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The Isle of Europe: what can ethnography tell us about politics at the European Parliament?

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Abstract[1]

This paper argues that ethnography has much to offer scholarship of European Parliament [EP] politics. By observing everyday activities, having access to backstage political processes and practices, and seeking to understand actors' perspectives, it can enhance our understanding of the everyday internal functioning of this institution, which at present remains somewhat of a black-box. Ethnography can shed light on politics inside the EP by investigating how the political groups are experienced in practice and understood by actors, and by exploring the institutional context in which they operate. The paper firstly reviews what we know about EP politics, focusing on group cohesion research, and then identifies a gap in the literature. It recommends ethnography as an appropriate methodological approach to start filling this gap and introduces organisational ethnography. It then presents some initial findings from two months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out inside the EP in 2010.

Introduction

"It is another world, you cannot imagine it. No one explains it to you exactly, and even if they do, it's not the same as actually being here, it's very different...if you don't actually work for the institutions, then you don't really understand how they function, and how they work. You can have the best theories outside, reading and imagining things, but it's not the same as having a firsthand experience" (ALDE assistant, interview 29/7/2010).

When carrying out observation at the European Parliament [EP] in the early 1990's, Abélès found that 'at once, we have the impression of dealing with a closed world with its own codes and ways of doing things' (1993:1). My recent elite interviews with EP assistants and officials suggest this remains the case in 2010. As the EP's powers have been continuously enhanced over the last 20 years with each successive treaty, the institution has increasingly attracted academic attention. However, Abélès' remains the only ethnographic exploration of the institution to-date which looks at the internal functioning of the institution at the everyday level. Whilst statistical research has contributed significantly to explaining institutional behaviour and outcomes, the EP's internal organisation and daily functioning have remained somewhat of a 'black-box' (Bowler & Farrell:1995:220) and former Secretary-General Julian Priestley has lamented that 'there is relatively little on the life of the Parliament' (2008:xi). The EP's *sui generis* nature means that ethnography, with its focus on understanding the context and seeking the emic perspective through participation in everyday activities and observation of backstage processes, is an appropriate methodological approach with which to start addressing this gap.

Before spending a week shadowing MEPs, BBC reporter Brian Wheeler suggested of the EP that; 'beyond those people who are paid to cover it, few people in Britain really know what goes on in Brussels and Strasbourg' (13/1/2009). In a mere 50 years, the EP has progressed from 'a token talking-shop' as the ECSC's Common Assembly, to a significant institutional player shaping legislation increasingly touching the lives of its 500-million citizens, through participation in the co-decision procedure (Corbett et al:2003:354). Institutional reforms have made it arguably one of the world's most powerful elected chambers and have continuously enhanced its role in the EU policy

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process (Hix et al:2003b:192). Given that the Lisbon Treaty has continued on this trajectory, by further extending the co-decision procedure into 40 new fields, enhancing budgetary control and extending assent power in international agreements (EP: The Lisbon Treaty) - it is essential that we get to grips with processes occurring inside this institution, understand how it works and disseminate these findings.

This paper argues ethnography has much to contribute to the literature investigating the EP, particularly for those seeking to understand its internal politics and functioning. Participant observation and elite interviews enable ethnographers to grasp the emic perspective; the actors' own understanding of their world and their behaviour in it (Eriksen:2001:36). Ethnography can therefore shed light on politics at the EP by exploring how the political groups are experienced in practice and understood by the actors involved in making legislation, and by investigating the wider context in which they operate to enhance understanding of decision-making at the everyday level. The paper briefly reviews the EP literature, particularly discussing research on group cohesion, before remarking further on this gap. It then proceeds to recommend ethnography as an appropriate methodological approach to address this gap and discusses how it is done, introduces organisational ethnography and presents studies which have enriched political science research on political institution functioning. It then presents some initial findings focused on the political groups and the institutional context in which they operate, from two months of recent ethnographic fieldwork.

1. What do we know about politics at the European Parliament?

The EU treaties have continuously empowered the EP in the EU policy process and academic writing has been 'a function of its powers and prestige' (Hix et al:2003b:192) increasing in quantity and sophistication alongside it's influence. Early scholarship was largely descriptive and focused on the legislature's development (Verzichelli&Edinger:2005:255). As their influence grew, attention turned to the MEPs, their behaviour and EP politics (Noury:2002:34) and a variety of approaches have been employed (Blomgren:2003:5). Research divides into four contemporary strands; development and functioning, political behaviour and elections, internal politics and organisation, and inter-institutional bargaining (Hix et al:2003:193). Broadly, contemporary research suggests the EP has become an increasingly important institutional actor and that it has a competitive party system.

Work on inter-institutional relations has found that the co-decision procedure has increased the EP's influence in the EU policy process with each reform vis-à-vis the Council and Commission, and interest has now turned to the role of the committees in inter-institutional relations (Burns:2004,2006 Diedrichs:2004, Earnshaw & Judge: 2002,1995, Farrell & Héritier:2003,2004, Maurer:2007, Ripoll Servent:2009). Co-decision has also brought attention to the 20 committees internally which are said to be the EP's 'legislative backbone' (Neuhold:2001) and where a substantial amount of the legislative work and real deliberation is done as; 'the EP in committee is the EP at work' (McElroy:2006:180).

Research on voting behaviour has largely consisted of increasingly sophisticated statistical analyses of plenary roll call votes [RCVs]. These studies have found that the EP groups have become more cohesive over time, that voting occurs along ideological rather than national lines, and that there is a left-right cleavage (Hix:2001, Hix:2002,

Hix et al:2003a, Noury:2002). While the number of groups has increased from 3 to 7[2], relative fragmentation has declined and the party system has consolidated into a 2+several party system (Hix et al:2003a:311-318). Raunio says we can speak of the *institutionalisation* of the EP party system (2006:253). This ideological party competition and 'politics as normal' comes as a relief to those looking to the EP to alleviate the EU's perceived democratic deficit (McElroy:2006:179). Similar statistical approaches have examined coalition formation, voting patterns and relationships with member-states, while other projects have begun to address national party delegations [NPDs], representative roles, legislative norms and relations with national governments (Blomgren:2003:5, Bale & Taggart:2006, Bowler & Farrell:1999, Braghiroli:2008).

