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“Bursting the Brussels Bubble”: what can ethnography tell us about politics at the European Parliament?

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This is an early draft of findings from initial analysis and I particularly welcome feedback on the theoretical framework.

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore what ethnography can tell us about the practice of politics inside the European Parliament [EP]. It responds to calls from within the discipline for more research which makes *the real world of politics* visible. The paper argues that an ethnographic methodology coupled with a Bourdieusian theoretical framework enables deeper exploration of the everyday practice of politics and therefore a more nuanced understanding of political behaviour within this institutional context. First, it briefly reviews the EP literature, identifies the gap to which it hopes to contribute and introduces ethnography. Then it discusses Bourdieu's *Structural Constructivism* and outlines relevant *thinking tools*, with particular reference to Adler-Nissen's work on the Council. The bulk of the paper applies the framework to data gathered through ethnographic fieldwork inside the EP and elite interviews with participants, aiming to open up the black-box and illuminate processes occurring inside. It conceptualises the EP as a *transnational political field* with a system of positions and power relations, within which *doxa* operates beneath a particular *habitus* of appropriate behavioural dispositions, and where actors employ their position and particular types of valid formal and informal *capital* in *strategies* to gain influence over what is at stake in the *game*.

'The European integration process is largely a socially driven process. To understand it, one must therefore explore its social character'
(Adler-Nissen:2009:15).

1. "Bursting the Brussels Bubble": an ethnographic approach

In Spring 2010, I began the search for a place to live during my fieldwork in Brussels; an essential task for any ethnographer you won't find mentioned in any "How To Do a PhD" guide. Asking a few Brussels-based friends for advice, most recommended I stay in the European Quarter; convenient and where most interns live, although probably a little pricey, a bit soul-less, and dead at the weekend. As luck would have it, I ended up living on rue Wiertz, with a view of my EP office from my window, and thereafter spent 7-months living deep inside the "Brussels bubble". This was a phrase I soon heard used by the staff of the EP and other Brussels-based organisations as they gathered on Place Lux, the bar-laden square in front of the EP where people often head on Thursday and Friday evenings to discuss the week. The "Brussels bubble" referred to the particular peculiarities of working in the EP in Brussels; a multinational and multilingual space, an intense environment with a distinct rhythm to life, where people come and go often but which feels like a small village where everyone seems to know each other and news travels fast.

This pervasive and taken-for-granted metaphor, which I quickly took for granted myself, indicates a starting point for a sociological analysis of the EP: that this institutional context can be conceptualised as a particular *field* with a particular *habitus* and that this approach can help us understand peoples' behaviour within it. Adler-Nissen takes a sociological approach to the Council and uses an inspiring theoretical framework which reminds us that it is *people* who conduct European processes (2009:22). Bourdieu's framework, from a scholar who tried to understand the relationship between peoples' practices and their context (Webb et al:2002:21) is one within which we can situate the behaviour of actors to help gain a deeper understanding of the practice of politics inside the EP. Conceptualising the EP as a *transnational political field* with a particular *habitus*, where *strategies* are employed and *capital* sought, could help us gain a more nuanced understanding of political behaviour in this context and *how* outcomes are produced. Coupled with an ethnographic methodology, it enables deeper exploration of the institutional context, what meanings actors attribute to it and to behaviour within it.

As its powers have been enhanced in the EU policy process, the EP is an institution which has increasingly attracted academic interest, writing being 'a function of its powers and prestige' (Hix et al:2003b:192). Early descriptive scholarship examined institutional development (Verzichelli&Edinger:2005:255) but as their influence grew, attention turned to the MEPs and EP politics (Noury:2002:34, Blomgren:2003:5). Broadly, the literature suggests the EP has become an important institutional actor, (work on the co-decision procedure finding its influence increased) whilst sophisticated statistical analyses of RCV's have found that internally; the EP groups are highly cohesive, voting occurs along ideological rather than national lines, there is a traditional left-right cleavage and a competitive, consolidated 2+several party-system (Ringe: 2010:1, Hix et al:2003a, Noury:2002). VoteWatch.eu recently confirmed these findings and added that ALDE is the 'kingmaker' and relatively stable coalitions form for different policy areas in the absence of a permanent majority (VoteWatch.eu:2010). The tradition of RCV-based studies, notably Hix, Noury and Roland's, has found that

despite high heterogeneity; MEPs being from different countries, cultures, languages, national parties and backgrounds - EP politics is not fragmented and unpredictable but has become increasingly structured (2007:3). Another important contribution has been the statistical rejection of the traditional functionalist assumption that MEPs *go native* in Brussels as voting records and time spent (Scully:2005) suggest 'they don't shift their activities, never mind loyalties' (Scully:1999). These findings have led some to suggest *politics as normal* for the EP (McElroy:2006:179).

Despite this attention, former Secretary-General Julian Priestley has lamented that 'there is relatively little on the life of the Parliament' (2008:xi) and Ringe says 'we know surprisingly little about the micro-foundations of EP politics' (2010). Statistical research has significantly contributed to explaining voting behaviour and outcomes, but a gap remains for research exploring internal processes in more depth and which takes a broader approach to *behaviour* beyond RCVs. We have less understanding of everyday political processes, activities and interactions occurring inside the institution itself and how they might contribute to the outcomes (Ringe:2010:2); e.g. processes within committees, groups, the Conference of Presidents and other organisational elements. Some qualitative research has begun to address this gap and open-up the black-box (Bowler&Farrell:1995:220) by investigating committees, (Neuhold:2001,2007, McElroy:2006 Ripoll Servent:2009) roles, (Bale & Taggart:2006) internal processes (Ringe:2010) and lobbying (Rasmussen:2008, 2011). However, McElroy says our understanding of EP legislative politics remains in its 'infancy' (2006:176). This is partly due to the under-socialised nature of the literature. Jenson and Mérand argue that;

'EU studies are dominated by a narrow form of institutionalism. The focus on formal organizations and asocial norms begs for a more sociological approach that would encompass the informal practices, symbolic representations and power relations of social actors involved in European society' (2010:74).

