THEORIES OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: A META-THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Oana – Andreea ION[*]

Abstract

The aim of the article is to demonstrate that the theories of European integration are political theories. In this respect, I will refer to (a) what theory means, (b) what is the difference between theories from the Humanities disciplines and those from the Sciences areas, (c) what political theory stands for and (d) what is the relation between political theories and theories of European Integration, in the specific context of European Union Studies.

Keywords: *political theory, theory of European Integration, European Union Studies*

> "Like Moliere's Monsieur Jourdain, who discovered late in the day that he had been speaking prose all his life, anybody who argues for any policy is taking a normative position, whether she realizes it or not" (Swift and White 2008, 50).

1. Introduction

The aim of the article is to demonstrate the fact that the theories of European Integration are political theories. The importance of this topic derives from the current debate in the political science literature regarding (a) the existence of an independent research field named *European Union Studies (EUS)* and (b) the complications caused by the overlap between this (new) category of EUS and the so-called *European Studies*, which are broader in goals and disciplinary areas covered. In this context, the article is tributary to those opinions that treat EUS as a research field in itself, distinct from international relations (IR) and comparative politics (CP). In addition, this article is not simply a bandwagon in this academic debate or an assumption of an opinion taken for granted, but a prototype of a solid line of argument in support of the character of political theory attributed to European integration theories. In this respect, I will refer to (a) what does theory mean, (b) what is the difference between theories from the Humanities disciplines and those from the Sciences areas, (c) what political theory stands for and (d) what is the relation between political theories and theories of European Integration. The necessity of such an approach is that the literature about the theories applicable to the European space either subsume them to the international relations theories, on the one hand, or to the comparative politics one, on the other, or – if they dealt with them separately – fail to satisfactorily support this option (see Rosamond 2000, Chryssochoou 2009, Diez and Wiener 2009, Hix 2011, Lelieveldt and Princen 2011), with a few exceptions (Warleigh 2006).

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[*] Lecturer, PhD, Department of International Relations and European Integration, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest (e-mails: oana.andreea_ion@yahoo.com; oana.andreea.ion@dri.snspa.ro).

2. Towards a Meta-Theoretical Perspective of the European Integration Theories

2.1. What does theory mean?

I argue here that theories of European integration should be acknowledged as political theories. But what is actually a political theory? A first – common sense induced – response could result from the motto of this section, which draws attention to the role – usually perceived as involuntary – that these political theories have in everyone's life. Another kind of answer to this question requires taking a step back in order to point some considerations firstly about *what theory means* and what would be (if applicable) the difference between the *theories from the Humanities* and those from the Sciences disciplines.

I start the analysis with the following argument: theories are "closely knit systems of ideas" or, in other words, they are "systems of hypotheses, (...) syntheses encompassing what is known, what is suspected, and what can be predicted concerning a given subject matter" (Bunge 2009, 433-434). A comment has to be added here: Bunge refers in his study to *scientific theories*, a phrase under which he usually understands theories developed within exact science-related disciplines, because he considers the Humanities too much oriented towards the empirical research side. Thus, "a set of scientific hypotheses is a scientific theory if and only if it refers to a given factual subject matter and every member of the set is either an initial assumption (axiom, subsidiary assumption, or datum) or a logical consequence of one or more initial assumptions" (Bunge 2009, 434) . I will return to this distinction between exact and Humanities disciplines later in the paper. First, however, I introduce the features - four central and two complementary - that "great scientific theories" should meet simultaneously:

> "(i) To *systematize knowledge* by establishing logical relations among previously disconnected items; in particular, to explain empirical generalizations by deriving them from higher-level hypotheses. (ii) To *explain facts* by means of systems of hypotheses entailing the propositions that express the facts concerned. (iii) To *increase knowledge* by deriving new propositions (e.g., predictions) from the premises in conjunction with relevant information. (iv) To *enhance the testability* of the hypotheses, by subjecting each of them to the control of the other hypotheses of the system. (...)(v) To *guide research* either (a) by posing or reformulating fruitful problems, or (b) by suggesting the gathering of new data which would be unthinkable without the theory, or (c) by suggesting entire newlines of investigation. (vi) To *offer a map of a chunk of reality*, i.e. are presentation or model (usually symbolic rather than iconic) of real objects and not just a summary of actual data and a device for producing new data (predictions)" (Bunge 2009, 436-437).

