Sovereignty Reloaded? A Constructivist Perspective on
European Research

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Abstract

This paper addresses three issues. Beginning with the sovereignty puzzle that emerges from multilevel governance analyses (in terms of the endurance of sovereignty within structures of overlapping authorities), it suggests supplementing the static view of multilevel governance with the dynamic perspective of Europeanization literature as an important step forward for the next generation of EU studies. In addition, it calls for a 'constructivist turn' in order to elaborate the dynamics identified by Europeanization approaches. It is argued that this provides the key to the sovereignty puzzle by analysing the link between interaction and identity. Finally, the constructivist perspective of the mutual constitution of structure and agency is advocated as a fruitful lane for the third wave of EU research as a way to overcome its struggles with unidirectional, causality notions of bottom-up and top-down relationships within multilevel governance structures.

Keywords: sovereignty, multilevel governance, Europeanization, European Studies, social constructivism

1   Introduction

In the history of European studies, there has always been a love-hate relationship between European integration and the sovereign member-states. The dynamics of integration are often portrayed as balancing along a continuum between the extremes of survival of the nation-state *versus* the Union as developing into a new 'suprastate'. With the emergence of multilevel governance analyses in the 1990s, attention has shifted from the process of integration to the

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emerging political system, leading to a description of the European Union (EU) as a complex and dynamic institution, with shifting patterns of authority amongst multiple actors across several levels, combining integration and cooperation. However, this does not settle the sovereignty issue. To the contrary, multilevel governance renders it even more relevant and puzzling. After all, it directly challenges the traditional view of a clear-cut separation between inside and outside (Walker 1993). In the conventional reading sovereignty balances on this distinction and is Janus-faced: looking both inwards (in terms of governmental supremacy) and outwards (connoting the absence of an overarching authority) at the same time.

Sovereignty is conceived as a legal, absolute and unitary condition (James 1999), and is, ultimately, indivisible. It hardly needs elucidation that such a depiction seems far removed from reality in the EU-context. For one thing, an extensive part of the business has been taken off the member-states' hands. The EU has gained a say in just about every policy area. This is not limited to so-called low politics, but includes areas such as internal security, defence, immigration, and most recently right of coinage – issues which traditionally are considered to be at the very heart of sovereignty and state survival. Juridically too, authority has been shifted to the European level. After all, in the *Van Gend and Loos* case the European Court has claimed the supremacy and direct legal effect of community law in the legal order of the member-states.[1] It is particularly this notion of mounting sharing of authority, amongst a variety of actors, across different levels, which is characteristic of multilevel governance description of the European polity, and which stands at right angles to the notion of sovereignty as an indivisible concept.

Whereas these developments at first hand appear to connote a zero-sum game between sovereignty and multilevel governance, member-states still play a key role in these governance structures (see notably Marks *et al.* 1995). Apparently, sovereign statehood is not obsolete or dead. After all, when it comes to the crunch, member-states can still appeal to their status as sovereigns. From a governance perspective there is 'irritating evidence' of the 'unrestricted vitality of national governments' (Kohler-Koch 1996b: 364). Combined with the recognition that the EU is far from a (supra)state itself, this leaves us with a rather ambiguous picture of sovereign statehood. What comes to the fore is a patchwork or amalgam of differing and

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[1] Case 26/62, NV. Algemene Transporten Expeditie Onderneming van Gend en Loos *v.* Nederlandse Administratie der Belastingen [1963] ECR 1, [1963] CMLR 105. In addition, the progress with regard to the integration of a Charter of Rights and the development of a European Constitution irrevocably change the formal set up. As this would include written changes to the founding documents, member states would lose their status as *Herren der Verträge* (Wind 2001).

overlapping political arrangements. At the same time, a pure legal reading of sovereignty as a juridical principle seems hardly satisfactory, as it does not capture the dynamics of the alleged postmodern context, and the changing institutions as described by multilevel governance. Unfortunately, the multilevel governance literature leaves the sovereignty issues by and large unaddressed. While it indeed provides a 'compelling metaphor' (Rosamond 2000) of the dispersal of authority within the contemporary polity of the EU, and appears to be a step forward for European Studies as it moves beyond the discussion of sovereignty as something that is 'ever present or about to disappear' (Walker 1990: 168), multilevel governance fails to discuss how sharing of authority amongst a variety of actors relates to the sovereignty of member-states as key actors in this structure. This paper sets out to analyse the puzzle of the resilience of sovereign statehood within a multilevel governance context. In order to try and make sense of this paradoxical state of affairs, there is a need for conceptual and theoretical clarification. Indeed a persistent objection against multilevel governance is its focus on description, at the cost of theorization.