Group cohesion

Votewatch.eu, a new independent website promoting transparency in EU decision-making by providing easier access to and analysis of EP voting records, recently released its Annual Report analysing behaviour in the 7th legislature (Votewatch.eu:2010). Based on all 792 RCVs, its main finding is that this legislature, like its predecessor, votes primarily along transnational party rather than national lines, and that the groups have increased their internal cohesion (discipline) compared with the 6th legislature. The cohesion rates of the 4 largest groups are higher than that of the member-state delegations in all areas except agriculture, where the groups are less cohesive and particularly the French and Scandinavian NPDs vote independently of their groups.

The report also finds that the largest group, the EPP, despite being bigger, is on the winning side less often and that ALDE are the 'kingmakers' when the EP splits along left-right lines. It notes that competition between the centre-right and centre-left groups has increased in particular policy areas (e.g. economics, budget, environment and civil liberties). It looks at how often each group is on the winning side of the vote, as there is no stable majority in the EP, and finds the 'kingmaker' ALDE wins the most often (followed by the EPP then S&D). It finds that the groups tend to win more often in certain policy areas and reminds us that different, but relatively stable coalitions form for different policy areas; a winning centre-right coalition on economics, industry, development and international trade, a winning centre-left coalition on budget, civil liberties, environment and gender, and a winning grand coalition on agriculture, fisheries, foreign affairs, internal market and budgetary control. On aggregate, the EPP and S&D vote together[3] 70% of the time, but ALDE and S&D are the most likely to vote together, 79% of the time (2010:1-11).

This research follows in the footsteps of a tradition of RCV based studies, notably Hix, Noury and Roland's extensive 2007 study which analyses over 15,000 RCVs from 5 legislatures (1979-2004). They found that - despite the fact the EP asked hundreds of MEPs from different countries, cultures, languages, national parties and institutional backgrounds to work together - EP politics is not highly fragmented and unpredictable but has become increasingly structured (2007:3). They found the EP's groups have become highly cohesive over time and voting behaviour adheres to the classic left-right dimension and that the groups are powerful agenda-setters. Their average relative cohesion score for the dataset was 0.809, compared with 0.603 for national groups[4]

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[2] The original 3 were the Christian Democrats, Socialists and Liberals (European NAvigator) and the current 7 groups are the EPP, S&D, ALDE, Greens/EFA, ECR, EFD and GUE/NGL (European Parliament: Homepage).
[3] The percentage of times the majority of the group voted the same way as the majority of another group (2010:4).
[4] On a scale of 0-1.

and therefore voting behaviour is ideological and based on party rather than nationality (2007:94). Simultaneously, the cohesion of the parliament has decreased due to a decline in highly consensual votes (2007:104). A key example of this cohesion was in 2004 when a left coalition of MEPs did not bow to the will of their national governments but sided with the leaders of their supranational EP groups and refused to elect the Barrosso Commission due to the inclusion of Buttiglione as the Justice & Home Affairs portfolio (2007:1-3). The study shows the organisations and this cohesion had been 'gradually fashioned' since the 1979 direct elections (2007:3).

The authors argue the development of group cohesion alongside the EP's increasing powers is due to like-minded MEPs having incentives to form stable transnational organisations and compete over EU policies. They suggest this is because in democracies, political conflicts between representatives of territorial units are best solved by federalism, except for socio-economic issues which is why we see these conflicts in legislatures. In RCVs, MEPs nearly always vote with the NPD, as national parties want to secure policy outcomes from the EU and this reinforces the left-right cleavage (2007:5). However, group cohesion has increased despite an increase in internal national fractionalisation which should decrease cohesion and therefore they conclude 'this indicates that the transnational parties are able to have a disciplining effect on their national member parties' (2007:104).

A strong party system requires cohesive parties so that they can turn electoral promises into policy outcomes. The literature says *cohesion* can be explained by external institutions (the structure of relations between the legislative and executive) and internal institutions (the internal incentive structure). Externally, parties are more cohesive in parliamentary than presidential systems due to reward systems. The EU is more similar to a presidential system as once elected the Commission does not require the support of the EP majority. However, these systems can have powerful legislative organisations due to incentive structures, where the party organisations reduce transaction costs for those with similar preferences through a division-of-labour contract where backbench labour and capital (information and expertise) is exchanged for office distribution by leaders. A cohesive, specialised party benefits from higher predictability and a reputation for reliability and efficiency (2007:87-91). The authors say cohesion is therefore somewhat surprising when we compare them with national parties. Firstly, group leaders' degree of agenda control is more limited as the Commission has the right of initiative so leaders cannot filter out issues where there are divergent opinions. Secondly, leaders do not have as many disciplinary instruments as they do not control the MEPs' future careers or candidate selection in the second-order elections. They only control the allocation of reports, speaking time and internal positions (2007:5). Hix et al say their findings are 'remarkable' given the EU institutional structure and they consequently suggest 'a particular explanation of political organisation and behaviour in the EP... [the results] suggest that the external and internal institutional context of the EP provides considerable, and increasing, incentives for the establishment of binding division-of-labour contracts (party organisations)' (2007:104).

