European Studies Today: Actors, Practices and Representations
23 & 24 November 2023 in Strasbourg

Held for the 10th anniversary of the SAGE laboratory (University of Strasbourg), this two-day conference aims to highlight the approach, concepts, and contributions of political and historical sociology in the study of actors in the European Union (EU). The conference aims to shed light on the critical perspective in EU studies and facilitate the gathering of researchers who share scientific interests in order to promote new research programs. The conference will include both retrospective and programmatic elements.

Over the past two decades, a significant body of literature in social science has emerged on the European Union. The establishment of the SAGE laboratory coincided with the development of a new scientific approach that draws from critical sociology while not being limited to it entirely. This call for papers seeks to reflect this approach and is organized around three main sessions to highlight the vitality of recent and ongoing research. The conference will begin with a round-table discussion to establish the theoretical framework for further discussions.

Round-table: Reflexive discussion on the use of central concepts (bureaucratic field, field of Eurocracy and related capital) and their evolution.

This round-table is intended as a forum for discussion on the theoretical framework mobilized by researchers to map out and analyse the dynamics of the spaces of power in the EU. Researchers will be able to retrace their own uses of these concepts (e.g. field of power, weak field (champ faible), European political work, etc.), but also their limitations and the 'missed opportunities' in the sociology of European actors. The reflexive work of this round table should also feed into the panels and themes below.

Session 1/ Present and future of a political and historical sociology for the analysis of the EU and its actors. Concepts (field, capital, socialisation, etc.) and methods (archives, prosopography, interviews, questionnaires, observations, and new perspectives)

The aim of this first session is to collectively outline new research perspectives for the future of the political and historical sociology of the European Union. In line with the research programme initiated by the Groupe de Sociologie Politique Européenne (GSPE), it will aim at presenting research partaking in this particular sociological approach. Several matters will be addressed here.

On the one hand, we would like to replace the specificity of this theoretical approach in its context, i.e. adopting a relational approach to this scientific output. What were its initial scientific premises? What blind spots in the social science literature on the European Union was it addressing? What circulations
have taken place between a Bourdieusian political science approach and works based on a political and historical sociology of the EU – in France and beyond? Among the approaches claiming to be rooted in political sociology, what contributions can be attributed to the sociology of the EU actors? The analytical framework developed in Strasbourg, focused on the actors and aiming at defining European spaces (of power, bureaucracy, etc.) has been decisive in opening up a sociological analysis of groups of dominant agents – EU Commissioners in particular. How has the sociology of actors been received, particularly by the dominant schools of European public policy analysis? How have criticisms, in turn, helped the sociological analysis of European elites to evolve?

On the other hand, the findings of studies based on this theoretical framework have called into question European institutional narratives and frames. Due to the multipositionality of their authors, the dominant scientific works on the EU very often use categories of bureaucratic common sense (sens commun) that do not work well as analytical frameworks. The research that has mapped groups of actors, the types and volume of their capitals, thus determining their capacity of action in the emerging European area, has revealed loopholes in these dominant scientific discourses. These works now provide us with a much more detailed understanding of the EU, which in turn informs current research. How do these contemporary researches appropriate, update, transform and complement these analytical tools, and, in return, what analyses and results do these tools help to produce today?

Finally, as opposed to the dominant history of the EU and its construction, still too often told in a teleologically way, the sociohistorical works on the EU have shed light on the processual, conjunctural and relational character of its history. Explaining European ideas and narratives in light of the social configurations that have allowed them to emerge and have shaped them has proved itself to be a heuristic approach. It has offered space to explore the resistance, the dissonant histories, the failed attempts, both individual and collective, which have shaped Europe as much as its Treaties, Conventions or symbols.

Thanks to this, we can now analyse the ways in which one of the European projects has become the European project, prevailing over other alternative political conceptions. We can also now consider the diversity of the social and political uses of this dominant narrative on Europe. The sociohistorical approach is particularly well-suited to reflecting on the processes of autonomisation of a European field (political, bureaucratic, etc.), based on studies that retrace its genesis and describe its structuring logics. Studies that have focused on the social and political dimensions of Europe’s instruments, categories and forms of knowledge have shown the extent to which this approach opens up original research perspectives that need to be pursued further. Papers reflecting on archives (institutional or private) and on the various instruments of knowledge (intruments de connaissance) about Europe (maps, statistics, etc.), their development, the conflicts surrounding their implementation and their effects are welcome.