In this paper, I propose to combine the governance turn in EU studies with both the notion of Europeanization as the rejoinder to the traditionally linear integration theories, and the 'constructivist turn' (Checkel 1998) in IR theory. As it focuses on the *dynamics* behind the emergent European political order, and the multifaceted interrelationships between different levels within this order, Europeanization can serve as frame of reference for the analysis of the continuation and change of the institution of sovereignty within the alleged postmodern EU-context. Constructivism adds to this a theoretical notion on the construction of social reality, and a conceptualization of identity formation (see Wendt 1999), as well as, crucially, the mutual constitution of structure and agency (see notably Wendt 1987, Gould 1998, Dessler 1989).[2] Together this will help us to better understand the 'nature of the beast' (Risse-Kappen 1996) in terms of an evolving multi-level polity beyond the member-states. Moreover, it will enable us to account for the alleged 'schizophrenic' character of sovereignty, i.e. the changing but prolonged status of sovereign statehood within a multilevel governance context. In addition, it is argued that the structure-agency discussion might turn out to be beneficial to the Europeanization debate in its struggles with causality notions of bottom-up and top-down relationships. So far this literature has had a hard time in dealing with the interactive processes

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[2] The analysis of structure-agency in terms of constitutive interaction of course originates in structuration theory in sociology as developed by Giddens (1979, 1984). As it has been taken up and elaborated in the context of international relations, this paper will refer to the extensive literature on the structure/agency-debate within IR theory.

of mutual change and influence between the member-states and European institutions. It is the intensified interconnectedness and concurrent new modes of interaction between different levels of governance, which necessitates the proposed 'third wave' of research on the EU (cf. Holzhacker and Haverland forthcoming). In my view, a constructivist perspective has a lot to offer in terms of conceptual clarification in this broader context too and as such can provide helpful insights at this turning point towards the third wave of research on the EU.[3]

This paper proceeds as follows. The next section will give an overview of the multilevel governance approach (section 2.1) and discusses its remnant statism (section 2.2). It will be argued that multilevel governance is unable to deal with the endurance of sovereignty in contemporary EU-Europe because of a static view. Section 2.3 will briefly discuss the lack of 'cross-fertilization' between multilevel governance and Europeanization approaches, and maintains that the added value of the latter literature consists of a dynamic dimension. In order to develop this tentative 'processual view' and to overcome the struggles with unidirectional biases, it is argued that the Europeanization approaches could benefit from the structure/agency debate that prevails in IR theory. In particular constructivism has elaborated this in terms of mutual constitution within a framework of intersubjective understandings and analyses the link between interaction and identity (section 3.1). Section 3.2 then discusses how these elements together enable us to clarify the 'continuity in change' of sovereign identities in a postmodern, multilevel governance context. To conclude, section 4 links the discussion back to the broader framework of European Studies and suggests how it can advance the proposed 'third wave' in Europeanization research (Holzhacker and Haverland forthcoming).

2.1   Multilevel governance – key points

Whereas originally European Studies consisted of theories of integration, in the nineties there was a move away from seeking to understand the process of integration and to predict where it is heading, towards analysing the 'nature of the beast' that had emerged in the meantime (Risse-Kappen 1996, cf. Puchala 1972). In the process of theorising integration, the emerging 'Euro-polity' had previously been left underdeveloped. However, the ambiguous picture that has evolved from the integration process so far has prompted discussion about the European order as 'the first truly post-modern international political form' and 'multiperspectival polity'

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[3] For other (calls for) constructivist approaches to EU studies see amongst others Christiansen *et al.* (2001), Checkel (1999, 2001b), Jupille *et al.* (2003), Jørgensen (1997b), Risse (2004), Shaw and Wiener (2000), Wiener and Diez (2004), and special issues of the *Journal of European Public Policy* 6(4), 1999, and *Comparative Political Studies* 36(1/2), 2003.

(Ruggie 1993: 140, 172, Anderson 1996, Caporaso 1996), in which states '…operate within a much more complex, cross-cutting network of governance, based upon the breakdown of the distinction between domestic and foreign affairs, on mutual interference in each other's domestic affairs, on increasing mutual transparency, and on the emergence of a sufficiently strong sense of community to guarantee mutual security' (Wallace 1999: 519). The multilevel governance approach captures the mood of these postmodern times well. Instigated by insights from domestic and comparative politics, it sets out to study the EU as a polity. As such the EU as a political system has moved from *explanans* to *explanandum* (Jachtenfuchs 2001, Caporaso 1996); and hence the criticism that multilevel governance does not address the 'causal motor of integration' (Jordan 2001: 201) seems off the mark as that is precisely what it did *not* set out to do (see George 2004). Besides this move beyond the intergovernmentalism *vs* supranationalism/neo-functionalism debate, multilevel governance also tries to overcome the disciplinary cleavages between Comparative Politics and IR theory. Indeed the notion of *governance* indicates a transgressing of the boundaries between the inside and the outside, between domestic politics and foreign affairs, and between public and private spheres. The additive 'multilevel', in turn, indicates the attempt to encompass the paradoxical yet parallel developments of increasing centralization towards the European level and regionalization to subnational as well as private institutions (Jørgensen 1997a).[4]

