds people together and stabilizes expectations about behaviour. These habits – Deutsch clarifies – at any point in time are taken-for-granted, but, historically, values and expectations have to be acquired by processes of social learning. The second set of conditions concern Deutsch's transactional theory, that is, the multiplicity and balance of transactions: communications, mobility of individuals, trade, on one side, and their institutional counterparts, on the other, contribute to integration in a major way.

The third set of conditions refers to the capabilities of the core institutions. These capabilities are necessary to manage what Deutsch called 'the burden', or the "traffic load of messages and signals upon the attention-giving and decision-making capabilities of the persons or organizations in controls" (Deutsch et al., 1957: 41). In turn, capabilities are the characteristics of a learning system. It is here that his cybernetic approach to politics plays a very important role. In *The Nerves of Government*, political organizations are described in terms of their learning capacity (Deutsch, 1966: chapter 10). Organizations are held together by communication. To transmit information, to react to signals, to exercise self-controlling mechanisms and manage feedback are the key functions of political systems – in this image, a political system is a type of cybernetic system, in line with the broader systemic turn in political science exemplified by David Easton. This way learning become the key to approach the *explanans*, via the notion of capabilities.

If Deutsch provides, intellectually speaking, a celebration of learning, Scharpf moves into the darker territory where learning is not possible. He does that by dint of a straightforward application of Coasian thinking about transaction costs. Sub-optimal decision-making outcomes are caused by the direct representation of Member States into the EU key decisions. Direct representation is the first condition for the JDT. Unanimity *de facto* or *de jure* makes it impossible to override the concentrated interests of individual units that object to the decision - this is the second element or condition. The third condition is that the EU works under the classic Community method where participation of the Member States is compulsory. When we consider the three conditions together, we are under a unique mode of decision-making, the JDT.

When decisions are taken in the JDT, they become very difficult to change. Over time, a situation emerges in which the EU faces high costs of action, but the Member States can no longer have the capacity to produce policy change in domains that are Europeanized. The JDT is a 'trap' only if Member States cannot pursue autonomous action - due to the legal framework of integration and the characteristics of the Community method (Scharpf 2011: 222). Consequently, Scharpf calls the JDT a compulsory negotiation system. Although the JDT was never meant to be a general impossibility theorem, and therefore individual EU policies may progress, the model predicts both sub-optimal *policy* decisions and *institutional* stalemate, or, better, "all possibilities of institutional transformation are entirely determined by the self-interests of national governments. And even among those who vigorously support activist and expansionary European policies are likely to hedge their bets when it comes to relinquishing their veto powers" (Scharpf 1988:268). To put it differently, institutional veto positions are more important than substantive policy preferences.

Over the years the JDT has inspired predictions about negative and positive integration, and product vs. process regulations. Scharpf expected the JDT to be more 'virulent' in positive integration (Scharpf, 2011: 225). It is difficult (under JDT conditions) to produce policies that govern markets (as opposed to policies that create markets). Product regulation can be used as barrier against imports and, although, in classic battle-of-the-sexes fashion, Member States disagree on how to harmonise regulations, they all agree on the necessity to harmonise them. By contrast, process regulation and direct tax coordination face tough JDT hurdles, given the diversity of national economic and institutional structures in the EU.

How does learning play a role in the JDT? We find learning only as violation or relaxation of the conditions of the basic model. At the theoretical level, if we add to the Member States the Commission as yet another strategic player (as Cram would do, see below), we find that the JDT tight conditions can be relaxed. The Commission – Scharpf (2011) has acknowledged in a recent contribution – uses its monopoly of legislative initiative and the threat of infringement procedures to alter the outcome of joint-decision negotiations. Depending on the preferences of the Commission, the overall policy trajectory towards de-regulation and negative integration can be partially reversed. This leads us to



the Commission as purposeful entrepreneur (Cram, 1003; Schmidt, 2000) and to our third case in the sample.

Cram proceeds from the observation that redistributive social policy has remained practically non-existent, whilst EU social policy of a regulatory nature has expanded, with patterns and timing that cannot be explained by the presence or absence of Treaty provisions. To address asymmetric growth of EU social policy and the timing issue, Cram draws on two major contributions to theoretical policy analysis, that is, Majone's approach to the regulatory state and Guy Peters on bureaucratic politics (Peters, 1992). The argument goes as follows: constrained by a limited budget, the Commission learns how to switch from grandiose projects about EU-wide redistribution to regulatory policy. The production of regulation is virtually costless to the regulator. Its major impact is on firms and citizens. The Commission cannot expand its budget freely, but gradually learns how to expand the domain of regulation.