They recommend a return to the sociological roots of neo-institutionalism, where researchers don't need to 're-invent the wheel' as it is grounded in the legacy of scholars such as Marx, Weber and Durkheim from where inspiration can be drawn. Whilst not wanting to reject analysis of formal structures, they suggest that research has been 'too distant from the actors *making Europe* and the conflicts among them as well as the social representations that organize their actions'; but now a new generation of scholars is beginning to investigate actors and informality with qualitative methods and empirical analysis rather than modelling alone (ibid:2010:74-6).

Ethnography, with its focus on everyday processes, activities and perspectives, is a methodological approach which could contribute. Van Maanen described ethnography as 'the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one's own experience in the world of these others' (1988 in Emerson et al:1995:10). It is part of the resurging qualitative tradition (Ybema et al:2009) which studies actors in their setting, contextual factors and seeks to understand phenomena and actors on their own terms; the *emic perspective* (Denzin& Lincoln:1998, Eriksen:2001:36). Ethnography has three important characteristics; (1) it is often equated with *participant observation*, where ethnographers spend a period of time living among informants (O'Reilly:2009:122), (2) it is committed to *methodological holism*, accepting that anything in the context could be relevant (Gellner &Hirsch:2001:7) and (3) some describe it as a *sensibility*, an orientation to exploring the world where the field-site and participants reveal what is important and relevant (Ybema et al:2009, Cerwonka&Malkki:2007). Immersion and documenting daily life, give access to the

subjugant realm; everyday rules, practices and unarticulated attitudes which go unquestioned as they are local *common sense* which is taken for granted, which therefore has a real impact on the way politics is practised at the everyday level (Schatzberg:2008). Whilst traditionally anthropologists immersed themselves in exotic societies, ethnographers are increasingly *studying up* in the west and powerful organisations (Wright:1994:14) and exploring the ways people manage their day-to-day situation in their work setting (Rosen:1991:12). Whilst, as Hilmer suggests, political science is probably not on the cusp of an ethnographic revolution, there is growing interest in the added value it offers. The goal is 'to contribute, rather than radically transform' (in Hilmer:2001:99) as this addition to the political science toolbox can mean the literature covering an institution or phenomenon is deeper, richer and practices and motivations better understood. Focusing on the *everyday* may enable deeper understanding of what encourages people to behave politically 'in the myriad of ways that they do' (2008:2) in complex institutions like the EP where decision-making is 'subject to a multitude of interests and a myriad of rules' (Noury:2002:34).

Medrano suggests sociologists have neglected the EU because they do not see a 'society' at the European level (2006 in Jenson&Mérand:2010:80) – a view a stint of ethnographic fieldwork in Brussels quickly challenges. Abélès found in the EP; 'at once, the impression of dealing with a closed world with its own codes and ways of doing things' (1993:1). *Thinking like a sociologist* means exploring the practices of actors in *European spaces* (Jenson&Mérand:2010:85). This paper argues that intensive ethnographic fieldwork confronting the empirical world coupled with a Bourdieusian theoretical framework which approaches the EP as a *transnational field*, can help make roles, motives and resources more visible and hence help us gain a more nuanced understanding of behaviour within this institutional context, and therefore put *people* and *meaning* back into political analyses (Vromen:2010, Schatz:2009, Ringe:2010) because it approaches integration as a socially driven process (Adler-Nissen:2009:15) and appreciates that 'the idea of politics being peopled by rational actors who calculate their self-interest before making each move leaves out much that makes us human' (Crewe:2005:6).

2. Bourdieu: a sociological theoretical framework for analysis

Ethnography can be coupled with a Bourdieusian theoretical framework for a sociological analysis. A handful of scholars have utilised Bourdieu's concepts to analyse the EU and IR (Pouliot:2007,2008, Kauppi:2003,2005, Fligstein:2008) but Adler-Nissen provides particular inspiration for those examining an EU institution. Investigating marginalisation processes and the consequences of opting out for the position and practices of member-states, she presents the Council as a transnational field where the opt-outs are managed on a daily basis among a body of national representatives who share a particular *habitus*. In this field, there is a struggle for power to define new legislation and projects, and an opt-out can be seen as a *stigma* which leads to *stigma management strategies* being pursued by diplomats (2009:22-23). Political Sociology focuses on 'the study of power and the junction of personality, social structure and politics' (Adler-Nissen:2009:80) so is a fruitful approach to an institution where members have continuously battled for more powers (Priestley:2008, Watson:2010). Bourdieu presents a fertile approach for exploring the implications of structures, as it enables the investigation of power structures and the historical and cultural contexts in which they gain social meaning (Adler-Nissen:2009:80). This is increasingly important in Brussels where the rules of the game are not all codified and

'many operate through informal processes that rely on cultural competence and symbolic capital' (Shore in Mundell:2010).

Structural Constructivism

Bourdieu's *Structural Constructivism* is an interdisciplinary approach which attempts to transcend the artificial division between structure and agency and allows us to explore how social meaning is generated and has consequences (Ernste:2006:5). This midway theory breaks with the presuppositions of structuralism which disregards social actors' capacity for creativity and intention, without relapsing into individualism, and allows space for structure and agency in analysis (Bourdieu:1990:61). It 'differs from the blind insight of the participants without becoming the sovereign gaze of the impartial observer' (Barnard:1990:81). This interpretist account of politics sees actors as constrained by material and symbolic structures, struggling to accumulate social resources and it is Durkheimian in its holistic approach and Weberian in its approach to political processes in economic terms and concentration on capital (Kauppi:2003:777-80).