The Gap

Much post-Maastricht research investigating voting behaviour has been of this quantitative RCV-based nature. Whilst it has significantly contributed to explaining voting behaviour and institutional outcomes, there now remains a gap in the literature exploring *how* these processes are occurring *inside* the EP. There remains a need to further enhance our understanding of everyday political processes, interactions and

behaviour occurring *within* the institution itself beyond plenary voting behaviour if we hope to understand how the EP works at the everyday level and final plenary votes are produced. The committees and political groups in particular, are two central organisational elements whose operation remains relatively under-researched, as well as other internal organisational bodies which have a role in legislation-making and the EP's internal politics, (e.g. the Conference of Presidents, Bureau, Co-ordinators, NPDs and inter-groups). McElroy has said our understanding of EP legislative politics remains in its 'infancy' (2006:176) and many scholars have suggested the EP's internal operation requires further investigation[5]. Hix et al examine variables such as RCV characteristics, political group characteristics, (size, internal national and ideological diversity and government membership) and EP power, as determinants of the increasing cohesion. However, this methodological approach cannot tell us *how* this cohesion is occurring inside the institution at the everyday level, or how the actors involved in these processes understand and attribute meaning to their behaviour. This is important if we hope to understand how decisions and legislation are made, and how politics is practised at the everyday level inside the EP. Ethnographic research, with its orientation towards everyday processes and activities, exploring the context and the emic perspective, can provide this added value and shine light into the black-box.

2. What does ethnography offer?

"Ethnography...is 'the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one's own experience in the world of these others' "
(Van Maanen:1988 in Emerson et al:1995:10).

Qualitative research is a tradition that cross-cuts disciplines which has seen a resurgence in recent years after quantitative methods have largely dominated the social sciences since the 1950's (Ybema et al:2009:3). Broadly, it aims to enhance our understanding of social processes by studying actors in their natural setting, paying attention to contextual factors and seeking to understand phenomena and actors on their own terms; the *emic perspective* (Denzin&Lincoln:1998:1-5, Eriksen:2001:36). It aims to provide an in-depth understanding of people's experiences, perspectives and histories in context and is characterised by an inductive approach, unstructured context-sensitive methods, rich data, explanations at the level of meaning and micro-social processes and *how* questions (Spencer et al:2003:3). As multiple methods are often used, Denzin and Lincoln suggest research may be viewed as a *bricolage* and the researcher as a *bricoleur* - a jack-of-all-trades who uses whatever tools are at hand to explore the question in the context, understanding that research is an interactive process shaped by themselves, the setting and participants at that moment. The emergent *bricolage* stresses the meaningful relationships that operate in the context (1998:1-5). Qualitative research thus has the potential to help us understand the meaningful interactions occurring inside the EP and way actors understand and negotiate their institutional context[6].

Ethnography is an important methodological approach within the qualitative tradition and has three important characteristics. Firstly, ethnography is often equated with the research method *participant observation,* widely viewed as the 'hallmark' of anthropology (Stocking:1983:70). Ethnographers seek the natives' own perspective on

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[5] Including Hix et al:2003b:197, Coman:2009:1112, McElroy:2006:176, Kreppel & Tsebelis:1999:934, Raunio:2006:258, Verzichelli & Edinger:2005:255.

[6] For more on what qualitative research methods offer EP research, see: www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/epqr

their world and behaviour in it through 'a merging of horizons' usually achieved through a period of fieldwork in the setting where the ethnographer lives among their informants, gaining direct and sustained contact with the group through participant observation, interviews, surveys and archival research (O'Reilly:2009:122). The resulting ethnography lies closely to the world as experienced and described by the participants (Eriksen:2001:36). Ethnographers often start from the interpretist[7] holistic premise that 'humans are part of a whole and that they do not exist in a meaningful way outside that whole' (Aspinwall&Schneider:2000:14). Interpretist approaches to politics have 'focused on the meanings that shape actions and institutions, and the ways in which they do so' (Bevir&Rhodes:2002:151) so ethnography can help us understand the meanings actors attribute to the EP groups and their behaviour within them and the wider institution. Secondly, what makes it distinctive is its commitment to *methodological holism*; 'accepting that in principal anything in the research context can be relevant and could potentially be taken into account', so ethnographers must adopt a curious cross-eyed vision where one eye ceaselessly roves around the context considering all aspects, while the other is tightly focused on the research topic (Gellner&Hirsch:2001:7). This is a useful approach for investigating EP politics because whilst focusing one eye on how the groups operate and are understood by actors, the ethnographer can also rove one eye around the institutional context to see how they relate to wider social and organisational processes. Thirdly, some scholars have described ethnography as a *sensibility,* supplying a certain *lens* through which to view the world and an orientation to exploring it (Ybema et al:2009:15, Yanow:2009). It broadly means allowing the field-site, and its participants, to reveal what is important and relevant, and should be the ethnographer's first commitment (2007:181). Cerwonka and Malkki liken it to Bourdieu's *professional disposition* and stress the inherently improvisational nature of the practice (2007:162).

Although no ethnographic fieldwork experience is the same, Sanjek describes some general phases, beginning with the selection of the site related to an unanswered problematic and reading to *contextualise* and *compare* the study. Once there, ethnographers must watch and listen to;

> 'document how the people see and talk about their everyday social activities and groupings, and the wider worlds they live in. It is their normal scenes of activity, topics of conversation and standards of evaluation that are the objects of ethnographic fieldwork' (Sanjek:2002:196).

Over time, the fieldwork 'funnel' narrows to focus on significant areas (Sanjek:2002:196) but there's never a day with nothing worth recording (Bogdan:1972:39). Ethnographies focus on 'a particular population, place and time with the deliberate goal of describing it to others' (Sanjek:2002:193) but they do more than provide thick description as they 'develop theoretical insights from the empirical material in relation to existing theories and studies' (Cerwonka&Malkki:2007:117).