The learning process is time-bound. The Commission – Cram argues – started with a head-on approach to social policy that only led to a perceived threat to the sovereignty of the Member States. Hence major attempts to social policy harmonization were curtailed by the Council (Cram, 1993: 143). Unable to intervene directly, the Commission learned how to intervene gradually, incrementally and marginally, “without alienating national governments” (Cram, 1993: 143). But learning also affects the choice of policy instruments, because the Commission, behaving as ‘purposeful opportunist’, over time has turned to regulation (rather than expenditure) as its major policy instrument.

Purposeful opportunism is the core causal mechanism of learning. The purposeful opportunist works outside the radar of the Member States by building expertise and knowledge reservoirs that can be used at the earliest possible opportunity. This policy entrepreneur creates procedures and ‘process policy’ that can be later by used as infrastructure for major policy changes. Process policy, in short, “may be important in setting up a system conducive to further regulation” (Cram, 1993:144). Soft law plays the same function: it is essentially a way to build pre-requisites for hard law without raising the concerns of the Member States. The conclusion is that the Commission expands its power: “[M]aking use of the bureaucratic skills, building upon EC declarations, instituting social programmes, setting up observatories and carrying out research projects, the Commission is

continually preparing for the next opportunity to create new policies” (Cram, 1993: 144). What is distinctive about this approach to learning, then? This causal argument explains both inertia and policy change. For long periods of time nothing seems to happen. But, when nothing seems visible on the major radar of integration theory, the Commission orchestrates a layer of procedures, soft law, technical expertise that can be deployed if and when the opportunity arises.

This theme of innovation becomes even more prominent in experimentalist governance. Here the core causal propositions are extended from the analysis of monitoring and learning, adding the governance dimension of polyarchy. Essentially, the direct deliberative polyarchy framework is calibrated onto the EU. The latter is polyarchic because of its “multipolar (...) distribution of power, in which no single actor has the capacity to impose her own preferred solution without taking into account the views of the others” (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008: 280). This is one of the two possibility conditions for experimentalist governance. As mentioned, the other is strategic uncertainty. This type of uncertainty makes it impossible to calculate pay-offs of alternative courses of action, or, as they put it, “policy makers recognise that they cannot rely on their strategic dispositions (e.g., more market vs. more plan) to guide action in a particular domain (or equivalently that they do not know *how* to achieve their declared goals)” (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008: 280; original emphasis).

Experimentalist governance - the causal argument goes on - emerges from three different routes: that is, the networks of regulators in telecommunications and energy, the networked agencies dealing with drugs and occupational health and safety, and the so-called open method of coordination at work in several domains of EU public policy. This new architecture does not emanate from the Treaties. It is functional rather than institutional – or structural. The key functions, in fact, can be performed by different institutional arrangements. It is informal but subject to permanent institutional revision and waves of proceduralisation that give the false impression of ‘informality’.

The essence of experimentalist governance is to connect different actors in multi-level networks that monitor, diffuse information on policy performance, and generate feedback. Instruments like annual reporting and peer review on how framework goals and indicators are achieved by Member States create the necessary informational conditions for

monitorability. Socialization in multi-level networks creates opportunities for exchanging and adapting local solutions, found in one place, to another place. Thus, “deliberative polyarchy is a machine for learning from diversity, thereby transforming an obstacle to closer integration into an asset for achieving it” (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008: 276).

## **DESIGN AND NORMATIVE IMPLICATIONS**

The four core causal arguments have also prescriptive implications. First, they suggest how a learning system should be designed. Second, they provide an appraisal of EU in terms of political theory standards.

Let us start with design issues. Deutsch explains that “the ability of any political decision system to invent and carry out fundamentally new policies to meet new conditions is clearly related to its ability to combine items of information into new patterns, so as to find new solutions that may be improbable in terms of their likelihood of being discovered, but relevant once they are discovered and applied” (Deutsch: 1966: 163).<sup>iv</sup> Learning itself is nothing but a special ‘capacity’. Deutsch talks of the ‘learning capacity of systems’, based on the presence of resources that are “available for unexpected recommitment” (Deutsch 1966: 164), that is, resources that can be re-deployed by the system when the environment signals new challenges or opportunities. How to design a political system (for the EU) like this, and whether the EU we know is this type of learning system are two important questions.

