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The Government and Politics of the European Union

Fourth Edition

Neill Nugent

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Conceptualising and Theorising

Conceptualising the European Union

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The previous chapters of this book have been concerned with identifying and analysing the principal features of the evolution and nature of European integration and the European Union. This chapter has much the same focus, but takes a different approach. It does so by moving away from logging and analysing 'the facts' to examining the insights that are provided by conceptual and theoretical perspectives.

Conceptualising, which essentially means thinking about phenomena in abstract terms, and theorising, which means positing general explanations of phenomena, have constituted the base of much academic writing on European integration. There are, it should be said, some who question the value of much of this conceptualising and theorising, with doubts and reservations usually focusing on what are seen to be poor, and potentially misleading, 'matches' between over-simplistic models on the one hand and complex realities on the other. This is, however, a minority view and most EU academic commentators take the general social science position that the development and use of concepts and theories enhances the understanding of political, economic, and social phenomena.

There are three broad types of conceptual and theoretical work on European integration and the EU.

- There are attempts to conceptualise the organisational nature of the EU. Such conceptualisations, which can be thought of as attempts to determine 'the nature of the beast', are explored in the first two sections of this chapter. The first of these sections examines conceptualisations of the EU as a political system and the second examines three key concepts that are habitually employed when assessing the political character of the EU.
- There are attempts to theorise the general nature of the integration process. Such theorising is not as fashionable today as it once was, but it

is still seen by many scholars as worthwhile, and it certainly marks the point of departure for a great deal of other conceptual and theoretical work. Grand theory, as general integration theory is commonly known, is studied in the third section of the chapter.

- There are attempts to develop conceptual and theoretical approaches to particular aspects of the functioning of the EU, especially policy and decision-making. Operating in the middle range, or as it is sometimes called the meso level, rather than at the general level, this has been a major growth area in scholarly work on the EU in recent years. It is the subject of the fourth section of the chapter.

As will be shown, within each of these three broad types of conceptual and theoretical work there is a wide range of different approaches. An underlying theme of the chapter is that the existence of many approaches is inevitable given the multi-dimensional nature of European integration as a process and the EU as an organisation. The complexities of the process and the organisation are such that different sets of conceptual and theoretical tools are necessary to examine and interpret them.

Before proceeding, two points of caution need to be raised. First, there is considerable overlap and intertwining between the many different dimensions of the conceptual and theoretical ideas that are to be described and analysed below. Although, for ease of presentation, the dimensions are sectionalised in the account that follows, it should be recognised that in practice there is considerable overlap between the sections. Most obviously, most broad theoretical work usually draws heavily on a wide range of more narrowly focused conceptual work. Second, the range of conceptual and theoretical approaches to the study of European integration and the EU is so great that only some of them can be considered here. Attention is necessarily restricted to examining some of the more important approaches and giving a flavour of their varying characters.

Conceptualising the European Union

What type of political organisation/system is the EU? This is a difficult question to answer. It is so for at least four reasons.

First, the EU itself has never sought to describe or define its political character in any clear manner. The closest it has come is in the Common Provisions of the TEU, especially as revised by the Amsterdam Treaty. Article 1 (ex Article A) of the TEU states that 'This Treaty marks a new state in the process of creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe, in which decisions are taken as openly as possible and as closely as possible to the citizen'. According to Article 6 (ex Article F), 'The Union is

founded on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law, principles which are common to the Member States.' The TEU thus tells us something about the political character of the EU, but not much.

Second, as the above quotation from Article 1 of the TEU suggests, the EU is, and always has been, in constant transition. Its character has changed considerably over the years as the integration process has deepened and widened. Its nature has never been settled. For example, its decision-making processes have become progressively more supranational since the mid 1980s, as evidenced by the much greater use of qualified majority voting (qmv) in the Council of Ministers and the growing power of the EP.

Third, the EU is a highly complex, multi-faceted system. This means that there are abundant opportunities for different characteristics of the system to be generated by different focuses of analysis. Is, for example, the focus to be on the EU as an actor or as an arena? If the latter, is the focus to be on its territorial or its sectoral character?

Fourth, in important respects the EU is unique. It is so, for example, in the way it embodies both supranational and intergovernmental features in its system of governance, and in the extent to which it embodies shared policy responsibilities between different levels of government and different nation states. A perfectly reasonable answer to the question 'what type of political organisation/system is the EU?', is thus that it is not of any type – or, at least, of any established type – at all. Rather it is *sui generis* – the only one of its kind.

But recognition of the fact that the EU is in important respects unique, does not mean that attempts should not be made to conceptualise it. The reason for this is that conceptualisation can help to highlight the EU's essential features, and in so doing can draw attention to those features that are distinctive and those that are found elsewhere.

States and intergovernmental organisations

A useful starting point in attempting to conceptualise the EU is to compare it with the most important political unit of the international system, the state, and with the customary way in which states interrelate with one another on a structured basis, the intergovernmental organisation (IGO).

Definitions of the state are many and various. Generally speaking, however, the key characteristics of the state are: *territoriality* – the state is geographically based and bound; *sovereignty* – the state stands above all other associations and groups within its geographical area and its jurisdiction extends to the whole population of the area; *legitimacy* –

the authority of the state is widely recognised, both internally and externally; monopoly of governance – the institutions of the state monopolise public decision-making and enforcement.

These four features do not all need to be present in a pure, undiluted and uncontested form for a state to exist. They do, however, need to feature prominently and to constitute the essential bedrock of the system. With the EU there is no doubt that all four features are present, but with the exception of territoriality they are so only in a partial and limited way. So, the EU does enjoy some *sovereignty* – as witnessed by the primacy of EU law and the fact that EU jurisdiction applies to the whole EU population – but the reach of that sovereignty is confined to the policy areas where the EU's remit is established. Likewise the EU does command *legitimacy*, but opinion surveys show that its internal authority is somewhat thinly based, whilst its external authority is generally weak beyond the Common Commercial Policy. And as for *monopoly of governance*, far from being in such a position of dominance the EU monopolises governance in only a very few policy areas, and even then it is highly dependent on the member states for policy enforcement. To these 'weaknesses' might be added the very limited development of EU citizenship and the EU's comparatively limited financial resources.

The EU thus falls a long way short of being a state, as statehood is traditionally understood. However, the concept of the state is still of some use in helping to promote an understanding of the nature of the EU. It is so for two reasons. First, as has just been shown, the EU does display some of the traditional characteristics of a state, and the continuing development of the integration process inevitably means that these characteristics will strengthen. Second, the realities of traditional statehood are breaking down in the modern world, most particularly under the pressures of international interdependence. So, for example, no modern state can now be regarded as being fully sovereign in a *de facto* sense, and the EU member states cannot even claim that they are fully sovereign in a *de jure* sense. These changes in the realities of statehood mean there must also be changes in how the state is conceptualised. And in such new conceptualisations – involving, for instance, notions of the regulatory state and the postmodern state – the EU displays, as James Caporaso (1996) has argued, many state-like features.