Drawing from several strands of multilevel governance Hooghe and Marks (2001a: 3-4) summarize the approach into three main characteristics. First, leaving behind the intergovernmentalist notion of the decision-making monopoly of national governments, multilevel governance is characterized by a sharing of competencies amongst a variety of actors at a variety of levels. Much in line with supranationalism, the focus is on the autonomous role played by the European institutions (notably the Commission) in the policy-making process. Rather than acting as agents of national governments, these have become actors in their own right. Moreover, they increasingly have an independent impact within the jurisdiction of member-states; this is illustrated most clearly in the case of the European Court of Justice. Besides these supranational actors both subnational and non-governmental actors have gained access to and an independent impact on the decision-making process.

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[4] Rosenau has suggested referring to these combined developments *fragme*ntation and integ*ration* as 'fragmeration'. For a most recent elaboration, in which he links the governance approach in IR theory to the governance turn in European Studies, see Rosenau (2004).

This has resulted in a second characteristic, namely, the undermining of the conventional separation between domestic and international politics. Whereas state governments used to be important gatekeepers when it came to representation of interests at the supranational level, this role has been circumvented by new lines of communication and representation due to multiple points of access for sub- and transnational or non-governmental actors. The once clear-cut separation between internal and external affairs has been blurred, and the domestic and international arenas have become 'almost seamless' within the EU context (Hooghe and Marks 2001a: 28, 78). Overall, one can distinguish a tripartite move away from national governments: i) upwards, as a most direct consequence of European integration; ii) downwards, because of regionalization and subsequent empowerment of subnational actors; and iii) sideways, to non-governmental actors such as e.g. public-private partnerships. This latter shift is foremost elaborated in the analysis of EU politics in terms of network governance. In this reading, '[p]olitical reality is held to be depicted far more accurately in terms of a network that can trace the tight, compact patterns of interaction between public and private actors of the most varied nature and at the same time able to make clear that we are not, in fact, dealing with a set of pre- or subordinate relationships, but instead with a bargaining process between strategies of action being pursued by mutually dependent, but at the same time autonomous, actors' (Kohler-Koch 1996b: 369-70).[5]

The third element of multilevel governance seems to follow logically; it states that a new mode of decision-making has emerged which has institutionalized the loss of control for national governments. It can be characterized as a 'multi-tier negotiating system' in which issues are being dealt with at several levels concomitantly, throughout all phases of the process (Kohler-Koch 1996a). Still, this does not imply a complete loss of any say that national governments might have. To the contrary, multilevel governance does not argue the obsolescence of state actors, but continues to appoint them a key role in European politics (Marks *et al.* 1995). Hence, while multilevel governance appears to share some of the characteristics of both intergovernmentalism (e.g. the centrality of member-states) and supranationalism (e.g. European institutions as autonomous actors), it clearly distances itself from that debate. It does so by emphasising on the one hand that a member-state is but one actor amongst many others. And on the other hand by interpreting governance not as something 'above' the state like a

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[5] See also Kohler-Koch and Eising (1999) and Jachtenfuchs (1995, 2001). Hooghe and Marks have only recently added the move sideways to their analysis (Hooghe and Marks 2001b, 2003, Marks and Hooghe 2004). Hence Rosenau's (2004) criticism of multilevel governance, that it implies hierarchy, and lacks to address the horizontal dimension, only counts for the early multilevel governance literature by Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks.

suprastate structure, but as governance *beyond* the state (Jachtenfuchs 1997). This connotes governance *with* governments. And national governments still are *primus inter pares* as well (Jessop 2004: 57). As such, multilevel governance seems to present a compromising 'in-between'; it rejects the 'either-or' discussion with interstate bargaining and transnational coalition building as mutually exclusive options (Risse-Kappen 1996), and regards the current structures as an intermediate arrangement in its own right (Anderson 1996, Kohler-Koch 1996a).[6]

2.2   Remnant statism

Linking the 'in-between' classification to the central issue of this paper, the burning question is how this intermediate arrangement relates to the sovereign status of member-states. Crucial in light of our discussion, multilevel governance combines the transformation of the nation-state with its erosion (Bache and Flinders 2004). Yet, multilevel governance can still be regarded as a statist approach. While governance approaches are often juxtaposed to statist or state-centred approaches (Marks *et al.* 1996, Jessop 2004) multilevel governance does not fully escape the 'practice of locating the state at the centre of the scheme' (Rosenau 2004: 40). To be clear, to some extent it does stay safe from state centric hazards. For one thing, the (member-)state is not examined in isolation, and treated consequently as an independent variable (Jessop 2004: 51). Moreover, multilevel governance distinguishes between the state as institution and state executives, who can pursue their own interests. Hence, differing from intergovernmentalism, the state is no longer treated as a unitary actor (see e.g. Kohler-Koch 1996a, Hooghe and Marks 2001a). Finally, while both intergovernmentalism and supranationalism can be criticized for 'fetishising formal constitutional and juridical features' and ignoring *de facto* state capacities (Jessop 2004: 55), modalities of power are indeed central to multilevel governance analyses. With a focus on the locus of control (Hooghe and Marks 2001a: 2) multilevel governance does indeed explicitly address the latter element.[7]