The subjacent realm
Ethnography does this through the added value of having access to the subjacent realm which demands the kind of flexible intellectual openness, principled efforts to understand and creativity which ethnographic immersion enables (Cerwonka &Malkki:2007:181). The subjacent realm refers to the everyday cultural rules, practices and unarticulated and inchoate notions, attitudes, ideas and perceptions which go

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[7] However some ethnographers are realists (Bell:1999).

unquestioned; it is the local knowledge which is *common sense* and taken for granted as *everybody knows* it, but which therefore has a real impact on the way politics is practised at the everyday level (Schatzberg:2008:2). Ethnographic immersion, with its focus on everyday activities and processes, permits us to grasp this realm as it 'compels us to look at the banalities of daily life as they are lived by the people from whom we are trying to learn' (2008:5). Gaining understanding requires active personal involvement and emotional engagement, but the result is a *sensibility* towards a context which cannot be discerned through variable analysis, and enables understanding of what encourages people to behave politically 'in the myriad of ways that they do' (2008:2) which is essential to understanding complex institutions like the EP where decision-making is 'subject to a multitude of interests and a myriad of rules' (Noury:2002:34).

Ethnographic immersion allows researchers to; *see the invisible, hear silence* and *think the unthinkable*. *Seeing the invisible* means looking to the absent to understand the present; e.g. a beer shortage in the Congo helped Schatzberg understand its role and importance in local politics (2008:5). These small insights encountered in daily life can lead to dramatic shifts in understanding of the context. *Hearing silence* refers to what isn't said and why not which means listening for pauses, hesitancy and reluctance, to reveal things about the image organisations wish to project and what they wish to keep backstage (2008:13-17). *Thinking the unthinkable* means taking nothing for granted and asking what is *not* on the political menu and why (2008:17-22). This could mean asking why MEPs don't work with compatriots, or even the value of the EP when the unhindered Council could be more efficient, to really understand how actors understand their institution. Grasping this requires immersion in the ordinary daily existence of the society (2008:21).

Organisational ethnography

Traditionally anthropologists immersed themselves in exotic societies, but ethnography is increasingly being done in the west and within powerful organisations where it aims to understand local processes, known as 'studying up' (Nader:1969 in Wright:1994:14). Van Maanen says the principal aim of organisational ethnography is 'to uncover and explicate the ways in which people in particular work settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situation' (1979 in Rosen:1991:12). Life within organisations is goal-orientated, and organisational ethnography is thus concerned with the social relations, (rules, strategies and meanings) coalesced around goal-oriented activities (Rosen:1991:3). Detailed ethnographic accounts of organisational life exist peppered across the social sciences. They provide rich insights about their individual site as well as making unique theoretical contributions to their fields (Smith:1997:427). However *organisational ethnography* also has its own distinct, 'long and storied history' (Levin:2003:9) and important moments (Schwartzman:1993, Wright:1994). The tradition is widely reported to have begun with the Hawthorne Studies [1920s] which discovered workplace social organisation (Schwartzman:1993:7), Harvard Human Relations School's top-down studies [1930's] on interaction and stratification, and Manchester shop-floor studies [1950s] which engaged in bottom-up shop-floor participation (Wright:1994:7-14). Contemporary studies have explored processes such as culture, identity, change, environment and conflict (Van Maanen:2001) and decision-making and relations in so many organisations that 'name the organisation and some ethnographer has written about it in some depth' (Levin:2003:9). Goffman and Blau's groundbreaking analyses of the 'underlife' of bureaucracies have shown the limitations of Weberian theories of

bureaucracies as efficiently functioning, dispassionate organisations by revealing backstage irrationalities, passions, cultures, politics and practices (in Ybema et al:2009:3). An ethnographic approach could help us understand the ways MEPs and staff negotiate power relations inside their institutional context.

Doing organisational ethnography means taking the principals and tools of ethnography, (methodological holism, participant observation and the sensibility) into an organisational setting. Observing and participating in everyday activities and practices and engaging with informants means researchers can discover subtleties in meaning and behaviour as they unfold *in situ* (Fine et al:2007:5). They describe aspects of organisational life such as; sense-making practices, the gap between what people do and say they do, routines and patterns, impression management, front and backstage practices, power relationships, and the relationship between the minutiae and wider social context (Smith:1997:429, Levin:2003:1) – e.g. what lunch routines tell us about the operation of commodity futures trading markets at the everyday level (Levin:2003). Ethnographers understand organisations through the actors' own language and meanings and may describe everyday organisational life through symbolic language, acts and objects[8] (Ybema et al:2009).

Organisational ethnographers experience many of the same 'moments'[9] as traditional ethnographers, but have also encountered and documented some particular methodological issues and concepts (Gellner & Hirsch:2001:1). As ethnography is characterised by 'sustained, explicit, methodical observation', the researcher must remain overtly in the organisation to become 'saturated' with knowledge, aiming to interpret members' particular experiences (Fine et al:2007:2,21) as observing everyday activities reveals *windows* into the structure and culture of an organisation (Levin:2003). However, researchers may face particular access issues as organisations are conscious of their image and are likely to read published accounts (Ybemba et al:2009:4). They must also negotiate a role for themselves which is understood by members which is a crucial, on-going negotiation process as the way one is perceived, (professionally and personally) will affect how people interact with you (Bell:1999). To be incorporated into closed circuits, ethnographers should join in activities as part of the process of trust negotiation (Ybema et al:2009:12). They must thus be reflexive about positionality as 'the personal characteristics of the fieldworker mediate the cultural scenes that unfold in their presence' as they are an integral part of the research process and 'suffused' throughout the text (Bell:1999:23). However problematic, it is this very embeddedness in the context that allows ethnography to gain its distinctive depth (Fine et al:2007).