For Deutsch the EU should be designed with in-built feedback, which goes beyond the capacity to respond to the environment - a design principle that exposes today’s limitations of designing coordination in the Eurozone exclusively as responses to the financial markets. Action must be produced in response to information. But the information input “includes the results of its own action in the new information by which it modifies its subsequent behaviour” (Deutsch 1966: 88). Learning capacity is more advanced than the classic (“mechanistic” for Deutsch 1966: 185) concept of equilibrium. In fact, a learning system is in principle equipped to pursue changing goals. Deutsch (1966: 187) comments that feedback is suitable for catching up with a trajectory like the one of a zigzagging rabbit. The EU we know today is not a learning system of this type.

Turning to normative appraisal, learning does not have to be necessarily 'benevolent'. On the one hand, learning can become deuterio-learning: the organization "learns to learn" (Deutsch 1966: 169, citing Gregory Bateson's concept). On the other, Deutsch acknowledges the possibility of self-destructing learning, which means that the organization "learned something that has reduced its subsequent capacity to learn, or its subsequent capacity to control its own behaviour" (Deutsch 1966: 169).

A JDT designer would instead pay attention to institutional changes that can alter the three conditions that - according to Scharpf - hinder learning and policy change. But others have criticized the JDT for not having considered changes that can take place even under unchanging institutional settings. Outside the radar of veto players, experts groups use subterfuge to avoid the JDT (Heritier, 1997). Another criticism of JDT is that socialization in bureaucratic settings creates pre-conditions for learning, and ways to reduce veto players considerations in what has been labelled 'an emergent European executive order' (Trondal, 2010). A deep crisis or a major threat is often a condition for switching from 'bargaining' to 'problem-solving attitudes' – in which case the JDT dissolves (Falkner 2011:4). The European Court of Justice - critics of the JDT have observed - has produced exits from the JDT. However, the European Court of Justice does not control their judicial agenda, and, unlike the Commission, cannot set a trajectory (e.g. towards positive integration; Scharpf, 2011). Interestingly, the normative appraisal remains negative, whether we accept the original JDT or are open to the critiques. Courts do not necessarily improve on the legitimacy of the EU. Subterfuge may be even worse than the original JDT, where at least the responsibility for the lack of change is clear.

Equally negative are the normative implications of our third case. Purposeful opportunism has strong similarities with 'integration by stealth' (Majone, 2005). In a recent article, interestingly based on her interview data and material that date back to the early 1990s, Cram takes the position that the normative justification for the opportunistic behaviour of the Commission is poor. Generalising from social policy to 'new modes of governance', Cram argues that these modes "are no less 'stealthy' and no more democratic than the traditional attempts of the Commission to expand its competence and capacity to govern. Indeed, new modes of governance, now increasingly widespread, may act as a fig-leaf for undemocratic practices" (Cram, 2011: 649).

By contrast, some policy instruments of experimentalist governance open up pathways to a more accountable EU. To illustrate, peer review and procedural requirements to report policy performance in public expose national public administrations to contestation in an information-rich environment, and promote a form of political competition rooted in the quality of arguments rather interests. This leads to a relatively optimistic normative assessment. Sabel and Zeitlin deny vigorously that theirs is a technocratic model. Quite the opposite; the accountability properties of EU experimentalist processes have democratising effects on domestic politics, and, via feedback, enhanced domestic accountability may reverberate on the EU itself (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008: 277). The design implications are clear: we should spend less time in thinking about institutional reforms at the Treaty level (the core causal argument is functional, see above) and support with adequate resources the networks that provide monitoring and learning in the EU.