It assumes social reality is constructed in an on-going, dynamic process and reproduced by people acting on their interpretations of reality, and social meanings are generated around structures, so constraints are *socially produced*. Structures come to have meaning for people which reflect an institution's social history and lead to particular structures of symbolic power which 'provide strong situational logics of action' but they do not determine behaviour (Adler-Nissen:2009:82-86). Bourdieu writes about the relationship between *habitus* and *field* and 'the crucial aspect of this equation is *relationship between*, because neither habitus nor field has the capacity to unilaterally determine social action' (Wacquant:2006 in Adler-Nissen:2009:85). Structures have an impact through actors' interpretation of their social meaning. *Practice* is central to this venture and Bourdieu was oriented towards micro-sociological practices, studied in order to understand how structures, particularly power structures, are reproduced and transformed in practice (Webb et al:2002:36, Ernste:2006). Ethnographic data about everyday practices viewed through the lens of the following concepts, enables a more nuanced discussion about the relationship between structures and behaviour.

Field

Field, a key concept in Bourdieu's toolbox, is defined as 'a structured system of social positions – occupied by either individuals or institutions – the nature of which defines the situation for their occupants' (Jenkins:2002:85). Thinking in terms of fields means thinking about social *spaces* so a *specific, de-limited space* becomes the centre of the analysis rather than a group (Adler-Nissen:2009:88-90, Barnard:1990). Adler-Nissen defines the field as;

'a relatively autonomous social system consisting of a patterned set of practices and beliefs, which suggests competent action in conformity with rules and roles. A field is a historically derived system of shared meanings which define agency and make action intelligible' (2009:87).

Within this relatively autonomous site, certain behaviour is regarded as appropriate and individuals develop *a sense of the social game*. Many fields exist and each is divided into sub-fields. Within the field, individuals compete for certain types of capital, which

the stratification of the field is based upon. Every field has a particular mix of capital, and it cannot be imported easily across fields (Adler-Nissen:2009:88-90).

As well as a structured system of positions, the field is also 'a system of forces which exist between these positions' which relate to each other in dominance, subordination and equivalence by the access they have to the capital at stake (Jenkins:2002:85). What is at stake can help us delineate the often blurry boundaries of a field (Adler-Nissen:2009:88-90) Fields are thus understood as shifting, dynamic and fluid, rather than static entities, made up of interactions which are part of the game which is played (Webb et al:2002:22, Thomson:2008). We can think of political behaviour *in and through the field* where stakes are defined and positions distributed and where a particular struggle takes place which is relatively autonomous from the member-states. We can therefore explore the particular context as a social system which follows its own laws and logics (Adler-Nissen:2009:90) and the practice of politics in *this field*.

Capital

Their position and type and amount of capital gives actors influence within the field (Webb et al:2002:23). There are four key types of capital; economic, social, cultural and symbolic and in functioning, the field *creates* a belief in the participants in the legitimacy and value of the capital at stake (Jenkins:2002:85). Capital is derived from the resources which count as valid currency; e.g. in the Council member-state size, length of EU membership, and expertise can be exchanged into diplomatic capital. What counts as valid capital can shift over time, but the degree to which factors feed into strategies and their success will depend on the hierarchies in the field. Using capital for the execution of power will also require legitimacy, so research should explore the structures that legitimise and naturalise power in a historically arbitrary social order. Actors have the chance to accumulate capital during interactions. All fields have an unequal distribution of capital and this is accepted by the actors (Adler-Nissen:2009:99-101). Bourdieu said of *political capital*; 'this supremely free-flowing capital can be conserved only at the cost of unceasing work, which is necessary both to accumulate credit and to avoid discredit' (1992 in Adler-Nissen:2009:100). Individuals will have different amounts of capital in the field, but this can change over time with their choices, interactions and strategies.

Strategies

Within the struggle for influence, actors can use their position and capital *strategically* which can help us understand behaviour within the field (ibid:2009:102). Research should explore motivations behind strategies to avoid passing off 'the things of logic as the logic of things' (Bourdieu:1990:61) which is why *strategies* is a more useful concept than *rules*. Bourdieu speaks of social action as a *game*, a locus of regularities, which is played by players who have learnt strategies. Mastery of the game is acquired through experience, but this still allows for infinite possibilities because actors can follow the best action in each situation (ibid:1990:60-5).

Strategies come from peoples' experiences of reality, 'their practical sense of logic' (Jenkins:2002:70-2). This *logic of practice* implies that people are able to develop a *feel for the game* which is learned consciously and unconsciously (Adler-Nissen:2009:103). It is a consequence of experiencing appropriate behaviour in the field, which new members must learn in order to operate effectively as 'they anticipate the necessity immanent in the way of the world' (Bourdieu:1990:11). For new COREPER diplomats,

'its intricate codes must be learnt, credibility needs to be built, and an understanding of how the other members of the club operate be developed' (Adler-Nissen:2009:102). Adler-Nissen stresses that norms and strategic behaviour are not opposites; agents are capable of reflecting on their own behaviour as they adapt to new or changing environments, and they can behave strategically in an environment where there is strong socialisation. However, they do not necessarily perceive consciously that they are behaving strategically to achieve influence, because the field generates its own habitus and unarticulated *sens pratique*. The key to understanding this is within Bourdieu's framework where strategy is bound to the habitus (ibid:2009:102-4).

Habitus

Bourdieu described the *habitus* as a socially acquired *system of dispositions* which is generated by the field and learnt by exposure and experience (1990:60). It is a property of social agents, (individuals or groups) that comprises a 'structured and structuring structure', or a systematically ordered system of dispositions which generates perceptions (Maton:2008:51). Durable and practical, it provides the rules of the game for everyday life and standards which individuals gain a sense of and operate within. Because the habitus is conceived of as embodied dispositions rather than rules, it allows for decisions and actions to vary across time and space (Bourdieu:1990:9, Webb et al:2002:41). Bourdieu's (contested and controversial) definition of *disposition* is essential; he describes it as 'a way of being, a habitual state...a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination' (1977 in Maton:2008:51, Jenkins:2002:76).