Ethnography and political science
By stressing the importance of exploring the context in understanding the social world and peoples' behaviour within it, ethnography allows us to ask; what exactly is the place of politics here and how is it practised? The EP has been investigated ethnographically by Abélès revealing some fascinating insights about the codes of a closed world (1993:1). He describes the architecture, 'kilometres of corridors, symbolize the complexity of the institution', rhythms and other symbolic aspects and suggests that

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[8]*Symbolic language* includes narratives, discourses, stories, metaphors, myths, slogans, jargon, gossip and anecdotes; *symbolic acts* include rites, rituals, practices, dramas, games and routines; and *symbolic objects* include spaces, architecture, design and artefacts (Ybema et al:2009).

[9] These include gaining access, building relationships, gathering evidence, becoming saturated, providing interpretation, using analogies, invoking authorities, examples and theories (Van Maanen:2001:235).

'discontinuous space, fragmented time, this is the exact opposite of the federal dream of integration and harmonization' (1993:6). He describes norms, (such as MEPs briefly greeting political colleagues but preferring to drink with compatriots) (1993:16) explores the parliamentary-representational role tension, how MEPs view and practise their role - and discusses what these observations say about the EU project.

Although Abélès' remains the only ethnography of the EP, the approach has been used to reveal insights into other political institutions, perhaps most notably Fenno's *soaking and poking* in the US Congress (1978). Schatz's volume brings together examples which demonstrate ethnography's important contribution to the study of politics (Schatz:2009). Some political ethnographers have orientated themselves towards particular practices or objects. Harper (1998) follows the passage of documents through the IMF to see what this reveals about its inner workings and relations. Faucher-King's study explores the *peculiarity* of British party conferences which are *taken for granted* as part of political life, and what they reveal about party 'group styles' and wider change processes in party politics. Crewe's (2005) exploration of the 'parallel universe' of the House of Lords shows 'the indivisibility of relationships and rituals from politics there' (2005:x). Similar approaches have been taken in Westminster and Washington by Fenno:1978, Matthews:1960, Weatherford:1985 and Searing:1994 to investigate Congressmen's *home-style, way of life* in Washington*,* power-pyramid, and representative *roles* respectively. Matthews in particular 'sought, in the manner of the anthropologist studying an unfamiliar tribe, to totally immerse himself in the daily life of the Senate' (1960:9). Other political bureaucracies have also been investigated with this context-sensitive approach to understand institutional behaviour (Goffman:1961, Blau:1963). Blau says understanding bureaucracies 'requires a knowledge of the patterns of social interaction within them' (1963:v) after studying interpersonal relations in two government agencies to reveal the dynamic character of bureaucratic structure in response to Weber's classic dehumanised characterisation. This approach has also been taken to Brussels (Zabusky:1995, Bellier:2000). Shore's illuminating study of *europeanisation* processes in the Commission (2000, 2001) explores how *European* ideas are made into reality. Approaching the EU as a social project, he found eurocrats feel they are *architects building* Europe (2000). He describes Brussels as the physical context where the eurocrats' *ghettoisation* and 'rarefied diplomatic habitat' contribute to a strong sense of *esprit de corps* in the institutions (2000:164-8). These studies have enriched political science research on the internal functioning of political institutions[10].

3. So what can ethnography tell us about politics at the EP?

"The fact you belong to a political group, makes you a member of a political family"
(ALDE assistant:interview:29/7/2010).

Likewise, an ethnographic approach can enrich our understanding of the practise of politics inside the EP. Participant observation enables the observation of everyday activities and processes and access to backstage practices whilst elite interviews can help us to further understand actors' perspectives on their behaviour and the meanings they attribute to it. Two months ethnographic fieldwork spent as a MEP's stagiaire and doing elite interviews, has provided me with data to make initial comments on the way the EP groups are experienced in practice and understood by actors and the chance to explore the institutional context in which they operate. *Being there* has allowed me to discuss the role the groups play in the daily life of actors, what kinds of influence they

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[10] For more detailed summaries of these studies, see Busby:2010, available on email request: alb40@sussex.ac.uk

think are important and their perceptions of where decisions are made – as well as the chance to experience the rhythms and activities of EP life for myself and explore the *taken for granted* subjacent realm which shapes every day behaviour inside.

The Rules of Procedure show how central the groups, (rather than nationality) are to the formal organisation of working life inside the EP (EP:Rules of Procedure). MEPs are allocated to committees and delegations proportionally by the plenary composition (Appendix 1) and the groups allocate rapporteurs, shadows, plenary speaking time and candidates for internal bodies such as the Bureau and committee chairs and their leaders meet in the Conference of Presidents. They also allocate committee co-ordinators, have secretariats with policy advisors for each [committee] policy area (Appendix 2) and meet regularly before plenary sessions to discuss voting lines as well as holding seminars to 'determine the main principals of their community activity' (European Parliament:2009:42). However, as a Green/EFA intern said, even after being taught how the EP "works" for a job in a Brussels-based NGO, 'I didn't realise just how important the group was until I was inside the parliament...it is very important, in terms of...everything!' (interview:17/6/2010).

Whilst RCV-based studies indicate group cohesion in plenary, RCVs only represent around a third of plenary votes and 'are atypical, they're chosen deliberately, on the most controversial stuff, they're not reflective of other votes – they stand out – analysing them gives some stats, but many votes aren't RCV' (EP official:interview: 20/7/2010). Other scholars have also noted the limited, symbolic, unrepresentative nature of RCVs which are one aspect of this complex institution (Bardi:2005:303, Rasmussen:2008:12, Neuhold:2007:6, McElroy:2006:179, Bailer&Schneider:2000:36). Ethnography can enhance our understanding of how the groups operate on a daily basis inside the institution and shape EP politics. When discussing voting behaviour at an event in Strasbourg, an ALDE assistant told me that they don't think it is the final votes that are the interesting aspect of political behaviour inside the EP, but how the final text and voting lines are *achieved* before they reach the plenary (fieldnotes:7/7/2010). Ethnography's *embeddedness* in the context can help us explore these organisational processes.