However, while multilevel governance maintains the transformation of the member-state, rather than its robustness (intergovernmentalism) or its withering away and rescaling of

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[6] For a criticism of this possibility, see Neyer (2003). For a discussion of multilevel governance as a substitute for neofunctionalism, see George (2004). He argues that '… multi-level governance does not escape the dichotomy, but is simply a more sophisticated restatement of one side of it … although minus functional spillover, which of course is why it needs a new name.' (George 2004: 108, 112). Jordan (2001) also identifies neofunctionalism as the intellectual roots of multilevel governance.

[7] However, it can be questioned whether this is anymore essential to sovereignty than formal constitutional features, as will be argued below.

statehood on a higher level (supranationalism/neo-functionalism), there is some remnant statism in this approach, too. Apart from the obvious fact that states are still addressed as the key actors in governance arena, theoretically the member-state is still the referent from which the other actors are conceptualized, be it upwards, downwards or sideways. For instance, the role of transnational actors is interpreted as a move sideways, *away from the state*. In this context Shaw and Wiener (2000) speak of the paradox of the European polity, which appears a 'near-state' and is antithetical to stateness at the same time: 'The risk of studying European governance then lies in the continuous *revival* of the idea of stateness, whether that takes the form of *resistance* against or *reform* towards the establishment of statelike patterns.' (Shaw and Wiener 2000: 65, italics in the original). Multilevel governance approaches fail to address this paradox and to elaborate on how these changes are compatible with the resilience of the principle of sovereignty. If we put the above profile of multilevel governance next to the Westphalian framework of reference, an ambiguous picture is revealed. With the emerging governance structures outside the state on the one hand, and the undermining of governmental representation on the other, multilevel governance 'escapes our conventional understanding of statehood' (Hooghe 1996: 15) and seems to connote a 'world turned inside out and outside in' (Anderson 1996: 135). Indeed, at face value multilevel governance appears a direct impingement of sovereign statehood, from three directions – both bottom-up e.g. loss of gate-keeping, top-down e.g. direct effect of EU law, and sideways e.g. increasing role of non-state actors. As such, the developments described by multilevel governance challenge both the notions of international anarchy (external sovereignty) and governmental supremacy (internal sovereignty). In this context it is remarkable that most multilevel governance theorists address sovereignty at most anecdotally (with the exception of Marks *et al.* 1995, see Aalberts 2004).

In line with ongoing debates in IR theory, there is yet another way in which multilevel governance can be conceived as a statist approach. Statism then not only connotes an exclusive focus on states as actors in the (inter)national arena, but also refers to taking the state as a 'given' i.e. an immutable, so-called brute fact (Bartelson 1998). This is also referred to as *reification* which is defined as

> 'the apprehension of the products of human activity *as if* they were
> something else than human products – such as facts of nature, results of
> cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will. … The reified world is …
> experienced by man as a strange facticity, an *opus alienum* over which he

has no control rather than as the *opus proprium* of his own productive activity' (Berger and Luckmann 1991 [1966]: 106, italics in original).

Indeed, two prominent authors of multilevel governance, Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, briefly address the flaw of reification, and accept the reading of states as social institutions. In their explication this results to a varying degree in differentiation from one's environment as well as the possibility to act coherently. Along this line they suggest that '[i]f states are viewed as sets of commonly accepted rules that specify a particular authoritative order, then one should ask how such rules may change over time, and whether and how they will be defended.' (Hooghe and Marks 2001a: 74). This mirrors a notion of the relationship between member states and the EU in regime-like terms. Still, this hardly seems an adequate picture, as it does not really do justice to the institutional features that have advanced since the beginning of the integration process. If, according to a common definition, regimes are described as a set of 'implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations' (Krasner 1983: 2), then the EU would at a minimum connote a 'saturated regime', founded on the core institution of the 'embedded *acquis communautaire*' (Christiansen *et al.* 1999: 539, Wiener 1998). The EU connotes more than a regulative agreement between independent states.[8] This is a *lacuna* in multilevel governance where Europeanization could provide a clarifying perspective, given its more explicit focus on dynamics of adaptation.