While *field* and *capital* give us an understanding of the structures of a social system, *habitus* is linked directly to practice and individuals, and can help us understand how structures relate to strategies in the field (Adler-Nissen:2009:94). It is a key element of the reconciliation of structure and agency and attempts to answer how behaviour can be regulated without obedience to rules (Maton:2008:50). Fields generate a particular habitus and certain dispositions are seen as appropriate, more likely to lead to influence, or are even required to function in the field.

The habitus is reproduced in socialisation as dispositions are taken in (Webb et al:2002:36) and the power of the habitus 'derives from the thoughtlessness of habit and habituation' (Jenkins:2002:76). However, Adler-Nissen notes that the habitus is not necessarily coherent or harmonious because it reflects individuals' histories and it is not permanent, it can change over time (2009:95). Webb et al remind us of the entirely arbitrary nature of the habitus, there is nothing natural or essential about our everyday dispositions or the practices we engage in (2002:38). Political Sociology suggests notions of norm-following should be placed into a particular field, where actors' understanding of goals is pieced together by the habitus and doxa, and the supply of options develops in response to the constraints of the field's particular history (Adler-Nissen:2009:93).

Doxa

Along with the everyday internalisation of the habitus, a field also has *foundational rules* which actors do not even reflect upon; the doxa is the unspoken structures, taken-for-granted premise and fundamental truth which makes co-operation meaningful for actors (Adler-Nissen:2009:97). Jenkins says, because actors are an integral part of their circumstances and within them they acquire practical competence, they are

incapable of perceiving arbitrary social reality as 'anything other than the way things are, necessary to their own existence as *who they are*' and take their social world for granted (2002:70).

The doxa operates 'as if it were the objective truth', so to identify it, we must ask questions actors themselves do not even consider (Adler-Nissen:2009:97-99). Exploring what is taken for granted in the Council, Adler-Nissen found the opt-outs are thought to be a breach of solidarity and threaten the *acquis communautaire*. She suggests that this attachment to the *acquis* is indicative of the doxa of the Council where laws are not just regulative but play a constitutive role in the identity formation of actors because it signifies the meaning of European co-operation; the opt-outs threaten this and hence are met with particular reaction (2009:98-99).

We can explore what is taken for granted and what this tells us about the practice of politics in the EP. As Adler-Nissen says; 'any attempt at modelling the world can be criticised for reducing complexity' and not all aspects of a phenomenon or context can be covered (2009:113). However, what this dynamic theoretical scheme provides, is a lens through which to view detailed data to help give a deeper, more nuanced understanding of behaviour within this context.

3. The EP as a transnational political field: initial ideas

The following sections discuss some early ideas from initial analysis of data gathered through ethnographic fieldwork (conducted via a 7-month internship with an MEP) and 43 elite interviews, with the application of the theoretical framework, aiming to take a deeper look at MEP behaviour within this field and its habitus.

Field: *A level playing field, or a field with two levels?*

During my interviews, I usually started with an open-ended question about the working culture of the EP, (Appendix-1) to which most interviewees asserted they certainly found the EP had a distinct culture, but found it difficult to describe. One MEP's assistant for example said;

'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 work' (29/7/2010).

Their responses to this question reflected my fieldwork experiences in Brussels; that this *Brussels bubble* is a small, isolated community with particular practices; *small* as people often discussed how everyone knows each other and how connected people are, and *isolated* as they often only knew other *eurocrats* working in the "bubble" and no locals. The very geography of the *Brussels bubble*, with the clustering of the institutions in the European Quarter, its distinctive, futuristic architecture, and ubiquitous EU symbols and historical plaques, (Appendix-2) means we can identify a specific, de-limited space (or field) in which European politics occurs. However as Ernste says, 'institutions are distinct from each other through the difference in life-styles' (2006:10) and the EP can be distinguished from the other EU institutions by its particular rhythm of life, guided by the weekly and monthly comings and goings of the MEPs. Those operating within this field were able to identify a system of positions and practices operating within this relatively autonomous space.

One aspect which many interviewees were keen to stress was the *consensus culture* of the EP, the extent of which had initially surprised a number of them. They described the importance of working together across groups, nationalities and delegations and of constantly building alliances in an institution where there is no permanent majority. One MEP said the EP is 'very consensus oriented' and that MEPs work with respect and communication within and between the political groups, and advised MEPs should not be 'too edgy' in their dealings with colleagues because you may disagree today but need them tomorrow on another issue (interview:8/12/2010). Some also described the egalitarian nature of this consensus culture; a place where every MEP has the opportunity to make things happen because here, *everyone is in government* as the EP is not dominated by a permanent majority and coalitions change by the issue so there are many opportunities for individuals to be involved– if they are prepared to put in the hard work! This gave the sense of a level playing *field* and an inclusive working culture.

However, when I asked questions about how to be an effective MEP or who they thought was influential, another trend emerged. Interviewees regularly identified two positions they felt were most influential in institutional processes; the Conference of Presidents [CoP] and committee Co-ordinators. This reflected a division in everyday activities which many interviewees referred to, between a *political* and *legislative* sub-field which operate simultaneously inside the field. One MEP said; 'there are two different lots of politics being played here, the stuff around the work we do and the policy stuff, but there's also the politics of whose top dog' (interview:2/1/2010). Many interviewees said being a specialist is an important way to be influential, (something discussed below) and after numerous interviews, I began to *take this for granted*. However, one MEP stopped me and, in their answer, referred to two sub-fields; 'I would challenge the premise, you do not necessarily have to focus on a particular topic, *if* you are in the leadership of the groups so much, this is when you steer processes more than influence a particular topic...when you're a regular member though, I would agree' (interview:8/12/2010).