I will also present below other opinions related to the functions of a (political) theory and the possibility of identifying a rapprochement between the two points of view.

2.2. Humanities vs. Sciences

How can we connect the discussion from above to the subject of this paper? One possibility is to appeal to a text by Septimiu Chelcea (2004) where theory is explained as "a set of statements with truth value regarding the relations between phenomena", immediately underlining the particularity of "social and behavioural sciences [where] theories have different levels of generality", an openness *to middle-range theories* Robert K. Merton formulated in the 1950s. The evolution of conceptions concerning the meaning and role of theory in the social sciences (and not only) is clearly highlighted in an 1999 article written by Lars Mjøset; he identifies in this area four meanings of the concept of *theory*, where two are gradual variations of its (deductive - nomological) positivist meaning (see Bunge above) and the other two subscribe to Karl Popper's critical rationalism view:

Table 1. Four notions of theory in social science

	Law-oriented	Idealising	Constructivist	Critical theory
Committed to the deductive nomological ideal	+	+	÷	÷
Accepts that sciences studying human actions are distinct form generalizing natural sciences	÷	+	+	+
Accepts that ethical fundamentals matter for social science theory	÷	÷	÷	+
Source: Mjøset 1999.				

Considering Mjøset's explanations, the approach I develop is close to his first type of notions[1], in Merton's terms; however, as I argue below, some components of the framework I discuss here subscribe to considerations that would qualify it as constructivist, although the existing arguments are rather clearly related to the rationalist area. It seems, therefore, that also between theories of the Humanities disciplines there are still many differences on the intension of a concept; in this respect, I will further investigate the particular case of the political theory.

2.3. What does political theory stand for?

I turn therefore to the question: *what is political theory*? In an attempt to identify the defining features, useful for the present research, I refer to a Michael Oakeshott 's essay bearing the same title *What Is Political Theory?*, where the purpose is not to explicitly identify a definition for political theory, but rather "an enquiry about how such a question may be answered". The starting point is to appeal to the Greek origins of the concept of theory, insisting that *theoria* means "the act or procedure of seeking to understand what is going on, 'theorizing'"; on the other hand, *theorema* seen as "a conclusion (...), 'understanding' of what is going on". In this way, Oakeshott points out that (1) nowadays the concept of *political theory* ambiguously refers to both "an activity or a conclusion"; (2) one should not forget that theorizing refers to the process, not to the attempt to "validating or 'proving' a conclusion reached" (1961, 391-392).

To simplify the conceptual analysis, I will now refer to the definition of political theory mentioned in the *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought*; there, political theory is

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[1] Mjøset's types of notions are:

The law-oriented notion of theory: according to Karl Popper, in social sciences one cannot identify laws with universal application, and the scientific approach should be geared towards identifying „regularities that apply only within specific contexts"; an example here is represented by Robert Merton's *middle range theories*, that „were legitimated by reference to the deductive-nomological ideal, but allowed contextual explanations unrelated to laws" (see Merton R. 1949. Social Theory and Social Structure. New York: Free Press);

The idealising notion of theory: following Max Weber and Georg Simmel, theory is regarded as referring to those „*ideal* situations" in which all variables can be controlled so that research - from the rational choice theory, for example - is carried out taking into account the fact that „«laws» in the social sciences are *ideal types*, idealizations of human motives";

The constructivist notion of theory: one draws attention here to the permeability of the area separating „science and everyday knowledge" the chosen example being Kuhn's explanation on normal science developed by research communities by virtue of paradigms commonly accepted at some point, a reason to often support the idea that „the most influential groups in the social system define what scientific theories are";

Critical theory: influenced by Jürgen Habermas, critical theory - less interested in the development of explanatory frameworks - approaches constructivism when it acknowledges that theories are socially influenced, nevertheless adjusting its relativistic inclination „by reference to an ethical foundation defined by communicative ethics". Thus, in social sciences, „lawlike regularities(…) are evaluated through collective reflection on their legitimacy" (Mjøset 1999).