Tribal political families
When new political staff[11] arrive, they are signed in by an MEP's assistant or member of group staff. They are then likely given a tour of the functional parts of the building, (largely floors 0, 3 and your office floor) and their role is explained by these figures. Although notes may be left from previous employees, all interviewees said they received no formal training and learnt on-the-job[12]. This means that the working practices of the institution for new political staff are learnt through the groups who therefore play a key role in socialisation. During my first weeks, I was repeatedly reassured that if I needed to know anything, then to feel free to pick up the phone and ask other offices of our NPD as everyone is happy to help and they are therefore your first ports of call. This introduces you into the group tribalism which exists inside the EP in terms of the everyday interaction of political actors. The high turnover of political staff, particularly interns and assistants, reinforces this interaction pattern due to the transience of the political staff. As Levin (2003) found, lunch routines can be a window

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[11] I refer here to group and MEPs staff , not the EP officials.

[12] I have since discovered that the EP offers an assistant training course in August, although the modules are not practically based; (1) Introduction to the role and structure of the EP, (2) the history and stories of the construction of Europe, (3) Short way to Lisbon: what you need to know in ½ a day.

which offers much insight, and in the EP, staff from each NPD often have a 'spot' in the canteen and know where to find each other to discuss their week (Green/EFA assistant:9/3/2009), as well as the more formal weekly NPD assistant meetings.

This tribalism is particularly reinforced by the monthly 4-day trips to Strasbourg as; 'you stick together more in Strasbourg because you only know each other' (Green/EFA intern:17/6/2010). Assistants often dine together and may be taken out by their MEPs, and there are also many group events and receptions as well as formal group meetings happening (fieldnotes:6-8/7/2010). When discussing how they would feel about a new MEP joining our group, one assistant remarked strongly that, 'yes, but it is still *us and them* isn't it', exemplifying this phenomenon (fieldnotes:6/7/2010). I first became aware of the extent of this phenomenon when I became worried that being a stagiaire for one group would limit my ability to learn about the others and mused to my MEP's assistant that I could try sneaking into other group meetings, to which they strongly advised I would risk being unceremoniously thrown out if detected (fieldnotes:2/6/2010) – showing how participant observation means 'you can just hang around, and you'll learn the answers in the long run without even having to ask the questions' (Whyte:1993:303).

Initially, political staff and new MEPs meet and work with their NPD colleagues who introduce them to the institution. The longer they stay, the more they branch out into the rest of the group. An experienced assistant told me that in the past, people 'used to stick to their own party' but now people are more 'curious' and mix more with people from across their group and other groups 'as the EP has become stronger and more experienced'. However they stressed this can depend on the NPD size as larger NPDs tend to work (and socialise) more together as 'the bigger the NPD is, the bigger power it has in the group, it is taken more seriously' so it is more important to be co-ordinated (ALDE assistant:interview:29/7/2010). Of the assistants who filled in a qualitative questionnaire I circulated to our NPD[13], those who had worked here longer, tended to stress their wider links firstly within the group and then the institution. This is because they will have had more opportunities to work with other offices on committee issues and events and work linked to their MEP's interests, as *work on an issue* is the *unit of interaction* among the different MEP offices. Offices whose MEP is not involved in a piece of legislation or planning an event can find themselves quite isolated. For example, my MEP gave me a piece of research to do and remarked that it would be helpful to me as I would have to ask other assistants for help and get to know other offices from our group (fieldnotes:21/6/2010).

Inside the EP, the groups act as a support and information network, (perhaps as Hix et al suggest) meaning they can feel like a political *family*. It is a way to share the large work volume MEP offices receive and information to help each other cope with the highly technical nature of EP legislation, and vast array of issues MEPs are faced with everyday (see Appendix 3). One Green/EFA intern stressed 'it would be impossible to function if you weren't in a group' as their job would have been impossible without the advisors as they got constituent questions on 'absolutely anything you can imagine, literally', such as whether they supported banning tomato extract and 'because the legislation is so complicated – you can't know everything about every little bit. You'd just *drown!'* (interview:17/6/2010). MEPs and assistants particularly share information

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[13] In July, 11 assistants and interns filled in a survey which let them type as much detail as they wanted for 15 questions about training, their role, types of influence, the role of the groups, MEPs and evaluating their experience.

about the work they are doing on committees and the legislation being discussed to keep each other informed, at the NPD meetings. Assistants may also circulate responses to standard *email your MEP* emails received before plenary if their MEP is the NPD expert on this issue, (e.g. the food labelling legislation in June about which MEPs received a lot of constituent letters).

This information sharing involves a degree of trust between the group MEPs in each others' expertise which carries over into voting behaviour. The rapporteurs and committee co-ordinators, along with the group policy advisors who are 'very powerful' actors, will have the most input into the group voting lists as they usually have the most expertise on a piece of legislation (EP official:interview:20/7/2010). The importance of the trust in voting lists was highlighted in Strasbourg when a co-ordinator announced in the plenary that the list was wrong and that the MEPs should be careful to vote the opposite way, which was greeted with many irritated noises (fieldnotes:7/7/2010). One EP official said that the extent of this reliance is that as they vote on hundreds of highly technical amendments each session, 'they're not going to know what they're voting on half the time' and follow the shadow rapporteurs (interview:20/7/2010). This is because the MEPs trust that the controversial issues and amendments will have been picked up by the policy advisors and brought for discussion in the working groups and group meetings. Therefore 'in the end, they know who the expert is in that situation and then they kind of follow him' and 'there's a little sense of respect among the MEPs for the rapporteurs' because they know how much work they have put in, and since they also have a lot of other work to do, they often trust their judgement (ALDE intern: interview:26/6/2010, Green/EFA intern:17/6/2010).