#### **THE DEPENDENT VARIABLE: LEARNING TYPES AND PROCESSES**

We are now ready to consider the question about the type of learning found in our four cases. Recall that May (1992) differentiates between instrumental (that is, oriented primarily to policy improvement), social and political learning. Scharpf identifies areas where instrumental learning is technically possible and desirable, but institutional settings hinder it. In different ways, Sabel and Zeitlin and Deutsch engage with social learning. Their perspective is broad, beyond the individual policy subsystem, arguably because in the end they are concerned with the dimension of governance. Additionally, Sabel and Zeitlin put more emphasis on policy-subsystems where they account for instrumental learning. By contrast, Cram is clearly interested in how bureaucratic actors learn how to pursue their strategies. The Commission does not have electoral objectives (so this is not exactly the same as Gilardi's political learning, Gilardi 2010). But Cram's type is still political because it is aimed at increasing integration at the expense of policy coherence and democratic accountability – arguably, integration by stealth (Majone, 2005). Learning is not instrumental in the sense of improving on public policy. It is a process functional to strategy. Turning to Scharpf, he is concerned with explaining lack of learning, so he falls in Zito and Schout's category of 'blocked learning' rather than 'social', 'political' or 'instrumental'.

Having looked at learning as outcome, what about the process? Deutsch conceptualises political systems as 'networks of communication channels' where information from both inside and outside that system, past and present, steers society. Learning processes are indeed evolutionary – emerging through 'feedback' processes, where political systems respond and adjust to the flow of information. . In Scharpf's analysis, when learning does occur it is in spite of the joint decision trap. It is the result of autonomy that actors have won for themselves against the structural odds (see AUTHORS, 2013 for further comments). Briefly, for Scharpf there is learning in the shadow of hierarchy, i.e., within a rule-bound, institutionally rich environment where agency is still possible (in line with his actor-centered premises). The purposeful opportunist story is one of strategic learning – the Commission wants to expand its power without increasing its costs. For Sabel and Zeitlin, the key to innovation is a deliberative process - and consequently learning through reflexivity

## **META-THEORY**

In exploring the meta-theoretical and methodological assumptions, we are "clearing the underbrush" (Bevir, 2008) from this literature. We take inspiration from Jupille's (2005) analysis of the EU studies literature, adapting some his dimensions to the nature of this article. To begin with, we already found that the *explanans* in the four cases has emerged within certain historical conditions and *different disciplinary traditions*. These "... provide different sets of received wisdoms" (Jupille, 2005: 211). Our four ways of theorizing learning arise from different disciplines: international relations (Deutsch), theoretical policy analysis (Cram), socio-legal studies and organizational theory (Sabel and Zeitlin), and political science / comparative politics (Scharpf).

Our second cut at meta-theory concerns Jupille's 'social theoretic' category (Jupille, 2005: 211). Wendt puts Deutsch squarely in the camp of the precursors of constructivism. Adler (2002:99) reminds us that "Deutsch himself was not a constructivist – constructivism had yet to make its way from sociology to political science – and favoured a positivist epistemology", although he had "an indelible influence on later development in constructivism". Sabel and Zeitlin fit the Deweyan tradition of pragmatism, which rejects the absolute assumptions of rational choice and constructivism in terms of logic of action. For

pragmatists, there is an on-going redefinition of ends and means generated by reflective actors engaged in practical experience.<sup>v</sup> Scharpf's JDT is inspired by rational choice institutionalism. Sub-optimal decisions are the default outcomes in complex federal systems where self-interested behaviour by actors – Member States in this case – unanimity and compulsory participation combine to create decisions that are difficult to reform or revisit. Arguably for purposeful opportunism the correct label is strategic constructivism (Jabko, 2006): the Commission pursues a certain set of goals, albeit it cannot calculate the future, it can only gamble on the future. Under these conditions, the Commission orchestrates a strategy of integration (i.e. reliance on regulation, preparation of repositories of expertise when time is not ripe for action, and purposeful opportunism) that is socially constructed.

The next dimension – *ontology* – is whether social phenomena exist independent of our conceptualisation of them or are constructions which result from actors acting on their beliefs. The contrast is between 'objective' reality and social or 'subjective' ontology. An objective ontology is found only in Scharpf, where the barrier to learning – the JDT – is an objective institutional reality that exists independent of political actors' knowledge of it. The work of Deutsch, Cram and Sabel/Zeitlin is all underscored by subjective ontology. Here actors are socially constituted by their interaction within and experience of their context. As for *epistemology*, following Searle (1995), we distinguish between a social and an objective epistemology. In contemporary objective epistemology, scientists are aware of the value-laden nature of observation and that social actors respond to different types of stimuli introduced by researchers in the social environment. Yet they think that with research design techniques one can reduce bias and make valid inferences drawn from empirical observations. This is because in an objective epistemological tradition there is still some distance between observer and the social phenomena that are observed. A value judgement like "Mountain A is prettier than Mountain B", is, following Searle, epistemically subjective. But "Mountain A is higher than Mountain B" is objective – and so are many statements in the social sciences, like "[T]his year total amount of money borrowed by the government is higher than last year". For Scharpf an objective epistemology is aligned with an objective ontology. The other authors start from a different, social ontology, but their empirical work does not clash with an objective epistemology. As demonstrated by Searle (1995), it is possible to combine an objective epistemology with a social ontology – note Adler's