The above mentioned arguments are summarized in Table 1.

defined as a „systematic reflection on the nature and purposes of government, characteristically involving both an understanding of existing political institutions and a view about how (if at all) they ought to be changed" (Miller 1991). Drawing attention to the rather recent acknowledgment as an independent academic discipline, the same encyclopedia operates a distinction between three types of statements present in modern science - empirical, formal and evaluative -, thus underlining the delimitation between political theory and science, on the one hand, and philosophy, on the other, through the focus it has on evaluative statements. In addition, four interpretations of political theory are summarized, that co-exist in contemporary approaches:

1. „Political theory as the history of political thought", a study of classic works;
2. „Political theory as conceptual clarification", an operationalization of key concepts used in political rhetoric;
3. „Political theory as formal model-building". Its role is to explain how a theory operates, or to indicate the final results and the implications of different political processes;
4. „Political theory as theoretical political science", an effort that „synthesizes particular observations and low-level empirical generalizations into a general explanatory framework", in this case without insisting on the normative input (Miller 1991).

A similar view is shared by Terence Ball and Richard Dagger (1995); the authors stress that both political theories and ideologies meet four similar functions, but the political theories perform them in a more objective manner. The four functions (of ideologies, but which – I underline – the authors see also applied, at a different level, to political theories) discussed are:

a. Explanatory function: it answers to the "why?" question, facilitating the understanding of the reasons for which current circumstances (either social, political or economic) exist. In Ball and Dagger's work, this definition stresses that it particularly applies in times of crises, but the end of the argument is an attribute more suitable for a function of ideology, not necessarily political theory;
b. Evaluative function: it provides measures to assess the social conditions. In this situation, I also believe one should make an addendum, inserting this time specifications such as "economic, political, etc." in order to properly adapt this function to the case of political theory;
c. Orientative function: it allows to define one's identity and to affirm it, both socially and territorially speaking. In this formulation, this function would be rather appropriate to ideologies, being quite difficult - but not impossible (see the case of standpoint theories) to be assumed by political theories;
d. Programmatic function: it provides a program of political action, answering to the questions regarding "what needs to be done?" and "with what means?". In the language of political theory, here one can find the *normative* dimension usually covered by any political theory (Ball and Dagger 1995, 22-24).

Summarizing previous arguments, the following ideas could be observed: I chose a line of research that understands political theory in the sense of conceptual clarification. This political theory should fulfil certain functions. I turn now to the functions of scientific theory listed by Bunge in order to show that there is a high degree of overlap between them and those identified by Ball and Dagger particularly for political theory; however, the comparison does not have the purpose of equating political theory with the theories from the exact disciplines:

Table 2. The functions of scientific and political theories. A comparative view

Functions of scientific theory (Bunge 2009)	Political theory as conceptual clarification (Miller 1991)	Functions of political theory and ideology (Ball and Dagger 1995)
Systematizing knowledge	X	Explanatory and evaluative functions
Explaining facts	X	Explanatory function
Increasing knowledge	X	Explanatory and evaluative functions
Enhancing the testability of the hypotheses	X	Explanatory and evaluative functions
Guiding research	X	Normative function
Offering a map of a chunk of reality	X	Evaluative function

One should have a deeper look into the relation between political theory and science, this time political science. In 2004, Stephen K. White and J. Donald Moon have edited a volume entitled suggestively with the same *What Is Political Theory?*; the assumed aim was, on the one hand, to identify the new features of political theory in the current socio-political context influenced to a considerable degree by globalization[2], and, on the other hand, to question the current relationship between political theory and political science. Thus, in the introductive section, Stephen K.White starts from a simple observation: the resurgence in the '70s (of the XXth century) - after decades of oblivion or minimized importance - of the academic interest towards political theory, despite the fact that in 1962 Isaiah Berlin had already published the essay "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" [3] where the discussions regarding the disappearance of political theory were explained as a temporary shortage of great theories, a situation believed to be, therefore, reversible. However, nowadays, political theory must confront new phenomena that act simultaneously, as well as a pluralism strengthen by globalization; for this reason, the object of political theory becomes complicated, yet durable, given the scale and unpredictability of these phenomena (White 2004, 1-4). In the same volume edited by White and Moon, Ruth Grant examines political theory in relation to political science, emphasizing older arguments existing in the literature, according to which "research in political theory resembles humanities research far more closely than it does scientific research" (Grant 2004, 175). Rejecting a *facts versus values* dichotomy in the relationship between a possible object of interest of the humanities and respectively of the sciences (social, mainly), Grant proposes an understanding of them as follows: the humanities area seeking "to explain meaning and significance, whereas the latter seeks to explain mechanisms of cause and effect". Thus, in humanities research, interest is on the meaning and importance of phenomena that depend heavily on context, so that methods commonly used are interpretative and historical, while there exist, of course, competing understandings of the same set of phenomena; an additional explanation is given here: "whereas the sciences are primarily concerned with knowledge of cause and effect, the humanities are primarily concerned with understanding of meaning and judgment of significance", so that in the latter case evolution of the field is assessed in terms such as „increasing depth, clarity, and comprehensiveness" (Grant 2004, 177-182).