Voting cohesion is also important to the groups themselves. Voting a different way to represent the views of your constituents or nation on some particular issues, (e.g. agriculture) is respected within the groups, but it seems to be important that MEPs or NPDs who wish to defect from the group-line inform the group in advance (ALDE assistant:interview:2/8/2010) because;

> 'it is embarrassing for a group to commit itself to vote in a certain way and then do something different in plenary, it's embarrassing for the image of the group, and for how united the group is, it loses its power and it's image, because sometimes the 3 biggest groups make an agreement on how to vote, in order for legislation to go through plenary or not, and if you have a group who says 80% will vote yes and then 50% object, then maybe the legislation will not go through because your group wasn't united because they didn't discuss it before, and it's a little bit embarrassing' (ALDE assistant:29/7/2010).

Therefore group cohesion is important to the wider internal institutional dynamics as much as any internal rewards system and external institutional relations which is related to the particular arrangement of the EU institutions and lack of a stable majority or EP Executive. When asked if this was a matter of trust, the ALDE assistant replied;

> 'not so much a matter of trust, as a matter of other groups taking you seriously as a group and making deals with you. If you're supposed to be committed to do something and you don't...this shows they don't have a strong unity, its not an important group, and important political decisions are made without including them, and that's something you don't want to do, because then you lose your power as a group' (interview:29/7/2010).

Culture of consensus

As Hix et al suggested, it is difficult for EP group leaders to enforce discipline on MEPs because they lack the traditional electorally-based instruments as they do not control party lists. One assistant said that they knew of suggestions of taking away speaking time for serial defectors but thought this would meet 'uproar' if pursued (interview: 2/8/2010). When I asked each interviewee and survey respondent how voting lines were agreed, they all answered with some variation of *through discussion and negotiation.* This forms what seems to be the first everyday working principle of the EP; consensus. As one assistant said, 'the whole spirit of the EP is more co-operative' (interview:2/8/2010) and the aforementioned suggestion therefore violates this.

The consensus culture is ubiquitous inside the EP and seems the first principle within the groups, NPDs and committees. It is even physically visible in the architecture. It is well known that the hemicycle shape of the plenary is thought to encourage consensus rather than the combative style encouraged by the confrontational two-sided Westminster chamber, but the committee rooms in Brussels and group rooms in Strasbourg also use this style.

(The AFET committee 2/6/2010 and an EP event on women in business 29/6/2010).

Discussion and negotiation to reach a compromise are part of the everyday organisational culture of the EP. When asked what they thought made a *good* MEP, most of the survey respondents mentioned skills such as being a good communicator, negotiator and being able to build good relationships with colleagues.

Before an extraordinary plenary, my MEP explained that making a really good plenary speech can 'boost' your reputation here (fieldnotes: 23/6/2010). However they were keen to stress to a Scottish visitor that it is a very different approach to politics here compared with Britain; the political style and way of working is different and everything is about consensus and compromise, so a combative and confrontational style, particularly in plenary speeches, is not appreciated among the bigger groups because 'that's just not how things are done here' as working together is very important (fieldnotes:13/7/2010).

My observations of committees and group meetings have so far shown that the chairs often look for the *feel* in the room and when possible, formal votes seem to be avoided if consensus can be found or will be taken by a show of hands instead of electronically. In fact most non-RCV plenary votes, (during sessions which consist of an hour of continuous and rapid voting on hundreds of amendments and then the report) are a

shows of hands "for, against, abstentions" and an electronic vote is only called by the chair if it is extremely close or there is a lot of heckling from MEPs (fieldnotes:6-8/7/2010). In a group committee preparatory meeting[14] I observed the chair try for around 30-minutes to avoid taking a formal vote on who should be a shadow rapporteur as two MEPs wanted the position, because they thought they should try to come to an agreement where everyone was happy through discussion (fieldnotes:6-8/7/2010).

This consensual approach means that for those who want to be involved in a particular issue, the EP organisational culture is very inclusive and the structure can be described as 'enabling' as any MEP can submit amendments and take part in discussions in their group and committee where much of the deliberative work on legislation is done (McElroy:2006, Neuhold:2001). When comparing it to Westminster, one Green/EFA MEP said;

> 'The EP is more enabling... it is about trying to get a productive outcome, in Westminster so much is the grandstanding and the set piece debates – the actual outcome of trying to change things is often secondary to the drama...whereas you sense with the EP there really is a genuine desire to get an outcome of whatever the debate is around which a majority can mobilise. I'm always struck by the word compromise in the parliament, in the EP its not a sell-out, not something bad, it's actually a very constructive way of trying to find common ground with which everyone can live with...there is a sense of trying to work together for the best possible outcome that everyone can live with' (interview:7/3/2009).

Part of this consensus culture, and due to the technicality and sheer volume of legislation the MEPs work on as has been discussed, is the respect and influence accorded to expertise on a subject;

> 'The Greens were looked at as people with expertise...there's an MEP from Luxembourg, who I think anybody would agree is the Parliament's expert on energy, even if you don't agree with him, people would respect the fact he is deeply immersed in his subject and knows it completely in depth. We have very good people, very good advisors...so I think those two things together mean that we have been able to have a much bigger impact on the shape of the Parliament, the way in which the majorities go, than some other MEPs' (Green/EFA MEP:7/3/2009).

This respect and inclusivity means that many people feel that in the EP, there is a sense that *everyone is in government,* a phrase an interviewee used (Greens/EFA intern:17/6/2010) as well as an MEP explaining how the institution works to a group of students (fieldnotes:29/6/2010). One MEP described the EP culture as one of 'crossing boundaries' where people don't try to exploit differences but try to find a common ground in the places where the EP can make a difference (fieldnotes:29/6/2010).