The *political* sub-field refers to those who occupy political leadership positions, e.g. the group leaders and the CoP, whereas the *legislative* sub-field refers to those working daily on the detail of legislation, e.g. co-ordinators, rapporteurs, committee chairs and members. There is bleed-through between these levels as some MEPs occupy positions in both, and these two levels regularly meet and negotiate; e.g. when co-ordinators and rapporteurs present their topic in group meetings. I noticed in a number of interviews that MEPs and staff working in the legislative sub-field seemed to have little knowledge about what group leaderships do, whereas they were extremely knowledgeable about their committees and specific dossiers.

I discovered the importance of these two positions early in my fieldwork. In my first month, whilst eating lunch in a park off Rue du Luxembourg with assistants of the delegation, (trying to carefully negotiate my insider-outsider status and judge whether it was appropriate to ask them about their jobs during their lunch!) – one assistant told me enthusiastically that if I wanted to know where decisions were made around here, then I needed to talk to the co-ordinators who meet with other group co-ordinators and that I should try to get into the meetings. One of my early interviews with an EP official identified the group leaders as influential, as he described how deals are brokered among them in the CoP (interview:20/7/2010). When I began to explore the activities of these positions further, I found myself blocked as I was unable to observe either

meeting. However, this denial of access to me and others in itself was interesting as it highlights the importance of these meetings, and tells us something about the nature of the discussions within them by the priority of privacy for negotiations.

Early analysis suggests that whilst this *field* is perceived as relatively inclusive by participants, rather than *level*, it is more accurately experienced as *a field with two levels*, (political and legislative) where there is a structured system of positions which define the situation for occupants with power relations between them (Jenkins:2002:85) as some positions are perceived as more influential than others. One MEP said that in the EP; 'consensus is formed and the deals are struck between a relatively small group of people on each side who know how to operate in the system' (interview:17/11/2010).

Habitus: What does it take to be an effective MEP?

This point was re-iterated when I explored what it meant to be an effective MEP. Most interviewees were clear that it takes time to learn how to operate here, two MEPs suggesting up to two years, and that at first the institution can be quite a bewildering experience. Interviewees suggested a number of things new MEPs need to learn. One MEP said he initially over-estimated the importance of Written Declarations which he later realised were time-consuming and 'essentially pointless' and under-estimated the importance of speaking in plenary, an occasion when the other institutions, entire press core and all the EP TV screens are focused on you (interview:8/12/2010).

This field generates a particular set of dispositions which designate appropriate behaviour, and as one MEP suggested, those hoping to be effective should learn to operate within it. He explained;

'the most important thing is to understand the culture of the place. Where some MEPs fail, is that they believe they can do this together with another job or interest, or that they can swan in at the time when you have to vote...When you've been here a while you can decide with greater knowledge how best to use your time, but if you are not prepared to throw yourself into it at the beginning, you never really understand what it's about' (interview:17/11/2010).

Initially, I asked what it takes to be a *good* MEP. MEPs usually said a good MEP takes the time to hear constituents' views and represents them in Brussels rather than becoming too detached. However, when I asked what it takes to be an *effective* MEP, seemingly removing a normative element, they raised ways in which they pursue their interests inside the institution. Often this referred back to the nature of the field, interviewees discussing the consensus culture and how you should approach colleagues co-operatively. They stressed that it takes time to learn how to operate and what behaviour is appreciated as constructive and appropriate. The antithesis of the appropriate disposition was demonstrated in February 2010 in an infamous speech by Nigel Farage MEP when he called Council President Herman Van Rompuy a 'damp rag' from a 'non country', which was met with gasps from other MEPs as 'the personal attack shocked the normally consensual EP' (EurActiv:25/2/2010). Whilst this adversarial style is typical in Westminster, it is not part of the EP's consensual habitus. However, as Adler-Nissen says, a habitus is not necessarily harmonious and therefore this concept allows us to explore inconsistencies; e.g. the EFD MEPs who refuse to acknowledge this disposition.

Adapting to the habitus is part of the socialisation process for those seeking to become effective actors in this context. The habitus enables us to take a detailed look at everyday behaviour and a more nuanced approach to *change* and exploring what, if anything, it means to take a more *European* approach rather than equating socialisation crudely with time spent in a place and voting position. As Kauppi says; 'European political integration is also social and cultural integration. Spending time in Brussels changes the political habitus of politicians. For...politicians work in Brussels does not present an alternative to national political careers, they do not all become federalists after having worked in the EU' (2003:785). However, to be effective there, they learn to employ their position and capital strategically within the habitus, to gain influence within the field.

Capital & Strategies: *Who has the most influence?*

During fieldwork, I observed many backstage meetings and the ways decisions were reached. I observed who spoke, what they said and reactions to them, as well as who was called upon to speak and why. Within the group and plenary, two types of MEPs spoke the most; firstly those who held a relevant [formal] office (e.g. co-ordinators, (shadow) rapporteurs, committee chairs) and secondly, those who held an [informal] reputation for being a specialist. I explored these ideas further by asking people what they thought were the most important roles in the EP and their group, who they thought had the most influence and how they went about achieving their goals. Within this field, actors can employ their position and other capital strategically for influence in processes; a distinction which can be summarised as formal and informal capital. Bourdieu differentiated two types of political capital, that acquired by the individual and by delegation (in Kauppi:2003:780). Individual capital is accumulated by the individual, either slowly or during a crisis and disappears with the individual character. Delegation capital is acquired through investiture by an institution, where an individual receives a limited and provisional transfer of collective capital when capital becomes institutionalized in positions (Kauppi:2003:780).