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[2] For Dryzek, Hohig and Phillips, the diversity in understandings of the term "political theory" leaves room for the same "commitment to theorize, critique, and diagnose the norms, practices, and organization of political action in the past and present, in our own places and elsewhere" (2006, 4).
[3] Berlin, Isaiah. 1999. Does Political Theory Still Exist. In *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press *apud* White, 2004.

Grant notes that politics has both scientific and humanistic goals, meaning that "the study of politics needs both to seek general laws to explain the causes of political behaviour and to develop interpretations of the meaning and significance of political events and conceptual regimes to inform evaluative judgments of them" (Grant 2004, 187). There are, therefore, two aspects – interconnected or that need to be interconnected in order to generate viable explanations – of the study of politics, both equally important: political science and political theory. For Ian Shapiro, the problems associated with political theory derive from the older "separation of normative from empirical political theory", a situation that led to the construction of a counterproductive dichotomy between political philosophy and political science; it resulted therefore a political science much too method-driven and less problem-driven, and researches were constrained by appealing to a few theories (theory - driven) - a situation that could be corrected by analyzing very particular issues through different theories (theory - laden), while explicitly assuming the implications of adopting one theory over another (Shapiro 2004, 193-195 , 198-200). The role of political theory would be to guide research towards different problems, leaving open the possibilities to analyze them theoretically and methodologically.

Dryzek, Hohig and Phillips do not contest neither the fact that political research has, for a considerable period of time, been strongly oriented towards "formal and quantitative", with theoretical models and methodologies influenced by the exact sciences, nor the fact that "qualitative and interpretive approaches" have recently started to recover lost ground; within these centrifugal tendencies, for them, political theory "is located at one remove from this quantitative vs. qualitative debate, sitting somewhere between the distanced universals of normative philosophy and the empirical world of politics" (Dryzek, Hohig and Phillips 2006, 4-5). For this reason, it takes real inquiries regarding the connections of political science with political theory (leaning, maybe too much, on empiricism), history (emphasizing the context of analyzed items), philosophy and the "real world" (in order to mitigate the normative character of different scenarios developed away from everyday life) (Dryzek, Hohig and Phillips 2006, 7-10)[4].

I will briefly apply the conceptual analysis to the role of political theory in the policymaking process. The relationship between political theory and contemporary political events should not be overlooked, as the danger is twofold: either a massive abstract theoretical discourse and a loss of touch with the social and political reality, or a pronounced regulatory interference of this speech, without taking into account differences that exists between a designed theory and the induced changes determined by its effective implementation. Adam Swift and Stuart White reconcile theory and "real politics" proposing a middle way solution where political theory has a place „crucial and fundamental, but (...) also modest and limited" in the policymaking process[5]; the authors believe that policymaking should take the form of a "collaborative division of labour" in which three parts cooperate: (a) the political theorist that „ clarifies concepts, interrogates claims about how the political community should organize its collective affairs (including claims about what should count as that community's 'collective affairs'), and argues for particular principles (or conceptions of values, or balances of competing values)"; (b) experts of various kinds that empirically test the possible impact of proposals coined by academics; and (c) politicians – considered as

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[4] For more examples of the relationship between political theory and other disciplines or subdisciplines and the "continuous overlap and symbiosis of these terms in the European political vocabulary", see Vincent 2004, 8.