previous remark that Deutsch was a precursor of constructivist ontology but anchored to positivist epistemology.

We have already mentioned the role of *structure and agency*. Let us make a few more remarks on this dimension. Both Deutsch and Scharpf underline the importance of structures in enabling and constraining learning opportunities. For Deutsch, the political system was a network of communication channels whose default position was to enable feedback from which learning flowed. Failure to learn was a failure of government to steer information flows and relate knowledge and forecasts back to decision-making. Scharpf too has a structuralist approach. No learning is the default position of decision-making complex federal systems. Where learning does occur it will be as the result of an opportunity or a hitherto unknown structural hole which agents carve out or exploit. This theme of the ability of agents to create political opportunities that structures do not appear to allow is emphasized by Cram. Sabel and Zeitlin similarly give the agent a prominent role in analysis. Learning is the result of actors exchanging information in a dense network governed by certain rules.

Complexity (defined by Zahariadis, 2013) has both an institutional and an issue dimension. Zahariadis rightly observes that theoretical lenses do not have the same explanatory power in addressing the two dimensions. In terms of our four major contributions, the JDT moves from institutional complexity, but it also has leverage at the issue level, considering the causal arguments about the differential development of negative and positive integration. At the opposite, Deutsch and his collaborators were majorly concerned with institutional analysis rather than individual policy issues. In between the extremes we found purposeful opportunism, a lens or approach that tackles issue complexity directly, and institutional complexity indirectly, and experimentalism. Sabel and Zeitlin do not separate out the institutional and the policy level. They rather provide causal arguments about the rise of a mode of governance where institutions and issue complexity interact, and then they explain why certain issues are more suitable for experimentalism than others.

## **LESSONS DRAWN**



Since theories of integration are not there to explain learning, but to make sense of integration, we started somewhat un-conventionally from four approaches grounded in cybernetics, theoretical policy analysis, network-based reflexivity and deliberation, and rational choice institutionalism.

The lessons for better theories of the EU policy process are the following. To begin with, analytically eclectic researchers could use the core causal propositions for different purposes. Transactional theory and the JDT are particularly useful for research projects aiming at the polity level. For example, a project on how the EU has responded, in terms of governance structures, to financial instability should consider the causal role of capabilities on the type of learning produced by the EU. A JDT perspective would add the analysis of the institutional blockages that explain decisions and non-decisions of the EU leaders. Instead, experimentalism and purposeful opportunism direct researchers towards core causal mechanisms that take place at the policy level – although in the long term they have polity implications. Major governance innovations do not necessarily take place at the level of Treaties and formal constitutional politics. Policy sectors incubate change that is not immediately visible because it is subject to permanent institutional revision. Procedures create reservoirs of knowledge that can be exploited by purposeful opportunism. Today, perhaps purposeful opportunism is less a characteristic of the Commission: it points us towards the behaviour of the European Central Bank instead. Purposeful opportunism also suggest analytical connections with the multiple stream model (Kingdon, 1984) to pin down learning as process and its relationship with policy change as outcome. However, purposeful opportunism can also be integrated in historical institutionalism, given the emphasis on time, and more precisely on the long-term effects of day-by-day, incremental, ‘marginal’ and seemingly irrelevant procedures (Pierson, 1996).

One could also turn purposeful opportunism on its head, and argue that if the Commission learns, why shouldn't the Member States take note of what is going on and react? This invites an analysis of the information asymmetries and other post-delegation problems well-known to scholars of regulation (Pollack, 2007). Another option is to turn the JDT on its head and explore exits (Falkner, 2011). But subterfuges, the intervention of the Courts, the use of threat by the Commission, and other exits are not normatively desirable. They may reduce legitimacy and aggravate the democratic deficit of the EU. This may generate instrumental and political learning, but fail in terms of social learning.