Turning to IGOs, these are organisations in which representatives of national governments come together to cooperate on a voluntary basis for reasons of mutual benefit. IGOs have very little if any decision-making autonomy and cannot enforce their will on reluctant member states. Amongst the best known examples of IGOs are the UN, the OECD, NATO, the OSCE and the Council of Europe.

The differences between the EU and IGOs are striking:

- The EU has a much more developed and complex institutional structure than is found in IGOs. The standard pattern of advanced IGOs – permanent secretariats and attached delegations – is perhaps, in a much grander and more elaborated form, replicated in the EU with the Commission and the Permanent Representations, but to these are added many other features. Among the more obvious of such features are the regular and frequent meetings at the very highest political levels between representatives of the governments of the member states; the constant and many varied forms of contact between national officials; the Court of Justice; and the EP – the only directly elected multi-state assembly in the world.
- No IGO has anything like the policy responsibilities of the EU. In terms of breadth, few significant policy areas have completely escaped the EU's attention. In terms of depth, the pattern varies, but in many important areas, such as external trade, agriculture, and competition policy, key initiating and decision-making powers have been transferred from the member states to the EU authorities.
- The EU has progressed far beyond the intergovernmental nature of IGOs to incorporate many supranational characteristics into its structure and operation. The nature of the balance within the EU between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism will be examined later in the chapter.

The EU may thus be thought of as being, in important respects, less than a state but much more than an IGO. Are there, therefore, other conceptualisations that come closer to capturing the essence of the EU?

Three of the more commonly used conceptualisations of the EU are now explored.

Federalism

Interpretations of the nature of federalism vary. Not surprisingly, perhaps, when systems as diverse as Germany, India, Switzerland and the United States all describe themselves as federal.

Different interpretations within the EU of the nature of federalism were no more clearly demonstrated than in the run-up to the 1991 Maastricht summit, when the UK government became embroiled in a sharp clash with the governments of the other member states over whether there should be a reference in the TEU to the EU 'evolving in a federal direction'. The clash

centred in large part on different understandings of what 'federal' entails and implies, with the UK government giving the word a much more centralist spin than other governments. Indeed, the solution that was eventually agreed upon – to remove the offending phrase and replace it with a statement that the Treaty 'marks a new stage in the process of creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe' – seemed to many EU governments far more centralist in tone than did the original formulation.

Academic commentators too have not been in complete accord on the precise nature of federal systems. In broad terms, however, most would regard the key characteristics of such systems as being as follows:

- Power is divided between central decision-making institutions on the one hand and regional decision-making institutions on the other.
- The nature of this division of power is specified in and is protected by constitutional documents. Disputes over the division are settled by a supreme judicial authority.
- The division of power between the central and regional levels is balanced in the sense that both have responsibilities – although not necessarily wholly exclusive responsibilities – for important spheres of public policy.
- Whilst the policy content of the division of power can vary, some policy areas are primarily the responsibility of the central level because they are concerned with the identity, coherence, and protection of the system as a whole. Such policy areas normally include foreign affairs, security and defence, management of the (single) currency, and specification and protection of citizens' rights – or at least the more important of these rights.

In applying the federal model to the EU it is readily apparent that the EU does display some federal traits:

- Power is divided between central decision-making institutions (the Commission, the Council, the EP and so on), and regional decision-making institutions (the governing authorities in the member states).
- The nature of the division is specified in constitutional documents (the treaties) and there is a supreme judicial authority (the ECJ) with the authority to adjudicate in the event of disputes over the division.
- Both levels *do* have important powers and responsibilities for public policy – with those of the central level appertaining particularly, but by no means exclusively, to the economic sphere.

At the same time, however, it is also clear that in some respects the EU falls short of the federal model:

- Although power is divided between the central level and the regional level, some of the responsibilities that lie at the centre are heavily dependent on regional acquiescence if they are to be exercised. This is most obviously the case where the unanimity rule applies in the Council, for example for decisions on constitutional reform, enlargement, and fiscal measures.
- The policy balance is still tilted towards the member states. The degree of this is much less than it was before the 'relaunch' of the Community in the mid 1980s, but for all but market-related policies the member states are still mostly in control of public decision-making. This is reflected in the fact that policy areas that involve heavy public expenditure – such as education, health, social welfare, and defence – are still essentially national policies, and the control of financial resources still lies overwhelmingly with the member states.
- Those policy spheres which in federal systems are normally thought of as being the responsibility of the central authorities, in the EU are primarily national responsibilities. Foreign affairs, security and defence, and citizenship rights are being developed at the EU level, but so far only to a limited degree and on a largely intergovernmental basis. Currency control is the most obvious exception to this, though of course not all member states are members of the single currency system.

These EU characteristics combine to suggest a system that may not fully embrace all the traits of the classical federal system, but is not as far removed from the federal model as is usually supposed (see Sbragia, 1992, for a supporting argument along these lines). This might lead one to agree with Warleigh (1998), who suggests that the most appropriate way of labelling the EU at present is as a confederation. That is, it is a union of previously sovereign states created by treaty in which supranational institutions exist but whose range of powers fall short of the powers exercised by their counterparts in federal systems.

State-centrism and consociationalism

State-centric models of the EU are advanced by those who take an intergovernmental view of the integration process. As such, they portray the EU as having the following features at its core:

- The system rests primarily on nation states that have come together to cooperate for certain specified purposes.
- The main channels of communication between EU member states are the national governments.

- The national governments control the overall direction and pace of EU decision-making.
- No governments, and therefore no states, are obliged to accept decisions on major issues to which they are opposed.
- Supranational actors such as the Commission and the ECJ do not have significant independent powers in their own right, but function essentially as agents and facilitators of the collective will of the national governments.

From this shared core, state-centric models branch out into a number of different forms, most of which involve some 'softening' of the core's hard edges. Variations occur in respect of such matters as the dynamics of inter-state relations, the nature of the policy role and impact of non-state actors, and the importance that is accorded to national domestic politics.

The last of these variations has produced a conceptualisation of EU policy dynamics as conducted on the basis of a two-level game, in which state-centrism is combined with a domestic politics approach. (See Bulmer, 1983, on this latter approach.) In the two-level game conceptualisation, most famously advanced by Putnam (1988), the governments of member states are involved in EU policy-making at two levels: at the domestic level, where political actors seek to influence the positions adopted by governments, and at the intergovernmental level, where governments negotiate with one another in EU forums.