[5] Dryzek, Hohig and Phillips also largely investigate the relationship between comparative politics - with a well defined theoretical interest and methodological options that rarely include references to the influence they can have on outcomes – and political theory, insisting that public policies, which are at the "applied end of political science", should benefit from a normative input coming from political theory, especially in the stages of policy design and policy evaluation (2006, 28-29).

"practitioners" – which choose from the sets of policies they dispose of those that are accepted by the electorate, ensuring their political victory (Swift and White 2008, 49-51, 68)[6].

I turn now to the political theory in the context of European Union Studies.

2.4. What is the relation between political theories and theories of European Integration?

Before analyzing the relationship mentioned in the subtitle of this section, I think that it is necessary to have a discussion about the field of *European Union Studies (EUS),* often identified as European Studies, although in this case the coverage is obviously wider and closer to an interdisciplinary dimension.

It is almost a truism to claim that theoretical development is influenced, on the one hand, by the academic context (synthesized by reference to paradigms in a Kuhnian perspective), and, on the other hand, by the socio-political context (Diez and Wiener 2009, 14). Regarding this latter aspect, there is a rich literature that emphasizes how much the EUS relate to the events that took place in the more than six decades of EU history[7]. Referring now primarily to the academic context, it must be said that the development of integration theories was influenced at the beginning by the theories of international relations (IR), considering that after the Second World War there was no academic interest for the European Union as such; this newcomer entity was broadly perceived as a large empirical field for testing the viability of prevalent theories, with a particular emphasis on specific issues relevant for the IR, such as: measures for granting peace in the new established international order, the viability of the Westphalian nation-state type to accomplish that purpose, etc. This is the context that determined the emergence of the first 'European' answers materialized in the federalist and neofunctionalist inputs.

EU's later development has led to a rapprochement between these IR-influenced studies and the instruments of CP, this shift being generated by the increased attention given by researchers to the EU treated as a *sui generis* political system. So, with a focus centred on the elements of the EU and not on the whole abstract entity, delimitations appeared, contrasting the classical general explanations and perspectives influenced by IR theories and major "problems" such as the preservation of peace, future of the state actors, etc. The central idea was now that the EU should become less examined in terms of IR theories, and more accordingly to the classical methodology of the analyses focused on polities interested in policy-taking and policy-making. In fact, the unique nature of the EU's institutional architecture can determine its equivalence with the political system (Hix 2011). Currently, some analysts argue for a reorientation towards the IR field; Ben Rosamond, for example, believes that the development of the IR theories has evolved towards a narrower relation with those of the comparative politics field, which is why he calls for the reintegration of IR theories within the EU studies, presenting two basic arguments: the influence of regional studies on the EU-related analyses in the context of globalization, and the position of this organization in the international political game (Rosamond 2007, 132).

In the same note, for Eising and Kohler-Koch (2005), the study of the originality of the European construction can be made either with the analytical tools of the IR or CP

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[6] An example is the case of EU regional policy: starting from (i) its overall objectives of reducing different disparities between EU's regions, one should (ii) investigate through various studies what could be the impact coming from the supranational level (opportunities such as job creation, economic growth, etc., but also potential risks – e.g. inefficient or inadequate use of financial support) in order (iii) for the practitioners to be able to select from a list of possible activities those that are compatible with their political profile, with the local context, etc., and win voters to their side.

[7] Aiming to streamline my analysis, I use only the "European Union" collocation. However, its meaning varies in the context, and it may refer to (a) the European Communities from 1951 – 1993; (b) the European Union framework as provided by the pillar structured Maastricht Treaty; and (c) the European Union with legal personality as it is know after Lisbon Treaty's 2009 entering into force.

theories. In other words, the dispute between IR and CP also involves a third actor, this distinct (as more and more authors argue) field of *European Union Studies*. We may simplify the discussion saying that at a t_0 moment, they were perceived as two spheres which did not intersect. I think the new picture proposed by experts who believe that both types of studies can gain by establishing interdisciplinary dialogue could take – at t_1 – the form of a continuum defined by CP, and, respectively, IR theories. On this continuum, EUS lay somewhere in between[8].