2.3   Multilevel governance vs Europeanization

In contrast to multilevel governance the focus of the Europeanization literature is again on *process*. However, rather than contemplating the imminent end product of European integration as was the focus of the classical debate, attention is turned to the impact of the process as it is, i.e. the dynamics of the evolving European polity, and notably the changes in and among institutions involved. The relationship between Europeanization research and multilevel governance approaches is a bit ambiguous. Generally speaking, these seem parallel but isolated branches of literature, with little cross-referencing. Alternatively the relationship is addressed only parenthetically. Just to pick a few examples as a (far from representative) illustration: handbooks like George/Bache (2001) and Rosamond (2000) focus on multilevel governance,

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[8] Moreover, regime theory does not seem particularly suited to analyse the progressing transformation of states within a multilevel governance context, as it starts from the realist assumption that states are self-interest maximizers, whose identities and interests remain constant throughout the process (cf. Krasner 1983). I will take up on this issue below.

with 'Europeanization' not even being listed in the index. The contributions to Cowles and Smith (2000), to mention another often quoted volume, discuss both multi-level governance and Europeanization, but not in connection to each other. Nor do the editors in their introductory chapter combine the two concepts. Cowles *et al.* (2001) obviously discuss Europeanization; and 'multilevel governance' is mentioned only once throughout the book. See also Featherstone and Radaelli's (2003b) most recent volume on Europeanization with merely four references to multilevel governance, three of which appear in the same chapter. Olsen in his discussion of the many faces of Europeanization, is most explicit in the sense that he describes one reading in terms of multilevel governance. Europeanization then 'involves the division of responsibilities and powers between different levels of governance. All multilevel systems of governance need to work out a balance between unity and diversity, central co-ordination and local autonomy. Europeanization […] implies adapting national and sub-national systems of governance to a European political centre and European-wide norms' (Olsen 2002: 923-4). A possible exception to the practice of neglect is Jachtenfuchs and Kohler-Koch (2004), who dedicate a paragraph to Europeanization in their chapter on governance approaches. While they do call for an extension of the Europeanization agenda beyond policy-making to more institutional issues, such as shifting boundaries between public and private spheres – i.e. multilevel governance, they fail to explicitly address the link between the approaches.

In my reading, Europeanization adds to multilevel governance as it focuses on the dynamics behind the emergent European political order, whereas multilevel governance is first and foremost a description of inter-linkage between the levels within the European polity, in terms of the locus of political control. This descriptive focus leads to the often-launched criticism that multilevel governance lacks a proper theoretical framework (but see George 2004). The Europeanization literature, conversely, analyses the continuing processes of interaction and mutual adaptation. In this context it sets out to explore explanations for institutional change and continuity and explores the impact of the changing environment on the member-states. As such Europeanization could serve as a theoretical supplement to multilevel governance in order to substantiate this latter approach. However, Europeanization research is far from unproblematic itself. For one thing, if suffers from an overkill of definitions and applications (Olsen 2002, Radaelli 2000). A popular definition is offered by Radaelli (2000: 3), who describes Europeanization as

‘[p]rocesses of (a) construction (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’ and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU decisions and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies.’

This definition seems most helpful for the purposes of this paper as it addresses a wider scale of dimensions than most other definitions, some of which limit their focus to changes in policy-making. Moreover, it hints at structure/agency issues as it includes both notions of construction and institutionalization and consolidation, which are then linked to identity issues. As will be shown in section 3, this is an important issue with regard to our sovereignty puzzle. Still, the above definition could suffer from a second and more critical flaw of Europeanization research so far, that is a unidirectional perspective. This has resulted in either a bottom-up or a top-down perspective, which has impeded abilities to account for feedback loops, as has been convincingly argued on several occasions. In order to overcome these biases, Holzhacker and Haverland (forthcoming) propose to introduce a third wave in European Studies, which considers both processes as systematically related processes as a kind of rotating cork-screw.[9]

For the further theoretical exploration of these interaction processes between different levels and actors, constructivism provides some interesting insights in terms of the structure/agency debate in IR theory. Whereas IR theory has often been pushed aside as irrelevant for the study of the European Union given the moribund dichotomy between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism that emerged from that discipline, and Comparative Politics is proposed as a better perspective to study the emerging governance structures (cf. Jachtenfuchs 2001), it will be argued that the constructivist turn can illuminate the dynamics of mutual adaptation. In addition, and particularly relevant to our analysis of the sovereignty puzzle, is the constructivist notion of identity formation.[10] This will allow us to explore both change and continuity, for it is a misreading of constructivism that it can only account for change. As such it adds a theoretical framework to Europeanization, with which we can explore both change and continuity without falling into the trap of reification.

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[9] Radaelli's definition fits this cork-screw model insofar as it does include a time dimension ('first …. then'), which Holzhacker and Haverland (forthcoming) advocate as an important element of the so-called third wave, too. A constructivist perspective adds to this a notion of the *mutual* constitution of structure and agency, in which case it might not always be so clear what the time sequence is.