A much employed variation of the core state-centric model is consociationalism. Originally developed – notably by Arend Lijphart (1969) – to throw light on how some democratic states which are sharply divided internally are able to function in a relatively smooth and stable manner, consociationalism has been championed as a model that can provide valuable insights into central features of the functioning of the EU.

Consociational states are normally portrayed as displaying the following main features:

- There is societal segmentation (which may or may not be geographically demarcated) and there are several politically significant lines of division.
- The various segments are represented in decision-making forums on a proportional basis, though with the possibility of minorities sometimes being over-represented.
- Political elites of the segments dominate decision-making processes. Interactions between these elites are intense and almost constant.
- Decisions are taken on the basis of compromise and consensus. The majoritarian principle, whereby a majority can proceed even if it is opposed by a minority, is not normally employed, especially when major or sensitive issues are involved. Decisional processes are

characterised by bargaining and exchanges, whilst decisional outcomes are marked by compromise and are frequently little more than the lowest common denominator.

- The interactions between the segments, and particularly between the elites of the segments, can be both positive and negative with regards to promoting solidarity: positive in that links are established and community-wide attitudes can be fostered between the segments; negative in that since the very rationale of consociationalism is the preservation of segmented autonomy within a cooperative system, segments may be tempted to over-emphasise their distinctiveness and moves towards over-centralisation may become occasions for resentment and unease within the segments.

Just as there are variations of the core state-centric model, so have the main features of the consociational model been developed and directed by analysts in various ways. In the EU context, the best known of these analysts is Paul Taylor (1991, 1996), who sees the model as extremely valuable in helping to explain the nature of the balance between fragmentation and cooperation/integration in the EU, the mutual dependence between the member states and the collectivity, and the ability – which does not imply inevitability – of the system as a whole both to advance and maintain stability.

At the heart of Taylor's analysis of the EU is the notion of there being a symbiosis – a mutual dependence – between the participating segments of the consociation (the member states) and the collectivity of the consociation (EU structures and frameworks). This symbiosis is seen as enabling many of the costs of fragmentation to be overcome, whilst at the same time preserving, and in some ways even strengthening, the power and authority of *both* the segments and the collectivity.

A particularly important aspect of this last point is the assertion that EU member states do not lose significant power or authority by virtue of their EU membership. Taylor is quite explicit about this:

the system works not on the basis of what functionalists, or federalists, would call the Community interest, but much more on the basis of the low level consensus among segmented elites identified within consociationalism. There is a strong sense that the Community exists to serve the member states . . . there is no evidence to suggest that common arrangements could not be extended a very long way without necessarily posing any direct challenge to the sovereignty of states (Taylor, 1991, pp. 24–5).

Dimitris Chrysochoou (1994, 1995, 1998), another exponent of the consociational model, also emphasises this point about the resilience of

states within the EU and their retention of fundamental sovereignty. For Chryssochoou (1994, p. 48), the EU is a confederal consociation, by which he means a system in which there is 'the merging of distinct politically organised states in some form of union to further common ends without losing either national identity or resigning individual sovereignty'. The internal mechanisms of the EU – which are seen as being largely under the control of state executive elites – are constituted, Chryssochoou suggests, so as to ensure that vital national interests are not 'mystically "subsumed" by the force of common interests in a neofunctionalist fashion' (ibid., p. 55).

The view of Taylor and Chryssochoou that EU membership does not of itself fundamentally undermine the sovereignty of member states is of course widely contested. Some of the contestants suggest that multi-level governance provides a more useful way of conceptualising and modelling the EU.

Multi-level governance

The conceptualisations considered so far are, broadly speaking, located within a comparative perspective. Their concern is whether and to what extent the EU 'matches' established models of governance. However, those who are firmly of the view that the EU is very much *sui generis* – or, as it is sometimes put, $n = 1$ – naturally wish to develop quite new conceptual ideas and models.

In this context, some EU scholars have drawn on the developing political science interest in what is commonly referred to as 'the new governance' and given it a particular emphasis and spin. At the general political science level, viewpoints included in the new governance are that government involves a wide variety of actors and processes beyond the state, the relationships between state and non-state actors have become less hierarchical and more interactive, and the essential 'business' of government is the regulation of public activities rather than the redistribution of resources. As applied to the EU, the new governance perspective 'is that the EU is transforming politics and government at the European and national levels into a system of multi-level, non hierarchical, deliberative and apolitical governance, via a complex web of public/private networks and quasi-autonomous executive agencies, which is primarily concerned with the deregulation and reregulation of the market' (Hix, 1998, p. 54).

Taking just one of these strands of the new governance, much has been heard since the early 1990s of the merits of conceptualising the EU as a system of multi-level governance. Advocates of this conceptualisation usually specifically set themselves against the state-centric model, suggest-

ing that the latter model is too simple in its emphasis on the pre-eminence of state executives as actors and decision-makers. The great importance of national governments is not denied, but the claim that they dominate and control decision-making processes most certainly is.

Following the scheme advanced by Gary Marks, Liesbet Hooghe and Kermit Black (1996), three main characteristics can be seen as lying at the heart of the multi-level governance model of the EU:

- Decision-making competences are deemed to lie with, and be exercised by, not only national governments but also institutions and actors at other levels. The most important of these levels is the EU level, where supranational actors – of which the most important are the Commission, the EP, and the Court of Justice – are identified as exercising an independent influence on policy processes and policy outcomes. In many member states subnational levels are also seen as important, with regional and local authorities able to engage in policy activities that are not (wholly) controllable by national governments.
- Collective decision-making by states at the EU level is regarded as involving a significant loss of national sovereignty, and therefore a significant loss of control by national governments. The intergovernmental view that states retain the ultimate decision-making power is rejected, largely on the grounds that '(l)owest common denominator outcomes are available only on a subset of EU decisions, mainly those concerning the scope of integration' (Marks *et al.*, 1996, p. 346).
- Political arenas are viewed as interconnected rather than nested. So, rather than national political activity being confined to the national arena and national inputs into EU decision-making being channelled via state-level actors, a variety of channels and interconnections between different levels of government – supranational, national, and subnational – are seen as both existing and being important. 'The separation between domestic and international politics, which lies at the heart of the state-centric model, is rejected by the multi-level governance model. States are an integral and powerful part of the EU, but they no longer provide the sole interface between supranational and subnational arenas, and they share, rather than monopolize, control over many activities that take place in their respective territories' (ibid., p. 347).

Multi-level governance thus conceives of the EU as a polity, or at least polity in the making, in which power and influence are exercised at multiple levels of government. National state executives are seen as extremely important actors in the EU arena, but the almost semi-monopolistic position that is ascribed to them by many state-centrists is firmly rejected.