Holding a formal institutional office is an important way to have influence and be seen as influential inside the EP. When asked about achieving goals, one MEP suggested the best route is to become a full committee member of something that interests you, then a rapporteur where you learn how reports are written, what meetings take place and how the system works (interview:17/11/2010). Offices give individuals access to restricted meetings, documents, information and staff which are denied to others, and means that they will have more opportunities to influence the formal decision-making process and thinking about an issue, and perhaps also to chair meetings, shape agendas, choose speakers, speaking time and allocate tasks and positions. The system of positions is hierarchical and often cumulative; e.g. group leaders have access to the group bureaus and the CoP, committee chairs to group bureaus, the Conference of Committee Chairs and trilogues. In group meetings, the co-ordinators often spoke first, summarising the work of a committee. This was followed by the committee chair if held and then the (shadow) rapporteurs on specific dossiers, who therefore opened the discussions. The group leader often summarised the debate and had the final word, and therefore these positions were *regularly* and *institutionally* influential in debates.

There are a number of formal offices for MEPs to hold, and these are arranged within a structured system with power relations existing between them as has been suggested;

some are seen as *more equal than others*. One MEP summarised this concisely, again with reference to the two sub-fields;

‘in terms of substance, the co-ordinators have a key role, because the substantive work is done at committee level, and the people who represent the group in the small meetings of the co-ordinators there, they have a large degree of influence. On the more political level, I would clearly say it’s the group leader, whose job it is to hammer out common lines and agreed positions from what is of course a rather heterogeneous group of people...I’d say these are the two groups of people’ (interview:8/12/2010).

These two positions were identified by numerous others. Co-ordinators are viewed as influential by insiders because they are the pivotal figure between the group and committee; with the Chair they ‘manage all the life of the committee collectively’ (interview:16/12/2010). One MEP said that having a skilled co-ordinator, who knows how to ‘do politics’ and build alliances, can make a huge difference to the performance of a group within a committee in terms of getting their policy preferences into legislation because they negotiate with the other groups (interview:2/12/2010). Another co-ordinator referred to their responsibility of handing out dossiers (7/12/2010). Rapporteurs and shadows are key figures in the legislative field; once a report is allocated to them, they guide it through the complex institutional labyrinth, are likely to be contacted by many relevant interest groups, speak on its behalf and have access to the important meetings including eventually trilogues. They are influential among their colleagues because of the highly technical nature of EU legislation; one MEP said; ‘you can’t be a specialist in everything, you have to rely heavily on the rapporteur doing the job and hope they actually know what they’re talking about’ (interview:2/12/2010).

However, before this, co-ordinators allocate these positions. One co-ordinator said it is their job to get interesting dossiers for the group in negotiations with other groups’ co-ordinators, then assign them. This can be an extremely powerful way to influence proceedings because they can compare candidates from other groups and whether they have a more European or national point of view (interview:7/12/2010). However, having observed this process in a committee prep meeting, it seems some co-ordinators are more consensual than others. Another co-ordinator said the distribution of reports is absolutely strategic and they looked at how compromising MEPs were likely to be for dossiers where they wanted to avoid amendments; sometimes targets had to be let go when it seemed other groups could handle dossiers better (16/12/2010). One MEP said that of course co-ordinators are influential and ‘mightier than the others because you know a bit more earlier than the others, so you can influence the direction your group goes in the committee’ (interview:7/12/2010).

From the *political* sub-field, the group leaders and the CoP were identified as the most influential. The CoP has a number of tasks (Appendix-3) and is where the group leaders regularly meet. When asked about influential bodies, one MEP said; ‘of course, it is the CoP. I would say that this is really *the* most important political steering organ of the EP. The EP Bureau is more administrative, and deals with issues which affect the EP as an institution, but not with policies, and in that sense, the CoP is the most important at the EP level’ (interview:8/12/2010).

Meanwhile, some interviewees stressed certain EP positions are *not* influential. One MEP stressed that Vice Presidents, in committees and groups, ‘doesn’t count at all, if you’re talking about influence, it is completely irrelevant, it’s a nice title, and you can sell it at home, but there’s no influence’ (interview:15/12/2010). However, this MEP added they knew one group Vice President who did wield significant influence, due to the fact everybody respected and viewed them as extremely competent (15/12/2010).

Whilst positions might 'define the situation for their occupants' (Jenkins:2002:85) by dictating what they can access, individuals can still manoeuvre from positions in *practice* using valid capital; something this theoretical approach appreciates due to its approach to structure and agency. Once the formal offices have been doled out, an alternative [informal] way to be influential, (or a type of capital) is to build a *reputation* within this transnational community. There are three important characteristics within this habitus; being hardworking, co-operative and a specialist. This disposition is particular to the way the field has developed historically as was outlined.

Firstly, one MEP said influential MEPs are 'clearly the group leader, it is also a number of colleagues who, on merit, wield influence, because...committed to the success of the things they do' (interview:8/12/2010). I noticed during the interviews that many MEPs took the time to name influential *individuals*, often those I saw speaking regularly in meetings. Due to the short number of hours MEPs spend in Brussels each week, (often Monday lunchtime to Thursday lunchtime), using your time effectively is crucial. A number of interviewees mentioned the particular perception of working hard here;

'be modest and work, here there is no blah, blah. Here nobody knows who you. You can be a former minister, you can be very famous in your country, but in the other countries, it is very likely that no one knows you, even if you were a prime minister or some other star ten years ago. The only way for you to be respected and to count here, is to do your work properly, to look at problems with a very modest eye, say, well we are in a team, we have to build a team and we have to listen to each other' (interview:16/12/2010).

This co-operative approach is also key within this consensual habitus where, as has been mentioned, constantly building alliances is crucial. A reputation as a good negotiator enables MEPs to punch above their weight;

'this guy is very good at finding common ground, negotiating and bringing people together...particularly for a small political group, I mean obviously we can't achieve anything our own, so making alliances with other political groups is crucial, a lot of that is down to personal relationships, what kind of approach you take' (interview:7/3/2009).