[10] This is the crucial difference between constructivism and (sociological) institutionalism. Whereas these labels are sometimes used interchangeably (see for instance Börzel and Risse 2003), institutionalism limits its focus to the analysis of change in behaviour (and maybe preferences), whereas constructivism takes also interests and identities to be endogenous to interaction.

3.1 A constructivist perspective – key points

The above quote about reification of the state (see p. 8-9) can be considered one of the axioms of constructivism. Crucial in this approach is the distinction between the natural and the social world, between physical, 'brute' facts and 'institutional facts', i.e. facts that depend on an intersubjective frame of reference (Searle 1995). In other words, 'even our most enduring institutions are based on collective understandings … they are reified structures that were once upon a time conceived *ex nihilo* by human consciousness … [which] were subsequently diffused and consolidated until they were taken for granted' (Adler 1997: 322). This focus on intersubjectivity as the basis for social reality and on the dynamics between structure and agency can help unravel the sovereignty puzzle in multilevel governance Europe. In order to do so, I will make use of Wendt's analysis. He is considered one of the key figures in constructivism and his book (Wendt 1999) is one of the most extensive elaborations of social constructivism. More specifically, his analysis of identity formation on the basis of intersubjective understandings will prove to be clarifying for our analysis of sovereignty in a multilevel governance context.
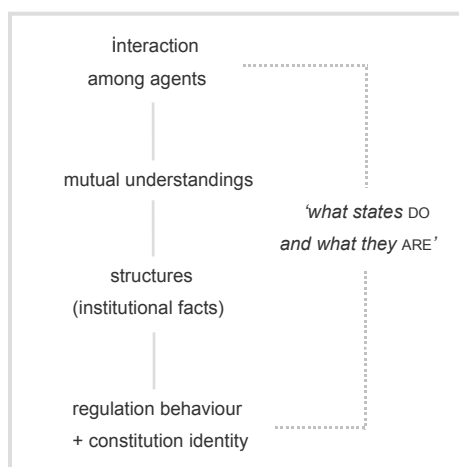

Figure I: Identity construction a la Wendt

Crucial for the understanding of identities is the mutual constitution of structure and agency. In a nutshell, the identity of social entities (read: member-states) are not intrinsic, but relational and emerge from structures. These consist of (i) shared knowledge; (ii) material resources; and (iii) practices (Wendt 1995). It follows that structures are not exogenously given either, but emerge through interaction amongst agents. Interaction and practice result in the constitution of shared meanings, which develop into structures that in turn affect behaviour and constitute identities (see figure 1). Thus, key structures are intersubjective i.e. social instead of material, and exist by grace of interaction. As such they are continuously in process. Consequently, structure has no meaning independent of (state) practice to accept certain institutions as a basic rule in international politics i.e. agency. Hence the focus is on 'distribution of knowledge' and intersubjective understandings. In that sense, the 'real world' of international politics consists of brute, material facts and institutional facts alike (Wendt 1999: 140, 110, Wendt and Friedheim 1995).

As identities in turn depend on these intersubjective structures, they are inherently relational and, consequently, changeable. Still this does not mean that they are fluid and instable. Not at all, as structures tend to support certain behaviours, while discouraging others and as such can be considered to have a conservative impact. In contrast to an individualist ontology – in which case all the constitutive power lies with the agents – constructivism emphasizes the constitutive feedback of structures on identities, too. Intersubjective constructions confront agents as obdurate institutional facts (Wendt 1994: 389), which is nicely captured by the notion of 'structure'.[11] Hence, while they are intersubjective in their nature, this does not mean institutional facts can easily (be) change(d). Once constituted, institutional facts 'behave as' and are 'acted upon' as brute or hard facts. Nevertheless, they are intersubjective and exist on the basis of interaction. Interaction as such forms the foundation of social reality. In this sense, both structures and (identities of) agents are dependent variables at the same time – they are *mutually constitutive*. One author aptly summarized the crux of the debate as follows: structure is both the outcome and the medium of (inter)action, and '[a]n actor can act socially only because there exists a social structure to draw on, and it is only through the actions of agents that structure is reproduced (and, potentially, transformed)' (Dessler 1989: 452).