To explore social learning, we need to turn to Deutsch and experimentalism. For policy theorists, Deutsch has the great merit of having moved our understanding of social learning from equilibrium to adaptation to changing goals. For him, a learning system effectively responds to changing goals, rather than simply creating the conditions for equilibrium among its constitutive units. This is a perceptive comment during this critical phase of EU integration, given that the EU policy change is very much a journey, perhaps, to paraphrase Deutsch, a 'zigzagging journey', rather than a destination.

Reflecting on the current state of the EU at a major crossroad, a deep crisis can offer exits from the JDT. But Deutsch alerts us to the possibility of dysfunctional learning. In terms of better theories, the presence of a crisis invites us to reflect on the relationship between learning processes and change. Although we normally assume that actors first learn (process of preference modification) and then change (outcome), behavioural and experimental economics suggests that actors can re-shape their preferences due to situational and cognitive constraints. When the very existence of integration and domestic state structures is questioned by an extremely challenging context (a sort of 'change or die' situation), decision-makers may choose whatever non-incremental change enables them to survive, even if their core preferences would tell them to go for more limited change. They might well learn ex-post, as a consequence of change. If this is true, we may need less entrepreneurship and 'visionary leaders' than is commonly thought.

Experimentalism offers the conditions under which non-incremental change may emerge, and also find its own way of delivering on accountability and social legitimacy. The model of experimental governance, however, does not envisage social learning as major discontinuity taken via some sort of history-making decision. It is definitively more evolutionary - historical decisions may then congeal the progress made in evolutionary way.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

To conclude, we answer the question about the theoretical leverage of these theories beyond EU studies. One limitation of the four cases is that taken together they look like a patchwork: neither are they alternative and mutually exclusive, nor do they complement nicely. The four cases come from different assumptions and disciplines. We also acknowledge that we are comparing major book-length comparative projects and articles that arose out of empirical puzzles. Another limitation is the lack of specific tools for

measuring learning: although there are causal arguments about the presence or absence of learning, there is much less on key empirical tests, measurement, scales and so on.

While we cannot integrate the four approaches in one single testable theory of learning valid across political systems, the four approaches are extremely well-suited to travel well outside the EU in terms of suggesting core causal arguments and standards of normative appraisal. Deutsch elaborated his conjectures in a fully comparative framework. Features of purposeful opportunism exist in various bureaucratic systems, not just in the European Commission. Democratic-deliberative governance is a property of policy systems that appeared in the US before they entered the EU. And, the JDT is a model of blocked decision-making that is not restricted to the EU. But this is exactly the nature of these theories: they travel well because they were not generated with an EU-imagery or EU-vocabulary in mind. Their authors did not think they had to explain a special case but rather solve more general political science, decision-making and governance puzzles. In this connection, these learning theories contribute to making the field of EU studies less *ad hoc* and more embedded with mainstream social science.

Future research could use the findings of this article to explore EU learning by connecting theory and meta-theory – thus contributing to a richer understanding of this phenomenon. We have also barely mentioned how to turn learning theories into design issues, a topic question given the current crisis of the Eurozone. Another lesson for future research is to focus on constraints and limitations of learning, as well as on cases where learning occurs, because this can provide a lot of information of how institutions structure, facilitate or hinder learning. Finally, learning is not a monolith. When researchers move from concepts to measurement, it is important to qualify our dependent variable as social-evolutionary, political-strategic, reflexive-experimentalist learning, or learning as escape route from traps and shadow of hierarchy.

## Acknowledgements

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<sup>i</sup> We are grateful to a reviewer for this observation.

<sup>ii</sup> The reference to lenses is appropriate considering that Deutsch studied optics in England for two years.

<sup>iii</sup> Interestingly, although Sandholtz and Stone-Sweet celebrated Deutsch for his intuitions about the causal effects of transactions, social exchange and communication on integration, they cite his work on security communities but not *The Nerves of Government* (Deutsch, 1966) (Stone-Sweet and Sandholtz, 1998). The work by Sandholtz and Stone-Sweet was in any case instrumental in re-discovering the importance of Deutsch for integration theorists.

<sup>iv</sup> Citations are from the first paperback edition of 1966 but the original hardback dates to 1963.

<sup>v</sup> We are grateful to a reviewer for this insight.