Particularly for smaller groups, a reputation for being a specialist can be important;

'we punch much above our weight...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've had a much bigger impact on the shape of the Parliament, the way in which the majorities go, than some other MEPs that are there' (interview:7/3/2009).

For regular committee members, committing to a topic and building a reputation as a specialist is important for being influential. Specialisation can be built through knowledge from a previous career, or from scratch inside the institution. One MEP said; 'the people who achieve the most here, are those who specialise in and therefore become specialists in, a very, very narrow range of issues. Those who are interested by lots of things and dabble in lots of things, tend not to get to the heart of any matter, but those who specialise...end up determining the shape of policy' (interview:17/11/2010).

Again this is partly due to the technical nature of EU legislation and also the daily avalanche of information MEPs receive; an issue which soon becomes apparent when

you open an MEP's bulging pigeonhole or inbox! Here, the information overload can be 'mind-boggling' (8/12/2010). Ringe's fascinating study exploring the coherence of the political groups, suggests that MEPs lack adequate resources and time to make informed decisions in all policy areas. For these choices, they look to expert colleagues with whom they share *perceived preference coherence*, (their group colleagues from the relevant committee) and adopt their position (Ringe:2010). In this field, MEPs rely on each others' expertise, a key form of valid capital and an important strategy. These ideas were illuminated in a discussion I had with some assistants; one told me that to understand the EP, you have to look at all the work that precedes and produces a vote; activities which become visible when we open the black-box with an approach which pays attention to actors, activities and perspectives; and their strategies.

Doxa: Performing multiple interests

Whilst talking with actors can be revealing and insightful, research must also interrogate their responses as they may be offering a validating account of themselves, their role, lifestyle, institution and politics to the public (Ball:1994:99); e.g. of course co-ordinators will tell us their role is important. Critical analysis is also key to exploring an institution's *doxa*; its unarticulated *sens pratique*. Sometimes it takes an anthropologist to reveal taken for granted practices which participants don't regard worth commenting on, even though they are very important¹ (in Mundell:2010).

The *doxa* is the 'fundamental truth which makes co-operation meaningful for the actors within the context' (Adler-Nissen:2009:97). Much of the research on the EP has tried to determine the factor which most accurately predicts voting behaviour and explains institutional outcomes. However, spending close and sustained time in this field among its transnational elite, observing everyday activities and backstage processes, suggests that *in practice*, MEPs balance a myriad of interests and perform multiple roles on a daily basis. Looking at their everyday activities through their diary, shows that they perform different roles and represent different interests every day; firstly due to the EP's monthly 'coloured weeks' system designating roughly a week per month to groups, committees, plenary and constituencies; and secondly by their daily meetings with interest groups, constituents and those relating to their offices and personal interests. Co-operation among actors is meaningful and possible because they all *embody* this task, balancing interests and performing multiple roles in this space. As Laffan says, 'MEPs are faced with cross-cutting multiple identities...they also have an institutional identity fashioned by the decision rules of the Union that force the EP to negotiate with the Council on legislative output' (2004:94).

Over lunch, a lobbyist told me I had come to the EP at an interesting time; since Lisbon, he had noticed MEPs becoming more confident in relations with the other institutions. One interest which is fundamental to the identity of participants in this field is the EP's institutional identity in relation to the other EU institutions. This has been crucial in its long quest for power (Priestley:2008) where a collective institutional interest has been distinguishable. Ripoll Servent says; 'this overall objective is at the core of the institutional preferences of the EP and thus works as the normative point of reference. Obviously policy preferences vary...however, they will have fewer chances to succeed if they contradict this primary institutional interest' (2011a:8). A number of

¹ E.g. one MEP told me at an event, that they thought I had not been very probing and felt they had not told me anything interesting, despite me finding the discussion about their particular institutional role very illuminating.

interviewees mentioned in various ways, how the internal dynamics of the EP are shaped by the EU triangle. To complete an earlier quotation, one MEP said; 'there are two different lots of politics being played here, the stuff around the work we do and the policy stuff, but there's also the politics of whose top dog in this place, the agenda the pro-Europeans have, how do we get more power for the parliament' (2/12/2010).

The historical development of the EU and the context in which the EP finds itself, shapes the field and the habitus which has developed within it. This has contributed to the consensus culture and the two levels. One MEP, ruminating on how he had found the extent of the consensus culture surprising said;

'Yes it's quite unique that you have this consensus parliament. The reason why we make broad compromises is that we know in this House that we have no influence if we don't because our counterpart is the Commission and the Council and if we don't have a broad majority, well they just tell us, well you don't agree anyway in the parliament so go to hell with your papers' (interview:15/12/2010).

This priority appears within the *legislative* sub-field where the need to consider the position of the parliament vis-à-vis the other institutions, pushes consensus and alliance building, showing the doxa penetrates the institution. One co-ordinator said they divide the reports in a sensitive way and 'try to do our best to strengthen the role of the parliament as a whole, because we know that from the outside we are not just seen as ALDE, either the parliament has an influence or we lose collectively, so it's always a strange game between defending our political visions, and at the same time entering a logic of co-operation with the others' (interview:16/12/2010).

However this aspect was more apparent within the *political* sub-field. The doxa naturalises itself and operates as if it were objective truth, becoming a key part of participants' identity (Jenkins:2002:70), apparent in this MEPs discussion of the CoP;

'it is a very strange body really...for the preparation of certain strategic political decisions...it can't stray too far...but there is of course the particular European aspect to consider, this parliament is an institution in the institutional triangle; the consensus based approach and the requirement for a qualified majority in the second readings, *forces*, really *forces* at least the centre of this house to co-operate...it's only natural, that's the set up, the treaty based set up of this parliament, and that in my view, explains and justifies the existence of the CoP' (interview:8/12/2010).