Critics of the multi-level governance conceptualisation naturally focus particularly on whether the supranational and subnational levels really do have the power and influence they are claimed to have. Supranational levels are seen by more state-centric observers as being largely subject to state-level controls (mainly through the various organs of the Council), while subnational levels are considered to have little room or potential to make a significant impact on policy outcomes. Is it not the case, multi-level governance critics argue, that in some member states there is no robust subnational level of government, and is it not also the case that there is little evidence of subnational actors exercising much of a policy role beyond the sphere of cohesion policy from which the advocates of multi-level governance draw most of their empirical evidence?

Three key concepts: sovereignty, intergovernmentalism, and supranationalism

As indicated in earlier parts of this book and throughout this chapter, much of the debate amongst practitioners and observers about the nature of the EU has centred on the related concepts of sovereignty, intergovernmentalism, and supranationalism. These concepts therefore merit special attention.

Defining the terms

Sovereignty is an emotive word, associated as it is with notions of power, authority, independence, and the exercise of will. Because of its emotiveness and its associations, it is a word to which several meanings are attached. The most common meaning, and the one which will be employed here, refers to the legal capacity of national decision-makers to take decisions without being subject to external restraints. This is usually called national, or sometimes state, sovereignty.

Intergovernmentalism refers to arrangements whereby nation states, in situations and conditions they can control, cooperate with one another on matters of common interest. The existence of control, which allows all participating states to decide the extent and nature of this cooperation, means that national sovereignty is not directly undermined.

Supranationalism involves states working with one another in a manner that does not allow them to retain complete control over developments. That is, states may be obliged to do things against their preferences and

their will because they do not have the power to stop decisions. Supranationalism thus takes inter-state relations beyond cooperation into integration, and involves some loss of national sovereignty.

The intergovernmental/supranational balance in the EU

In the 1960s the governments of five of the Community's then six member states were willing to permit, even to encourage, some movement towards supranationalism. President de Gaulle, however, who wished to preserve 'the indivisible sovereignty of the nation state', was not. In order to emphasise this point, and more particularly to prevent certain supranational developments that were due to be introduced, in 1965 he withdrew France from most of the Community's key decision-making forums. The outcome of the crisis that this occasioned was the 1966 Luxembourg Compromise (see Chapter 7) which, though it had no legal force, had as its effect the general imposition of intergovernmentalism on Community decision-making processes: the powers of the Commission and the EP were contained, and decisions in the Council came customarily to be made – even where the treaties allowed for majority voting – by unanimous agreement.

The first enlargement of the Community in 1973 reinforced intergovernmentalism, bringing in as it did two countries – Denmark and the UK – where there was strong domestic opposition to membership and where supranationalism was viewed with suspicion. The Greek accession in 1981 had a similar effect. International economic uncertainties and recession also encouraged intergovernmentalism, since they forced states to look rather more critically at the distributive consequences of Community policies, produced a temptation to look for national solutions to pressing problems, and resulted in greater caution about the transfer of powers to Community institutions.

However, intergovernmental attachments and pressures were never able, and never have been able, completely to stop the development of supranationalism. The treaties, increasing interdependence, and the logic of the EU itself, have all ensured that national sovereignties have been progressively undermined. Indeed, not only has supranationalism become more embedded, but since the mid 1980s it has been given a considerable boost as most of the states have adopted a much more positive attitude towards its development. They have done so partly because the effects of the delays and the inaction that intergovernmentalism spawns have become more obvious and more damaging, and partly because it has been recognised that as the number of EU member states has grown, over-rigid intergovernmentalism is a greater recipe than ever for stagnation and sclerosis.

The EU thus displays both intergovernmental and supranational characteristics. The principal intergovernmental characteristics are as follows.

- In most of the major areas of public policy – including foreign affairs, defence, fiscal policy, education, health, and justice and home affairs – decisions are still mainly taken at the national level. Each state consults and coordinates with its EU partners on aspects of these policies, and is increasingly subject to constraints as a result of EU membership, but ultimately a state can usually decide for itself what is to be done.
- Virtually all major decisions on the general direction and policy priorities of the EU are taken by Heads of Government in the European Council: that is, in the forum containing the most senior national representatives. Only rarely does the European Council take decisions by majority vote. All of the important decisions on EU legislation need the approval of ministers in the Council of Ministers. Under the TEC some key Council decisions, including those of a constitutional or fiscal nature, must be unanimous. Where qualified majority voting is permissible, attempts are always made to reach a consensus if a state makes it clear that it believes it has important national interests at stake.
- The Commission and the EP, the two most obvious ‘supranational political rivals’ to the European Council and the Council of Ministers in that their responsibility is to look to the EU as a whole rather than to specific national interests, are restricted in their decision-making powers and cannot impose policies that the representatives of the member states do not want.

Of the supranational characteristics of the EU, the following are particularly important.

- The Commission does much to frame the EU policy agenda. Moreover, though it may have to defer to the European Council and the Council of Ministers where major decisions are involved, it is an extremely important decision-maker in its own right when it comes to secondary and regulatory decision-making. Indeed, in quantitative terms most EU legislation is issued in the name of the Commission.
- In the Council of Ministers, qualified majority voting is now common. This is partly a result of changing norms and expectations, and partly a result of the treaty reforms that have brought about extensions of the policy spheres in which majority voting is permissible.
- The EP may not enjoy the constitutional status and authority of national parliaments, but its influence over EU decision-making is now considerable. This influence has been greatly enhanced by the cooperation and assent procedures created by the SEA, by the co-decision

procedure created by the Maastricht Treaty and extended by the Amsterdam Treaty, and by a range of other powers it has acquired – including the right to confirm the appointment of new Commission Presidents and Colleges.

- The force and status of decision-making outcomes is crucial to EU supranationalism, for clearly the EU could hardly be described as supranational if its decisions had no binding force. Indeed, some do not and are merely advisory and exhortive. But many do, and these constitute EU law. It is a law that constitutes an increasingly prominent part of the legal systems of all member states, that takes precedence over national law should the two conflict, and that, in event of a dispute, finds its final authority not in national courts but in the interpretations of the EU’s own Court of Justice.

Both intergovernmentalism and supranationalism are thus important features of the functioning and nature of the EU. This is no more clearly demonstrated than in the influence exercised by the Commission: on the one hand it is an important motor in the European integration process, but on the other it is constrained by the preferences of the governments of the member states. As Mark Pollack has put it in analysing the role of the Commission in terms of principal-agent relationships, ‘Supranational autonomy and influence . . . is not a simple binary matter of “obedient servants” or “runaway Eurocracies”, but rather varies along a continuum between the two points . . .’ (Pollack, 1998, p. 218).

A pooling and sharing of sovereignty?