The quote on the link between structure and agency conceals that this dual dynamic of reproduction and transformation counts for structure and agents alike. Wendt discusses two ways in which interaction can affect identity. The basic relationship is the connection between what actors (here: states) *do* and what they *are*. Interaction brings about *and* sustains identity. On the one hand, interaction can serve to reinforce the status quo identity of agents. When agents are communicating, they are not only pursuing their self-interested goals, but 'are also instantiating and reproducing a particular conception of who they are' (Wendt 1999: 341). This is the constitutive effect of interaction. In the process of communication, agents participate in the joint constitution of their identities and counter-identities. Hence it should be noted, that even when identities (and interests) remain relatively stable, this constancy is still *endo*genous to interaction.[12] The second dynamic of interaction builds upon this endogenity of identity. As they are always in process, and result from practice, the boundaries of the agent's identity (here the member-state) are, in principle, always at stake. This approach allows for the emergence of

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[11] Actually, Wendt refers to 'social facts'. However, in my opinion the label institutional fact is more accurate. For a distinction between social *vs* institutional facts, see Searle (1995)

[12] This in contrast to rational choice and regime theory, which considers interests and identity to be given and as such exogenous to interaction. Arguably multilevel governance shares this individualist ontology in combination with an instrumental logic of action (Checkel 2001a, Risse 2004, George 2004).

collective identities – as is the case in the EU context, precisely because identity is a dependent variable. This means that as a result of interaction and the shared meanings evolving from that, a sort of 'super-ordinate identity' can develop above and beyond the state.[13] Hence, state identity is both constituted, reinforced *and* can be transformed through interaction. And it is this understanding of the concomitant dynamics of identity construction and change that can be useful for our discussion about multilevel governance and sovereignty.

Sovereignty is first and foremost part of what Wendt has labelled a state's social or *role identity*. Role identities are not based on intrinsic properties an agent might have, but only exist in a social context, in relation to other agents (who *vice versa* possess relevant counter-identities). As such, role identities cannot be enacted unilaterally, but exist on the basis of shared expectations and collective understandings. Sovereignty is part of such a role identity, as it can be conceived as a status granted by fellow-states by means of recognition. It is recognition that renders sovereignty an institution shared by many. Consequently, sovereignty as an institutional fact exists by grace of a specific audience, 'an international society which [still] recognizes the distinction between internal and external as valid and acts upon the belief in the existence of that distinction' (Werner and de Wilde 2001: 288). Such an understanding of the contingent feature of state identity and the institution of sovereignty is crucial for our attempt to account for the continuity and change of sovereignty within multilevel governance Europe. The crucial element lies in the understanding that this institution is an institutional fact: it consists of intersubjective meanings that emerge from interaction. These institutional facts in turn not only affect behaviour, but concomitantly constitute identity, including sovereign identities.[14]

3.2   Constructivist reading of sovereignty in multilevel governance structures

By conceiving sovereign statehood as the historical innovation it is, shifting the focus to the context of complex political practices of modern states, and the 'minute rituals through which states are constantly made and remade' (Walker 1991: 452), constructivism can help to clarify what's going on in Europe in terms of the endurance of sovereignty in a multilevel governance context. How does this all fit the multilevel governance picture? From the above discussion it

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[13] This general idea can be traced back to Karl Deutsch. In the 1950s he pointed out the likelihood of the formation of new (security) communities on the basis of a shared identity as a consequence of increased social interactions within the EC-context (cf. Deutsch 1953, 1957, see also Adler and Barnett 1998).

[14] For a more extensive and critical analysis of Wendt's discussion of sovereignty, see Bartelson (1998) and Aalberts (2002)

follows that it can be seen as an emerging structure i.e. multilevel polity and process or practice, at the same time. To put it more accurately: multilevel governance consists of an evolving intersubjective structure emerging from, and therefore endogenous to, process and interaction. From the interaction amongst member-states mutual understandings transpire, which in turn lead to the development of intersubjective structures and institutional arrangements, i.e. multilevel governance structures. As aforementioned, multilevel governance academics reject a unitary view of the state. Hooghe and Marks (2001a) are most explicit in this, and argue that the focus should be on state executives. Whereas this shows sensitivity to at least one aspect of the analytical problem of statism, it is only a first step, for such a perspective entails the risk of ending up with an individualist ontology (cf. neo-realism). Taking individuals as the starting point for explaining collective patterns of action begets a bottom-up perspective towards the agency/structure relationship. Consequently, agents have a constitutive effect on structures, but such a perspective cannot account for the constitutive feedback of structures on agents. This is where the added value of the Europeanization approaches lies. Within this literature the attention is shifted to the impact of institutional arrangements (structure) on the member-states (agents). These intersubjective structures constitute the context that sets the boundaries in which the member-states (and, as one of the key features of multilevel governance, other actors) operate. This not only refers to constraints and opportunity structures in terms of their preferences and behaviour, but reaches further to the boundaries of 'Self', i.e. identity.[15] As Holzhacker and Haverland (forthcoming) maintain 'if we truly want to [understand] the evolving multi-level political system of the EU and the member states, we must also acknowledge the interactive processes that feed back onto themselves', i.e. onto the agents. Europeanization hence addresses and potentially can account for the change in behaviour, and, crucially, identity of agents. Indeed, multilevel governance underlines the need to shift the focus from the disappearance of their identity as such as held by supranationalism *versus* the givenness and stability of identity as held by intergovernmentalism to the transformation of member-state identities.