However, my time so far in the EP suggests that this is the view and perception of those working in the three largest and pro-European groups who take a regular, active part in legislation making. There are MEPs who choose to take a confrontational approach in the plenary, (most famously Nigel Farage) not take part in the committee discussions, (as I have observed groups attend the committee votes and then leave afterwards) and not adhere to the consensual culture. An EP official suggested that one strategy smaller groups are taking to make their views heard, (as they have less plenary speaking time) is the 'catch the eye' 1-minute speeches at the end of plenary

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[14] Where the MEPs of a group who belong to a committee meet to discuss legislation, contentious issues, plans and shadow rapporteurs.

debates which are requested individually and selected by the chair rather than allocated as speaking time via the group secretariats (interview:20/7/2010) which are an area which could provide a fertile ground for further research on political strategies.

Concluding Remarks

> *"The EP is like a big puzzle, you have to put the pieces together in order to get the whole piece at the end. It's not something which happens in one day" (ALDE assistant: interview:29/7/2010).*

Ethnography has the potential to enhance our understanding of the internal functioning of this complex and 'curious' institution (Scully:2003:131) by shining light into the black-box. It can help us build upon current quantitative studies to explore *how* their findings are occurring inside the institution and understand these organisational processes and practices more deeply and from the point of view of the actors involved in them and the meanings they attribute to their behaviour inside the institution. This is important if we hope to understand how legislation is made inside the EP as it becomes an increasingly influential actor in the EU policy process.

In particular, an ethnographic approach can tell us much about the way politics is practised at the everyday level inside the EP, by allowing us to explore the ways the groups are understood by actors, the wider institutional context in which they operate and organisational processes associated with them as has been discussed.

Doing an organisational ethnography of the EP means casting oneself off in Brussels to become saturated with firsthand knowledge of how actors understand processes occurring inside – by setting up camp on the *Isle of Europe* and watching its natives and their everyday practices and focusing on daily *taken for granted* banalities which tell us much about how politics is practised. As Forsey says of studying western elites; 'as with villagers on remote islands, we are observing ways in which people come to grips with their lives in the particular historical and social moments in which they find themselves' (2004:69).

Appendices

Appendix 1: The current political composition of the EP

	EPP	S&D	ALDE	Greens/EFA	ECR	GUE-NGL	EFD	NI	Total
Belgium	5	5	5	4	1			2	22
Bulgaria	6	4	5					2	17
Czech Republic	2	7			9	4			22
Denmark	1	4	3	2		1	2		13
Germany	42	23	12	14		8			99
Estonia	1	1	3	1					6
Ireland	4	3	4			1			12
Greece	8	8		1		3	2		22
Spain	23	21	2	2		1		1	50
France	29	14	6	14		5	1	3	72
Italy	35	21	7				9		72
Cyprus	2	2				2			6
Latvia	3	1	1	1	1	1			8
Lithuania	4	3	2		1		2		12
Luxembourg	3	1	1	1					6
Hungary	14	4			1			3	22
Malta	2	3							5
Netherlands	5	3	6	3	1	2	1	4	25
Austria	6	4		2				5	17
Poland	28	7			15				50
Portugal	10	7				5			22
Romania	14	11	5					3	33
Slovenia	3	2	2						7
Slovakia	6	5	1				1		13
Finland	4	2	4	2			1		13
Sweden	5	5	4	3		1			18
United Kingdom		13	12	5	25	1	11	5	72
	EPP	S&D	ALDE	Greens/EFA	ECR	GUE-NGL	EFD	NI	Total
Total	**265**	**184**	**85**	**55**	**54**	**35**	**30**	**28**	**736**

(Source: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/members/expert/groupAndCountry.do?language=EN)

Appendix 2: The EP Committees

Standing committees

▸AFET   Foreign Affairs

    ▸DROI Human Rights

    ▸SEDE Security and Defence

▸DEVE   Development

▸INTA   International Trade

▸BUDG Budgets

▸CONT   Budgetary Control

▸ECON   Economic and Monetary Affairs

▸EMPL   Employment and Social Affairs

▸ENVI   Environment, Public Health and Food Safety

▸ITRE   Industry, Research and Energy

▸IMCO   Internal Market and Consumer Protection

▸TRAN   Transport and Tourism

▸REGI   Regional Development

▸AGRI   Agriculture and Rural Development

▸PECH   Fisheries

▸CULT   Culture and Education

▸JURI   Legal Affairs

▸LIBE   Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs

▸AFCO   Constitutional Affairs

▸FEMM   Women's Rights and Gender Equality

▸PETI   Petitions

Special committees

▸CRIS   Financial, Economic and Social Crisis

▸SURE Policy Challenges Committee

(Source: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/activities/committees/committeesList.do?language=EN)

Appendix 3: Post received by our office one morning (June 2010)

Issues received by post
- magazine on how the EP has banned seal imports from Canada
- dinner invite from the Kangaroo club to a seminar on the single market in the C21st and how to make it greener and more efficient
- dinner invite from the Thai Ambassador
- CV asking for an internship
- reply from a Swedish colleague to a request for information on electoral campaigning
- a regular update from the Commission on the establishment of the staff for the EEAS
- Fur in Focus - a pro-fur leaflet
- information sheet on exiled Iranians who protested about human rights and invite to a rally
- survey from ComRes
-advert to sign written declaration on stopping Belarus from building a nuclear power station near Lithuania
- pamphlet on stopping smacking children and a sticker to wear for the awareness day
- Bulletin magazine from the former MEPs association
- invites to events in the EP on Turkish accession, how football can change lives, drugs and international terrorism, women in business, how copper is important to everyone
- a report from an NGO on progress on tackling poverty in African countries
- a regional farmers magazine

Interviews

1. 7/3/2009: Interview with Greens/EFA MEP
2. 9/3/2009: Interview with Greens/EFA Assistant
3. 17/6/2010: Interview with Greens/EFA intern
4. 26/6/2010: Interview with ALDE intern
5. 2/7/2010: Interview with a lobby intern
6. 20/7/2010: Interview with an EP official
7. 29/7/2010: Interview with an ALDE assistant
8. 2/8/2010: Interview with an ALDE assistant

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