The EU is quite unique in the extent to which it involves states engaging in joint action to formulate common policies and make binding decisions. As the words ‘joint’, ‘common’ and ‘binding’ imply, the process of working together is resulting in the EU states becoming ever more intermeshed and interdependent. This is no more clearly seen than in the binding effect of many aspects of their relationships and shared activities: binding in the sense that it would not be possible for them to be reversed without creating major constitutional, legal, political and economic difficulties at both the EU and the national level.

Clearly a central aspect of the intermeshing and the interdependence, and one of the principal distinguishing characteristics of the EU, is the way in which the member states have voluntarily surrendered some of their national sovereignty and independence to collective institutions. However, viewed from a broader perspective, the EU is not only the cause of a decline in national powers, but is also a response to decline. This is because much of the rationale of the EU lies in the attempt – an attempt for which

there is no international parallel – on the part of the member states to increase their control of, and their strength and influence in, a rapidly changing world. Although all of the states have reservations about, and some have fundamental criticisms of, certain aspects of the EU, each has judged that membership enhances its ability to achieve certain objectives. The precise nature of these objectives varies from state to state, but in virtually all cases the main priorities are the promotion of economic growth and prosperity, the control of economic and financial forces that are not confined to national boundaries, and the strengthening of political influence. Insofar as these objectives are being attained, it can be argued that the diminution in the role of the state and the loss of sovereignty that arises from supranationalism is counterbalanced by the collective strength of the EU as a whole.

Indeed, since international change and developing interdependence has resulted in all of the member states experiencing a considerable *de facto*, if not *de jure*, loss of national sovereignty quite irrespective of the loss that is attributable to EU membership, it can be argued that the discussion about national sovereignty, in the classical sense of the term at least, is no longer very meaningful. Rather should it be recognised that the only way in which medium-sized and small states, such as those which make up the membership of the EU, can retain control of their operating environments is by pooling and sharing their power and their sovereignty.

Theorising European integration: grand theory

Many scholars of European integration have explored ways in which the overall nature of the integration process might be theorised. The purpose of such exploration has been to develop a broad understanding of the factors underlying European integration, and in so doing to facilitate predictions of how integration is likely to proceed.

This search for what is commonly referred to as ‘grand’ theory – that is, theory which explains the main features of the integration process as a whole – began soon after the European Community was established in the 1950s, with US scholars leading the way. However, after about fifteen years of considerable activity and published output, interest in grand integration theory declined from the mid 1970s as disillusionment set in with what had been and could be achieved by such theory. Furthermore, the EC itself became less interesting, with its seeming retreat into retrenchment and even sclerosis. There followed a lull of ten years or so in which little was published in the sphere of grand integration theory. This lull ended in the mid to late 1980s, when interest was re-stimulated by the ‘relaunch’ of the integration process through the SEM and SEA in

1985–6, and with the appearance on the academic scene of new scholars who believed that though early grand theory may have had its limitations, the *raison d'être* of grand theory – to further understanding of the general character of European integration – was as valid as ever.

A notable feature of the reawakened interest in grand theory in recent years has been that much of it has centred on debating the respective merits of, and developing more sophisticated versions of, the two theories that dominated the early years of European integration theory: neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism. Another prominent feature has been the extensive use that has been made of interdependency theory, which is not especially focused on European integration but is widely seen as being of much use in helping to explain the reasons for, and the course of, the European integration process.

This section of the chapter is thus primarily concerned with neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, and interdependency.

Neofunctionalism

The foundations of neofunctionalism were laid in the late 1950s and during the 1960s by a number of US academics, of whom the most prominent were Ernst Haas (1958) and Leon Lindberg (1963).

In its classic formulation, neofunctionalism revolves largely around the concept of spillover, which takes two main forms. The first form – functional spillover – arises from the interconnected nature of modern economies, which makes it difficult to confine integration to particular economic sectors. Rather, integration in one sector produces pressures for integration in adjoining and related sectors. The second form – political spillover – largely follows on from economic integration and has a number of dimensions: national elites increasingly turn their attention to supranational levels of activity and decision-making; these elites become favourably disposed towards the integration process and the upgrading of common interests; supranational institutions and non-governmental actors become more influential in the integration process, while nation states and governmental actors become less influential; and the increasing importance of integration generates pressures and demands for political control and accountability at the supranational level.

Early neofunctionalism thus suggested, though it certainly did not regard as inevitable, the progressive development of European integration. Drawing heavily on the experience of the ECSC, which had played such an important part in paving the way for the EEC, integration was seen as promoting further integration. The slowing down of the integration process following the 1965–6 crisis in the EC and the world economic recession of the early 1970s was thus something of a jolt for advocates of

neofunctionalism. Far from policy integration proceeding apace and political behaviour and decision-making becoming increasingly supranational in character, policy integration became increasingly halting whilst political behaviour and decision-making remained essentially nationally based and conditioned. As a result, neofunctionalism lost much of its gloss and appeal, not least when its foremost figures – Haas and Lindberg – retreated from it and suggested that future integration theory would need to give greater recognition to, among other things, nationalism and the role of political leadership.

Since the late 1980s, however, as the pace of integration has again picked up, there has been a reassessment and a partial comeback of neofunctionalism. Jeppe Tranholm-Mikkelsen (1991), for example, has argued that much of the 'new dynamism' in Western Europe since the mid 1980s can be explained in neofunctionalist terms, though he also emphasises the importance of factors that were not part of the original neofunctionalist position – such as forceful political actors and changes in the external security environment. His main conclusion is that although neofunctionalism may be dealing only with 'some part of the elephant . . . it appears that those parts are amongst the ones that make the animal move' (ibid., p. 319).

Tranholm-Mikkelsen exemplifies those who argue that although original neofunctionalism may have had its limitations and faults – most notably, being overdeterministic and not giving due allowance to the continuing importance in the European integration process of the (often distinctive) interests of member states and their representatives – it still has, especially when updated and modified, considerable theoretical value. Evidence cited to support neofunctionalism's case relates both to functional and to political spillover. In respect of functional spillover, reference is most commonly made to the SEM, where the original 'requirements' for the completion of the internal market have steadily been expanded to include, amongst other things, the social dimension, the single currency, and a measure of fiscal harmonisation. In respect of political spillover, the great advances in supranational decision-making since the mid 1980s are commonly cited, with 'the motor role' of the Commission, the common use of qualified majority voting in the Council, and the Court's support for much integrationist activity all seen as falling within the neofunctionalist framework. Indeed, with regard to the role of the Court, Burley and Mattli (1993, p. 325) have explicitly argued that 'the legal integration of the Community corresponds remarkably closely to the original neofunctionalist model', and that the ECJ has not only had considerable scope to pursue its own agenda but has frequently done so in a manner that favours integration.