Whilst often the groups fight along ideological party lines, as the literature suggests, there are times when the *institutional identity* takes priority. This collective identity and its internal impact has been explored by other scholars (Kreppel in McElroy:2006:179, Farrell&Héritier:2004, Ripoll Servent:2011, 2011a, Ripoll Servent&MacKenzie:2011). This idea resonates with something Parker has said more broadly about organisations, that 'organizational cultures should be seen as *fragmented unities* in which members identify themselves as collective at some times and divided at others ... [it] should be understood as involving both the everyday understandings of members and the more general features of the sector, state and society' (2000:1). The theoretical and methodological approach outlined in this paper, enable this nuanced approach to be taken to understanding micro-behaviour occurring inside institutions to help us gain a deeper understanding of how they operate. Such research can make a contribution to the EP literature, which currently takes 'too broad a brush' and misses some important

elements of the practice of politics such as everyday processes and perspectives (Ringe:2010:2), to which this approach attends and which is therefore its added value.

6. Concluding remarks

Structural Constructivism enables us to take a holistic approach to an institution such as the EP and analyse a *transnational political space* where activities and processes are occurring, as a field which constrains and enables behaviour within it (Kauppi:2003:786). Whilst the EP has increasingly attracted academic attention and research has significantly contributed to explaining outcomes, there is now a gap which calls for research which pays closer attention to processes and the everyday level. The approach outlined offers one contribution to this call as it pays close attention to everyday activities, backstage processes, meaning and actors' perspectives which enables us to explore how they understand their context, meanings they attribute to it and to behaviour within it – to begin addressing the under-socialised literature.

Conceptualising the EP as a transnational political field, as a particular space in which a struggle occurs within a system of power-related positions with a habitus of particular, historically-informed dispositions and where a particular doxa operates; allows us to explore the strategies actors employ with their valid capital within the context – and hence gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of behaviour within this context. The ideas presented in this paper are just a starting point but the first steps have been taken towards *bursting the Brussels bubble* with an ethnographic approach.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Introduce myself and my research, as a political ethnographer researching organisational culture.

Ask about citation: on or off the record?

1. Ask about the working culture of the EP
2. Ask about the working culture of their group
3. What does it take to be an effective MEP?
4. What do new MEPs need to learn?
5. Who/what are the most important roles in the EP?
6. Who/what are the most important roles in their group?
7. Ask about their specific role – what does it involve?
8. Is there anything you would change about the way the EP works? (encourage reflection)

Appendix 2: The Brussels Bubble: a de-limited space, or field.

See the larger file for a map showing the clustering of the institutions in the European Quarter, and photos demonstrating its distinctive, futuristic architecture, and ubiquitous EU symbols and historical plaques outside the EP.

Appendix 3: Duties of the Conference of Presidents

Rule 25 : Duties of the Conference of Presidents

1. The Conference of Presidents shall carry out the duties assigned to it under the Rules of Procedure.
2. The Conference of Presidents shall take decisions on the organisation of Parliament's work and matters relating to legislative planning.
3. The Conference of Presidents shall be the authority responsible for matters relating to relations with the other institutions and bodies of the European Union and with the national parliaments of Member States. The Bureau shall name two Vice-Presidents who shall be entrusted with the implementation of the relations with national parliaments. They shall report back regularly to the Conference of Presidents on their activities in this regard.
4. The Conference of Presidents shall be the authority responsible for matters relating to relations with non-member countries and with non-Union institutions and organisations.
5. The Conference of Presidents shall be responsible for organising structured consultation with European civil society on major topics. This may include the organisation of public debates, open to participation by interested citizens, on subjects of general European interest. The Bureau shall appoint a Vice-President responsible for the implementation of such consultations, who shall report back to the Conference of Presidents.
6. The Conference of Presidents shall draw up the draft agenda of Parliament's part-sessions.
7. The Conference of Presidents shall be the authority responsible for the composition and competence of committees, committees of inquiry and joint parliamentary committees, standing delegations and ad hoc delegations.
8. The Conference of Presidents shall decide how seats in the Chamber are to be allocated pursuant to Rule 34.
9. The Conference of Presidents shall be the authority responsible for authorising the drawing up of own-initiative reports.
10. The Conference of Presidents shall submit proposals to the Bureau concerning administrative and budgetary matters relating to the political groups.

Source: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+RULES-EP+20090714+RULE-025+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN&navigationBar=YES>

Interviews

	Date	Name
1	7\3\09	MEP
2	9\3\09	MEP Assistant
3	17\6\10	MEP intern
4	26\6\10	MEP intern
5	2\7\10	Lobbyist intern
6	20\7\10	EP official
7	29\7\10	MEP assistant
8	2\8\10	MEP assistant
9	14\10\10	MEP assistant
10	18\10\10	EP official
11	28\10\10	EP official
12	28\10\10	EP policy advisor
13	5\11\10	EP official
14	8\11\10	Group official
15	12\11\10	Group official
16	12\11\10	EP official
17	15\11\10	EP policy advisor
18	17\11\10	MEP
19	17\11\10	EP official
20	20\11\10	EP official
21	21\11\10	EP policy advisor
22	23\11\10	MEP assistant
23	24\11\10	EP official
24	25\11\10	EP official
25	25\11\10	MEP assistant
26	26\11\10	Senior EP official
27	30\11\10	MEP
28	2\12\10	MEP
29	6\12\10	MEP
30	6\12\10	MEP assistant
31	7\12\10	MEP
32	8\12\10	MEP
33	8\12\10	Group policy advisor
34	9\12\10	Group staff
35	9\12\10	Former EP official
36	10\12\10	MEP assistant
37	14\12\10	MEP
38	14\12\10	MEP assistant
39	14\12\10	MEP
40	15\12\10	MEP
41	15\12\10	MEP
42	15\12\10	MEP
43	16\12\10	MEP
44	16\12\10	MEP

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