The papers presented in this session will diverge from ahistorical and asocial concepts applied to Europe (spillover effect, etc.) by putting the social dimensions of actors’ practices and representations front and center. In particular, a focus on the actors’ practices, representations, trajectories and circulations should help to reveal the central dimensions of this European political space. We will therefore pay particular attention to proposals based on qualitative materials, especially those that use prosopography, ethnographic fieldwork, statistical analysis of qualitative data or biographical interviews.

Session 2/ From European professions to the European Union at work. Sociology of European workers for a mapping of power spaces.

Since its first steps, the political and historical sociology of European actors has paid significant attention to the question of European professions and has made major contributions to the understanding of
professional groups working in (civil servants, etc.) but also with the European Union (interest representatives, journalists, experts). The aim of the second session is to build on this work. Where early research has tended to focus on the most visible and dominant groups, we suggest applying the same questions to less visible EU professionals. In this sense, this session will focus on the analysis of the European Union at work and is two-folded.

First, the results of studies focused on staff working closely with the most dominant professionals (MEPs’ assistants, cabinet and executive entourages, etc.) have shown the heuristic value of the analysis of these groups of workers for a refined and detailed understanding of political activities as a whole. Relations of power and of competition, but also cooperation between professional groups, have strong effects that need to be reflected in a relational analysis of political work (technical work, parliamentary work, bureaucratic work, etc.). It is therefore important to carry on with this analysis in order to consider all the actors involved in the different segments of the divided European political labour. Returning to the basics of an interactionist sociology of work, the aim here is to mobilise tools that may apply to both the ‘pretentious professions’ and the ‘modest trades’ (Hughes, 1971), as well as to the various professional groups that participate on a permanent or intermittent basis in European political work in Brussels, Luxembourg or other places. In Brussels, as elsewhere, the work of collaboration, of assistance, etc. is often invisible yet central for a detailed understanding of the work of the EU, of its actors and, more generally, of the field of Eurocracy.

Secondly, analysing the European bureaucratic field as a professional space should enable us to analyse the circulation of actors, their practices and their representations. From a relational perspective, the study of the division of labour within the European bureaucratic field (between institutions and interest groups, for example), but also between the field of Eurocracy and ‘adventitious fields’ (Offerlé, 2004) (academic, expert, activist, etc.) is heuristic. This approach is also suited to highlighting organizational issues and transformations (managerialisation, privatisation, etc.) in professional practices, and more generally the institutionalisation of these political spaces and their professionals. Paying attention to work practices and how they are changing makes it possible both to grasp the socialisations at work and, in turn, to question the socialising effects of the professional careers of those who work in, for, with or against the EU. Hence, papers that mobilise and question the notion of biographical trajectory are welcome. This notion is central to the understanding of the European bureaucratic field and its transformations, and illuminates professional socialisation and the circulation of practices and representations it involves. It also gives concrete illustrations of concepts such as professionalisation, managerialisation, etc., and allows us to jointly consider the socialising effects of the sub-spaces of the field on the players and the effects of changes in the sociographic recruitment of European professionals on the institutions.

This also raises fundamental methodological questions: since archives only record the detailed biographies of the dominant actors (commissioners, presidents, MEPs, etc.) and the accessibility of biographical data decreases as one goes further down the professional ladder, what research methods should be used to retrace the trajectories and the careers of all the actors who do not have an entry in the Who’s Who?

These questions are not, however, exhaustive, and papers presenting investigations of professional groups that have been little or not yet explored, adopting a sociological and relational approach, will therefore be welcome here. This session will also welcome researches on groups of actors that may be more or less remote from institutions, but are involved in the European public policy making.