Intergovernmentalism

Intergovernmentalism has its origins in international relations theory, and more particularly the realist tradition within that theory. Put simply, realism is centred on the view that nation states are the key actors in international affairs and the key political relations between states are channelled primarily via national governments. Unlike neofunctionalism, realism does not accord much importance to the influence of supranational or transnational actors and only limited importance to non-governmental actors within states.

As applied to European integration, intergovernmentalism thus explains the direction and pace of the integration process mainly by reference to decisions and actions taken by the governments of European states. There is a recognition that other actors, both within and beyond states, can exercise some influence on developments, but not a crucial, and certainly not a controlling, influence. This focus on states – and the associated perception of states having their own distinctive national interests which they vigorously defend, especially in the spheres of high politics (foreign policy, security and defence) – has resulted in intergovernmentalists tending to emphasise, as Stanley Hoffmann (1966) put it over thirty years ago, 'the logic of diversity' rather than 'the logic of integration'.

For many years Hoffmann was the foremost proponent of this interpretation of European integration, but in recent years Andrew Moravcsik (1991, 1993, 1995, 1998) has established himself as its leading exponent. (Other exponents of forms of intergovernmentalism include Garrett, 1992, 1993, and Grieco, 1995.) Just as Tranholm-Mikkelsen and others have built on early neofunctionalism to develop a more sophisticated theoretical framework, so has Moravcsik performed a similar service for intergovernmentalism. He calls his framework liberal intergovernmentalism.

There are three main components of liberal intergovernmentalism. First, there is an assumption of rational state behaviour, which means that the actions of states are assumed to be based on utilising what are judged to be the most appropriate means of achieving their goals. Second, there is a liberal theory of national preference formation. This draws on a domestic politics approach to explain how state goals can be shaped by domestic pressures and interactions, which in turn are often conditioned by the constraints and opportunities that derive from economic interdependence. Third, there is an intergovernmentalist interpretation of inter-state relations, which emphasises the key role of governments in determining the relations between states and sees the outcome of negotiations between governments as essentially determined by their relative bargaining powers and the advantages that accrue to them by striking agreements.

Because liberal intergovernmentalism advances such a clear and, in important respects, almost uncompromising framework, and because it is seen by many as just not fitting the facts in an era of multiple international actors and complex interdependence between states, it has inevitably attracted criticism. Four criticisms are particularly worth noting.

First, it is suggested that Moravcsik is too selective with his empirical references when seeking to demonstrate the validity of his framework in the EU context. More particularly, he is considered to focus too much on 'historic' decisions and not enough on more commonplace and routine decisions. To over-focus on historic decisions is seen as distortional, since not only are such decisions untypical by their very nature, they also necessarily emphasise the role of national governments since they are channelled via the European Council.

Second, it is argued that liberal intergovernmentalism concentrates too much on the formal and final stages of decision-making and pays too little attention to informal integration and the constraints that such integration imposes on the formal decision-makers. For example, Wincott (1995) argues that the SEM programme and the SEA, which Moravcsik suggests were the outcome of negotiations between national actors, are in important respects better viewed as the formalisation by national governments of what had been happening in practice for some time.

Third, critics argue that insufficient attention is paid to the 'black box' of the state, and more especially to disaggregating the different parts of government. According to Forster (1998, p. 364), this means that liberal intergovernmentalism provides an inadequate account of how governments choose their policy options. 'The formation of objectives, the pursuit of strategies and the final positions adopted are every bit as disorderly and unpredictable as domestic policy-making. Politics is not always a rational process: ideology, belief and symbolism can play as important a role as substance.'

Fourth – and this is probably the most commonly voiced criticism of liberal intergovernmentalism, and indeed of any form of intergovernmentalism – it is said that it grossly understates the influence exercised in the European integration process by supranational actors such as the Commission and the ECJ, and transnational actors such as European firms and interest groups. For example, in a collection of essays edited by Wayne Sandholtz and Alec Stone Sweet (1998), several academic commentators provide evidence of EU supranational bodies seeking to enhance their autonomy and influence and having considerable success in so doing. Moravcsik's portrayal of the Commission as exercising the role of little more than a facilitator in respect of significant decision-making has attracted particular criticism, with numerous empirically-based studies claiming to show that the Commission does exercise an independent and

influential decision-making role, be it as – the metaphors abound – an *animateur*, a policy entrepreneur, or a motor force. Such studies do not, it has to be said, convince Moravcsik that the Commission and other supranational actors are doing much more than responding to an agenda set by the governments of the member states. As he puts it '*intergovernmental demand* for policy ideas, not the *supranational supply* of these ideas, is the fundamental exogenous factor driving integration. To a very large extent, the demand for co-operative policies creates its own supply' (Moravcsik, 1995, p. 262, emphasis in original).

Forster (1998, p. 365) has suggested that liberal intergovernmentalism's weaknesses mean that it is 'perhaps best regarded less as a theory of intergovernmental bargaining, than as a pre-theory or analytical framework'. This may be so, but it should not be forgotten that although weaknesses in liberal intergovernmentalism can readily be identified, the approach has considerable strengths. In particular, it provides a reminder of the role of states in the EU and it does so in a much more nuanced and sophisticated manner than did early intergovernmentalism.

Interdependency

Whilst both neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism recognise that external factors have at times triggered the pace and nature of European integration, both theories are concerned primarily with the internal dynamics of integration. Interdependency, in contrast, has been used by scholars of European integration to place integration in the wider context of growing international interdependence.

Interdependency theory was initially developed in the 1970s, most famously by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1977). Its central thrust when applied to European integration is that the integration process should not be viewed in too narrow a context. Many of the factors that have influenced its development have applied to it alone, but many have not. This is seen most obviously in the ways in which post Second World War international modernisation in its various forms – including increased levels of wealth, vast increases in world trade, the technological revolution and the transformation of communications – has promoted many different forms of political and economic interdependency. These in turn have produced a transformation in the ways in which different parts of the world relate to and come into contact with one another. For example, there has been a steady increase in the number and variety of international actors – both above and below the level of the nation state – and a corresponding weakening of the dominance of states. An increasing range of methods and channels are used by international actors to pursue their

goals, with relationships between governments, for instance, no longer being so controlled by Foreign Offices and Ministries of External Affairs. The range of issues on international agendas has grown, with, in particular, traditional 'high' policy issues (those concerned with security and the defence of the state) being joined by an array of 'low' policy issues (those concerned with the wealth and welfare of citizens). And paralleling the change in the policy content of international agendas there has been a decline, in the Western industrialised world at least, in the use of physical force as a policy instrument – conflicts over trade imbalances and currency exchange rates are not resolved by armed conflict but by bargaining, adjusting and compromising.

