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The Europeanization of Gender Equality Policies: A Discursive-Sociological Approach

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Introduction

Europeanization and gender are two fields of study within political science that have often moved on parallel tracks and have only occasionally met. Yet they have much to offer each other, and if they joined forces they could help improve the understanding of the complex processes of policy change in Europe. This chapter aims to bring the two research agendas closer by discussing Europeanization theories from the perspective of scholars working on gender and other inequalities.

Europeanization is a widely discussed concept. Over the past ten years, it has generated plenty of definitions and operationalization attempts, whether as a new theory, a ‘catch-all’ concept, or a principle for organizing existing theories of European integration and (often divergent) empirical findings. Despite numerous clarification attempts, applications that draw on a narrow definition of the role of the European Union (EU) in promoting domestic policy change still coexist with broader applications that cover a wide variety of political, social, and cognitive phenomena (Baisnée and Pasquier, 2007; Graziano and Vink, 2008). Despite the concept’s lack of clarity and its broad scope, Europeanization studies have definitively contributed to changing the lenses through which European integration is analysed. The strengthening of the EU’s legal order, as well as its successive and increasingly conditional enlargements, have shaped the scholarly interest in Europe’s ‘domestic impact’. This interest has developed mainly from a top-down point of view, focussing on processes of internalization and norm adaptation, often with a specific premise: convergence is the rule, while increased variety/divergence is the exception.
The conceptualization of Europeanization as a convergence with the EU norm has nonetheless increasingly been both theoretically and empirically questioned (Featherstone and Radaelli, 2003; Caporaso, 2008), as it became clear that Europeanization, rather than being a proxy for convergence, was often a synonym for political contention, competing discursive patterns, and an institutional ‘misfit’. Another consequence of the increased diversity of the EU after the Eastern enlargement is that analyses of the EU member states’ (MS) relations have blossomed, providing more sophisticated and realistic frameworks for understanding the interactions between the EU and its member states. Far from constituting a united field with a shared research agenda or methodology, these analyses can nevertheless be characterized by a more comprehensive approach that takes into account institutional, discursive, and interactional factors, thus placing most of these studies at the intersection between different types of new institutionalism (Radaelli, 2000; 2004; Woll and Jacquot, 2010; Schmidt, 2010).

Gender equality policy is a field that is interesting particularly for exploring the institutional, discursive, and interactional dimensions of Europeanization processes, and it can also help challenge the idea of Europeanization as a convergence with the EU norm. The comparative literature on state feminism and feminist institutionalism has extensively studied the role of gender equality institutions, alongside the women’s movement, in gendering policy outcomes (Krook and Mackay, 2011; Outshoorn and Kantola, 2007; Stetson and Mazur, 1995). Gender scholarship has also explored how the meaning of gender equality is discursively constructed and contested in policy debates (Bacchi, 1999; Ferree et al., 2002; Kantola, 2006; Verloo, 2007; Lombardo, Meier and Verloo, 2009). Moreover, gender literature has highlighted the key role of actors – be they femocrats, feminist movements, advocacy coalitions, or ‘velvet triangles’ of gender policymakers, activists, and academics – in the making of policies (Van der Vleuten, 2007; Woodward, 2003, p. 76; Liebert, 2003; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Finally, European gender research has revealed that comparisons across member states show diverse policy outcomes rather than uniform ones (Van der Wal and Verloo, 2009; Lauwers, 2009; Verloo, 2007; Liebert, 2003). This implies that convergence with the European gender norms tends to be taken to the empirical test.

By drawing on sociological and discursive approaches to Europeanization, this volume expects to contribute to the gender and Europeanization literature using the comparative analyses of gender and other equality policies in the enlarged EU that were conducted in the QUING (Quality in Gender+ Equality Policies) research project (see