Session 3/ Investigating public policy in Europe and European public policy
This third session focuses on the contribution of political sociology to the analysis of public policy in Europe. Public policy has been at the heart of the many and theoretically diverse scientific endeavours that have resulted in a wide range of concepts and notions often constructed specifically for their objects (Europeanisation, multi-level governance, crisology, neo-institutionalist model, etc.). While this has yielded an abundant literature, it has also turned the EU into a special case, in the process making public policy comparison more challenging. Also, in the absence of a collective dynamic, research aimed at applying an analytical framework based on the sociology of public policy to the EU actors has remained scarce and sector-specific. We wish to help fill this gap in two ways here.

First, this session will aim at testing public policy analysis by drawing the concepts of political sociology, especially ‘field’. The challenge here is to link the analysis of public policy to the analysis of configurations of actors and capitals. This will help us move beyond certain explanations often used in public policy analysis (opposing institutional and/or professional affiliations, partisan oppositions or even national cultures, windows of opportunity, the interplay of divergent state interests, etc.). Building explanatory models that enable analysis of the social dynamics and power relations that structure groups of players will give us a sharper analytical framework. The papers of this session should account for the diversity of spaces and actors involved in the making of public policies and demonstrate the possible circulations of ideas and practices in these political processes. How can we characterise the role and oppositions between permanent and temporary staff, as well as between the EU institutions and private interest groups? What circulations can be identified between different fields (academic, economic, etc.) and different spaces (local, national, international), with what effects? Lastly, what does an analysis of European public policy actors emphasising their power relations tell us about the EU?

Second, in its effort to apply a common framework to the analysis of European public policies, this session will place the EU in a broader institutional and political space, adopting a comparative perspective. Papers focused in particular on the diversity of uses of the European project to support, defend or oppose public policies (whether in a local, national or international context) will be given special attention, as will those that see the EU as one of a number of interlocked political spaces. Using or opposing the dominant European project can therefore be analysed in the light of exogenous variables and of the social characteristics of individuals, when it comes to policies made 'away from Brussels' or within the institutions. Also, since researches are too often centred on Western Europe, papers adopting a decentralised perspective will be appreciated. Particular attention will be paid to comparative approaches, as well as to the analysis of 'Europe at the local level', and to researches analysing the place of the EU and its actors in international spaces.

In short, this third session aims to give a concrete expression to the political and historical sociology approach by applying it to public policy in Europe and European public policy. Proposals may, for example, use the analysis of one or more public policies as a case study, discussing the political and social oppositions between their competing stakeholders. From the identification of a public 'problem' to the framing of its political 'solution', via the setting of the issue on the political and mediatic agenda, in what ways are public policies not the result of 'necessary public action'? How can we determine the capacity of groups of individuals to act in a given situation? What resources (political, social, institutional, legal, discursive, etc.) are mobilised? Finally, what do these analyses say about the state of power relations in the European space, within the institutional triangle, far from Brussels, or at the 'margins' of Europe?

Concluding session: summary and perspectives
As the aim of this conference is to help open up research perspectives for the future, the concluding session will be dedicated to collectively raising a number of questions based on the discussions that will have taken place in the panels. These include, for example:

- What kind of future research agenda on the EU do we want?
- With which projects, which theoretical frameworks and which methodological questions do we want to contribute to the existence of a distinctive approach to European research topics?
- What conclusions can we draw from the major prosopographical operations (European elite database, etc.)? What future research horizons have they opened up?
- What conversations and common programmes can EU studies pursue? What role should interdisciplinarity play?

**Submission procedures**

Proposals for papers should be sent by email to Marie Acabo (marie.acabo@unistra.fr) and Maxime Behar (mbehar@unistra.fr) by 21 August 2023.

This is a multidisciplinary conference (political science, sociology, history, law, economy, etc.) and papers may be submitted in French or English.

In order to contribute to the reflections of the concluding session, we kindly ask you to indicate how your paper contributes to the topic of this session, so that the committee will be able to organise discussion effectively.

In order to facilitate anonymisation, please indicate your surname, first name, institutional affiliation and contacts, as well as the title of the paper and the session number on a separate first page. The rest of the document will include the title of the paper, the session for which it is submitted and the paper proposal (max. 1000 words) which will present the empirical material and methods used.

This event is financed by the SAGE laboratory and the ITI MAKErS project.