Interdependence theory is thus useful in helping to set European integration within the context of the rapid changes that are occurring throughout the international system. This system is becoming, like the EU system itself, increasingly multi-layered and interconnected. Whether the purpose is to regulate international trade, promote the efficient functioning of the international monetary system, set international standards on packaging for the transportation of hazardous material, or control the hunting and killing of whales, states now come together in many different ways, in many different combinations and for many different purposes.

Interdependency theory is distinctive from neofunctionalism and inter-governmentalism in that it emphasises that much of the European integration process is explained by factors that are global in nature, and it emphasises too that many of the systemic features of the EU are found elsewhere in the international system, albeit less intensively. Interdependency is also different from neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism in that it has been less intensively applied to European integration and partly in consequence is less rigorous and systematic in the explanation it offers. Whilst most of those who have engaged in the theoretical debate on the nature of the integration process have recognised the importance of interdependency, they have tended to do so as part of the framing background rather than as front line causation. Indeed, it is not possible to point to any major scholar who has advanced interdependency as *the* central plank of his or her explanation of the European integration process. As Carole Webb wrote in the early 1980s, 'For most students the concept of interdependence has been used to explain the conditions under which governments and other economic actors have to contemplate some form of collaboration; but unlike the approach of integration theory, it does not necessarily help to define the outcome very precisely' (Webb, 1983, p. 33). Interdependency in the European integration context is thus perhaps best thought of as an approach and/or a perspective rather than as a theory.

The future of integration theory

Social science theories rarely satisfy everyone. Whatever phenomena they are seeking to explain and whatever forms they take, such theories almost invariably attract criticism for being deficient in important respects. Commonly identified deficiencies include focusing on only part of the phenomena under examination, being too general in scope and/or formulation, being excessively time-bound, and being insufficiently empirically grounded.

European integration grand theory has not been exempt from such criticisms. Indeed, it has been especially prone to them given that the European integration process is so complex, so constantly changing, and so capable of being viewed from different angles. But, as with other social science theories, grand integration theories do not lose all value because critics can show them to be less than complete and final in the explanations they offer. Rather, grand theories can be of considerable value in furthering understanding of the integration process by offering particular insights into it, providing partial explanations of it, and promoting further work and thought on it.

Of course, as long as existing theory is seen to be deficient in certain respects there will be attempts to improve upon it. In this context an increasingly important feature of the theoretical debate on European integration is the attempt by many theorists to move beyond what is now widely viewed as the over-narrow and restrictive nature of the jousting between classical intergovernmentalism and classical neofunctionalism.

One aspect of this new theorising is the development of theoretical explanations that, although emerging from one or other of these two schools of thought, are much more complex, sophisticated and nuanced than the theories in their original formulations. Moravcsik is by far the best known of those who are theorising in this way, but there are many others. Another aspect of the new theorising is the attempt to bring together key features of the traditional theories and link them, as appropriate, to relevant parts of other theories. Robert Keohane and Stanley Hoffmann (1991) adopt such an eclectic and synthesising approach in their analysis of the quickened pace of integration, particularly institutional integration, in the mid 1980s. Essentially they argue that neofunctionalism, interdependency, and intergovernmentalism all have something to contribute to the explanation of why the Community was 'relaunched'. Regarding neofunctionalism, '(s)pillover took place not as a functional expansion of tasks but rather in the form of the creation, as a result of enlargement, of incentives for institutional change' (*ibid.*, p. 22).

Regarding interdependence, '(t)he 1992 program was . . . strongly affected by events in the world economy outside of Europe – especially by concern about international competitiveness' (ibid., p. 19). Regarding intergovernmentalism, they consider that the precise timing of the burst of integration was due 'not only to incentives for the world political economy and spillover but also to intergovernmental bargains made possible by convergence of preferences of major European states' (ibid., p. 25).

Janne Matlary (1993) is another who argues that the limitations of traditional models – especially, in her view, the limitations of intergovernmentalism, which she regards as failing to recognise the crucial interaction between EU institutions and member states and also between formal and informal integration processes – make a synthesing approach essential. There seems, she says, to be 'an emerging view that a comprehensive theory of integration must include not only realist assumptions of state behaviour, but also analysis of domestic politics and the role of the different EC institutions' (ibid., p. 376). Stephen George (1994) is less optimistic than Matlary that a comprehensive theory of integration can be developed, but he too is convinced of the need for a model that 'combines the insights' of the intergovernmentalist and neofunctionalist schools.

Searching for points of contact and overlap, perhaps even for a synthesis, between ever more sophisticated intergovernmentalist and neofunctionalist-inspired models is thus likely to be a feature of future integration theory. Whether, however, synthetic theory will ever be able to escape its basic problem, namely that attempts to develop it are almost inevitably drawn back into one of the dominant perspectives, must be doubted. For as Alexander Warleigh (1998, p. 9) has observed, '*rapprochement* of neo-functionalism and neo-realism would effectively deprive both theories of their respective *raison d'être* and guiding principles, a step which neither set of scholars [advocating the theories] can take without emasculating their theory'.

Another likely feature of the future course of integration theory is its placement within the context of wider interdependency and globalisation theory. As Ben Rosamond (1995) has pointed out, such theories should help to establish how integration is occurring in so many different ways in so many parts of the world: at the 'official' level between international, supranational, national, regional and even local institutions of government, but at the 'unofficial' level too as a result of changes in technology, communications, travel patterns and culture.

Michael O'Neill (1996, p. 81) has observed that European integration theory 'has been a constantly shifting dialectic between events as they have unfolded on the ground, and the efforts of scholars to track and accurately explain them . . . the paradigms and the intellectual tension generated by [the theoretical discourse on integration] have helped to map more

accurately the actual developments in European integration, and to clarify our understanding of what the process means'. These observations on integration theory to date will doubtless also apply to future theory. In all likelihood, theorising will become more sophisticated and nuanced as new theory builds on previous theory and as the integration process itself continues to unfold. But the essential purpose of grand theory will remain unchanged: to assist understanding and explanation of the integration process.

Theorising the functioning of the EU: middle-range theory

Whereas grand theory looks at the nature of the integration process as a whole, middle-range theory looks at particular aspects of the process. More especially, it normally focuses on aspects of how the EU functions.