In this view, the role of European integration theories would be of an undeniable importance, considering that „the highest educational purpose integration theory can serve is to understand the conditions of human association within the larger polity, the forces that shape the range and depth of its evolution, as well as the possibilities of improving the quality of the debate on such self-inquiring questions as 'where we are now, from where we have come and to where we might go'" (Chryssochoou 2009, 3). Basically, one can find here the previously discussed explanatory, evaluative and normative functions which integration theories would meet.

For Diez and Wiener, „European integration theory is thus the field of systematic reflection on the process of intensifying political cooperation in Europe and the development of common political institutions, as well as on its outcome. It also includes the theorization of changing constructions of identities and interests of social actors in the context of this process" (2009, 4). In fact, a systematic and extremely useful analysis of European integration theories can be found in the volume edited by Thomas Diez and Antje Wiener (2004 – first edition; 2009 – second edition) under the name of *European Integration Theory*. Here, a criterion used in the analysis of the theories refers to the functions that these theories have; in other words, it talks about the goals that guide the analytical approach. Hence, one can perceive:

1. Theory as explanation and understanding (it overlaps the explanatory characteristics present in Ball and Dagger's classification) of the causes or development of a phenomenon;
2. Theory as description and analysis (it overlaps the evaluative function and, partly, the explanatory one) which involves „the development of definitions and concepts (...), labels and classifications";
3. Theory as critique and normative intervention (i.e. the normative function earlier mentioned) which questions the existing realities questioning or provides „normative alternatives" (Diez and Wiener 2009, 18)[9].

To sum up, these arguments were aimed to show that European integration theories are political theories, considering that (a) they observe Ball and Dagger's criteria and (b) they offer, following Blackwell Encyclopedia's wording, various „systematic reflection[s] on the nature and purposes of government, characteristically involving both an understanding of existing political institutions and a view about how (if at all) they ought to be changed"

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[8] If the discussion is extended beyond the realm of political studies, it should also be mentioned that the term "EU studies" is a much better defined area of research than "European studies", as well as an area more opened towards interdisciplinary (but rather with multidisciplinary results); it is widely recognized that overwhelmingly the political perspective dominates these studies where one can find contributions of legal sciences, the economics, sociology or history, for example (Bourne and Cini 2006), and this situation will persist for long enough, because I do not see at this point any serious competitor for political studies.

[9] Jupille (2006, 210-212) is the author of one of the few examples of analyses containing meta-theoretical considerations regarding EUS. From his point of view, there would be five „meta-theoretical dimensions" that structure this field: (a) the ontological dimension (EU as a material or subjective entity); (b) the epistemological dimension (positivist vs. post-positivist approaches); (c) social theoretical dimension (rationalism vs. constructivism in perceiving identities and interests of actors); (d) the disciplinary dimension (various explanations provided by different disciplines or different sub-disciplines influence the research design; the example shown here is a classic one in EU studies: IR vs. CP): (e) scholarly style dimension (general vs. particular in establishing research themes). These meta-theoretical dimensions are intersecting one another, and – even if certain combinations are impossible - they lead to different political theories within the EUS framework.

(Miller 1991). Moreover, EUS, in general, and theories of European integration[10], in particular, manage to create a link between political science and political theory considering that they both identify general explanations regarding "the causes of political behavior" and they "develop interpretations of the meaning and significance of political events and conceptual regimes to inform evaluative judgments of them" (see Grant 2004). In addition, the diversity of the theories of European integration represents a trump card that can help scholars avoid theory-driven or method driven researches in exchange for theory-laden approaches that would "guide research towards different problems, leaving open the possibilities to analyze them theoretically and methodologically" (Shapiro 2004). In this way, EUS present the opportunity to realize in a more undemanding manner the connection between theorists, experts and politicians in shaping the scope and form of the polity, political and policymaking processes.

3. Conclusions

The main argument of the article was that European integration theories are genuine political theories, according to the definition of theory in general and of political theory in particular, with emphasis on the functions any political theory should be able to perform. This demonstration is meant to consolidate the position of European Union Studies' field within the broad political science research. Future analyses on this subject could strengthen the EU studies position and their relation with International Relations and Comparative Politics - continuing, for example, Alex Warleigh's (2006) efforts - by investigating the existence of specific features regarding the methodology applied in both of these cases.

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[10] For a complete list of the European integration theories I refer to, see Ion 2013.

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