However, the sovereignty puzzle does not merely entail change as such, but rather consists of the endurance of sovereignty within an alleged non-sovereign context, consisting of overlapping authorities and the curtailment of state gate-keeping, of multilevel governance.

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[15] Again, this is where constructivism adds a dimension to regime theory and institutionalism, which analyse institutions as 'persistent sets of rules that constrain activity, shape expectations, and prescribe [behavioural] roles' (Keohane 1988: 384). In this regard regimes connote specific institutions, as they are focused on particular issues (see the definition by Krasner, p. 9).

Here constructivism provides helpful insights, by analysing sovereignty as an institutional fact that emerges from interaction which affects identity. The reality of sovereignty hence 'consists in its use and acceptance'(Werner and de Wilde 2001: 304, Ruggie 1998). As long as states mutually accept each other as sovereigns, and tune their behaviour accordingly, they are. In essence, this is what their (sovereign) individuality entails. Hence, while Europeanization approaches are correct in pointing out that interaction in terms of multilevel governance influences the (identities of) member-states, this does not trounce upon sovereign individualities as such, because of a simultaneous sovereignty discourse. This is the conservative dynamic of interaction. When states (or rather, state executives) are communicating in the European arena, they are constantly constituting and reproducing their mutual quality as sovereign states, irrespective of their particular vision for the future of Europe. In this sense, states can be considered self-fulfilling prophecies and sovereignty as an institutional fact can be said to entail a 'sedimented discourse' – a discourse that as a result of political and social practice has become relatively permanent and durable (Howarth 1995: 127-8, 132). As straightforward as it may appear, this dynamic of interaction ensures the continuation of sovereign identity within ostensibly incompatible and divergent multilevel governance structures. In sum, multilevel governance and sovereignty are not a zero-sum game. While the multilevel governance structure impacts on state identities, and statehood to an increasing degree is defined by EU-membership (Risse 2004), these Europeanized states retain their sovereign identity due to a simultaneous sovereignty discourse.[16] The degree of Europeanization is not inversely proportional to sovereignty in terms of 'more Europeanized = less sovereign'. Such a formula is flawed insofar as it disregards that sovereignty is an institutional fact that exists on the basis of a dual logic of interaction, which lies at the basis of the mutual constitution of structure and agency.

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[16] Risse (2004) discusses the construction of European identity too, but focuses in this context on citizen's identities, i.e. their sense of belonging and (supra)national attachments. However, he reaches a similar conclusion: 'studying questions of European identity highlights the importance of analysing the discursive construction of meanings' (Risse 2004: 171, see also Wæver 2004).

4   Conclusion

This paper set out to address three issues that might have seemed rather distant at first sight. However, they are related and interlinked through the understanding of social reality and the constitution of structures and agents. The first issue followed from the lack of theoretical backbone within multilevel governance approaches, and in particular their failure to address the sovereignty puzzle that emerges from their analyses. In this context it was suggested to supplement multilevel governance with bottom-up and top-down dynamics in the Europeanization literature. Whereas Europeanists so far have not discussed this sovereignty puzzle either, they add a processual view to the static approach of multilevel governance, by focusing on the impact of the changing environment on member-states. This is an important, if only first, step for the next generation in EU studies. In order to elaborate these dynamics in terms of 'continuity in change' with regard to sovereign identity, this paper secondly advocated a constructivist perspective. Such a perspective not only clarifies our discussion through analysing the link between interaction and the continuation and/or transformation of sovereign identity, but also provides helpful insights in terms of mutual constitution of structure and agency. As a third issue, the structure/agency debate in turn is argued to be particular relevant to the general call for a third wave in EU research as proposed by Holzhacker and Haverland (forthcoming). So far Europeanization literature has suffered from a unidirectional perspective, emphasizing either bottom-up or top-down processes, without being able to account for feedback loops. It has been argued here that as soon as one acknowledges and aims to analyze these double dynamics, one is dealing with mutual constitution, and the structure/agency debate comes into the picture. Rather than isolating either the top-down or the bottom-up perspective with regard to causal impact, a constructivist perspective emphasizes that actors play an active part in the constitution of social structures, which in turn constitute their identities and relationships and influence their behaviour and preferences – which then again feed back into the institutional arrangements.[17] As such this would be a clarifying perspective and fruitful line of research for the third wave of EU research in its aim to tackle the dynamics of European integration and Europeanization in tandem.

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[17] While Featherstone and Radaelli (2003a) acknowledge the importance of notions of structure and agency for the Europeanization research, they still apply causality language, which does not fit a notion of mutual constitution (see Aalberts and van Munster 2003). Risse (2004) addresses the structure/agency-debate too, but in his elaboration he tends to limit the focus to March and Olsen's (1998) Logic of Appropriateness (as opposed to its instrumental counterpart – the Logic of Consequences) and the impact on behaviour and preferences, rather than the deeper and more abstract notion of identity.

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