In recent years, much scholarly attention has shifted in the direction of middle-range theory. There are two main reasons for this. First, there has been an increasing feeling that grand theory is inherently limited in what it can achieve. It is prone, critics argue, to falling between two stools. On the one hand, if it restricts itself to identifying only major causal factors it inevitably misses, or at least does not adequately recognise, the many different dimensions of the integration process. On the other hand, if it attempts to encompass all the dimensions of integration it becomes too complicated and difficult to operationalise. Better, the argument runs, to be less ambitious and to focus on only parts of the beast, especially the more important parts. Second, as the European integration process has intensified, so has the EU attracted the attention of an increasing number and range of scholars. It used to be the case that most of the European integration scholars who were interested in theorising and conceptualising were steeped in and made extensive use of international relations theory. This has become much less the case in recent years. Many scholars today suggest that European integration should be studied not just through a traditional international relations approach but also, and arguably more so, through other subdisciplines of political science. If it is the case, as many scholars suggest, that the EU has many of the qualities of a state, then does it not follow that approaches that are deemed to be suitable for the study of states might also be suitable for the study of the EU? Those who answer this question in the affirmative have particularly advocated the merits of using comparative politics and policy studies approaches. As Hix (1994) states, they have used these approaches not to follow the international relations approach and examine European *integration*, but rather to examine EU politics.

To illustrate these approaches to EU politics, two of the more important will now be considered: new institutionalism and policy networks. Both approaches draw from the range of political science subdisciplines, but especially from comparative politics and policy studies.

New institutionalism

Much has been heard since the late 1980s about the merits of new institutionalism. In essence, new institutionalism has at its core the assertion that institutions matter in determining decisional outcomes. As such, new institutionalism is partly a reaction against behaviouralism, which was so influential in social and political science circles in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in the United States.

In what ways is 'new' institutionalism different from 'old' institutionalism? In general terms the main difference is that whereas old or traditional institutionalism did not go much beyond analysing the formal powers and structures of decision-making institutions, new institutionalism defines institutions in a very broad sense to incorporate a wide range of formal and informal procedures, practices, relationships, customs, and norms. As such, new institutionalism is much more all-embracing and expansive in its concerns and interests.

Beyond a core shared interest in institutions broadly defined, new institutionalism spreads out in different directions. As Hall and Taylor (1996) have noted, there are at least three analytical approaches within new institutionalism: historical institutionalism, rational choice institutionalism, and sociological institutionalism. Among the main concerns of historical institutionalism are the distributions of power that are produced by institutional arrangements, the ways in which these arrangements result in path dependence and unintended consequences, and the relationships between institutions and other factors that shape political activities and outcomes such as economic developments and ideological beliefs. Rational choice institutionalism is especially interested in the extent to which and the ways in which institutions shape, channel, and constrain the rational actions of political actors. And sociological institutionalism particularly focuses on how institutional forms and practices can often be culturally explained.

Most of the new institutionalist work undertaken on the EU has been within the historical institutionalist approach. For example, Bulmer (1994, 1998) and Pierson (1996) have both advanced the merits of this approach for analysing and, as Bulmer puts it, 'capturing', political and policy activity in the increasingly multi-layered system. More specifically, Bulmer

has advocated and employed the framework of a 'governance regime' for analysing the EU at the policy-specific or sub-system level.

Policy networks

The policy networks approach can be thought of as an application of new institutionalism as that term is understood in its broadest sense. The approach is used to describe and analyse policy processes and policy outcomes.

Simply put, policy networks are arenas in which decision-makers and interests come together to mediate differences and search for solutions. Policy networks vary in character according to three key variables: the relative stability (or instability) of network memberships; the relative insularity (or permeability) of networks; and the relative strength (or weakness) of resource dependencies (Peterson, 1995, p. 77). From these variables a continuum emerges, 'At one end are tightly integrated policy *communities* in which membership is constant and often hierarchical, external pressures have minimal impact, and actors are highly dependent on each other for resources. At the other are loosely integrated *issue networks*, in which membership is fluid and non hierarchical, the network is easily permeated by external influences, and actors are highly self-reliant' (ibid.).

The EU is seen by those who champion the policy network approach as particularly lending itself to the emergence of such networks. Amongst factors identified as being conducive to policy networks are: the informal nature of much EU policy-making; the multiplicity of interests at EU level that are anxious to have access to policy-makers; the highly technical – almost non-political – nature of much EU policy content; the powerful policy positions held by senior officials, especially in the Commission and especially in the early stages of policy making; and the heavy reliance of officials on outside interests for information and advice about policy content and policy implementation. As Schneider *et al.* (1994, p. 112) state on this last point, 'The highly pluralist pattern exhibited by the EU policy networks is a consequence not only of numerous actors' efforts to influence the European policy process in an early stage of formulation, but also of a deliberate networking strategy employed by the European institutions, especially the Commission'.

The existence, the types, and the influence of networks varies considerably across the policy spectrum. Networks of a policy community type are often found in areas where EU policy is well established, where an organised 'clientele' exists, and where decision-makers benefit from the

cooperation of interests. Examples of such policy areas include agriculture and research and development. In contrast, issue networks are more common where EU policy is not well developed, where the policy debate is fluid and shifting, and where such organised interests as do exist have few resources to 'exchange' with decision-makers. Consumer protection policy and much of environmental and social policy are examples of policy areas where issue networks are commonly found.

The usefulness of the policy networks approach is not, it should be said, accepted by all EU analysts. Amongst the reservations that have been expressed are that it cannot deal with the making of major directional decisions and it cannot capture the extreme fluidity and fragmented nature of EU policy processes (see Kassim, 1994, for a critique of the usefulness of policy networks in analysing EU policy processes). There is doubtless something in such criticisms, but they are arguably partly based on misplaced understandings of what advocates of the model claim on its behalf. As Rhodes *et al.* (1996, p. 381) suggest, when arguing that the approach is very helpful in the EU context, "Policy networks" is a useful tool for analysing the links between types of governmental units, between levels of government, and between governments and interest groups. It aids understanding of the policy process but it is only one variable in that process'.

Concluding remarks

A wide variety of conceptually and theoretically informed approaches to the understanding and study of European integration and the EU have been explored in this chapter. All have been shown to be subject to criticism and all have had reservations expressed about their usefulness. For example, of the three grand theories that were considered, amongst the central 'charges' laid against neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism are that both press their side of the case too hard and both disappoint when applied empirically over time, whilst the central weakness of interdependence is seen to be its lack of a regional focus.

But all concepts and theories, and the methodological approaches based on them, should be judged not only on their deficiencies but also on their merits. As has been shown, there is extensive merit in much of the conceptual and theoretical work that has been undertaken on European integration and the EU. There may be no one body of work that has been able to capture and explain all aspects of European integration and the EU reality, but that is only to be expected. After all, as Hix (1998, p. 46) has observed, there is no general theory of American or German government, so why should there be one of the EU? Rather, we should admit, as Wayne

Sandholtz (1996, p. 426) puts it, 'that different kinds of theories are appropriate for different pieces of the EU puzzle'.

This chapter has examined some of these different kinds of theories, and also different kinds of conceptualisations and theoretically and conceptually based methodological approaches. They have been shown to further understanding of European integration and the EU by drawing attention to, and highlighting, key features of processes, structures, contexts, and outcomes.