1. Contesting European Integration in times of Polycrisis: An introduction.

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Abstract

This chapter outlines the current conjuncture with its various dynamics of the European polycrisis. It subsequently introduces the key aspects of a Critical Political Economy (CPE) approach, discusses CPE analyses of European integration to date and reflects on what a CPE approach can contribute to understanding the current conjuncture of polycrisis in Europe. Moreover, the chapter provides an overview of the structure of the volume as well as its various contributions.

Keywords

Critical Political Economy, European integration, polycrisis

Introduction

Over the last 15 years, the European Union (EU) has faced a series of intertwined crises, also referred to as polycrisis. Successive economic recessions have shaken the foundations that had been established between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, following the relaunch of the process of European integration with the creation of the Single Market and the Economic and

Monetary Union (EMU). The Global Financial Crisis and the resulting global economic crisis in 2008 turned into a double-dip recession with the outbreak of the Eurozone crisis in 2010. Since 2020, further economic tensions have been caused by the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, the subsequent 'lockdowns' and the resulting disruption of global supply chains, as well as the return of inflation. The European political economy, closely integrated with the global political economy, finds itself in the grip of a global crisis of overaccumulation, in which capital has increasingly struggled to find profitable investment opportunities (Robinson, 2022: 16-17). As 'chronic stagnation places mounting pressure on the political and military agents of transnational capital to crack open new spaces of accumulation' (Robinson, 2024), this crisis of overaccumulation intertwines with geo-political tensions between the EU, the USA and China over trade as well as outright war in Ukraine.

In turn, the increase in flows of refugees triggered by war and famines and the humanitarian disaster caused by 'Fortress Europe' – the border regime that the EU has been building for decades and increasingly hardened (Kouvelakis, 2018) – can be regarded as part of a wider crisis of race relations. People of the Global South have partly become surplus population, expelled from the system as they are no longer needed for further capitalist accumulation, neither as cheap labour, nor as reserve labour army (Bhattacharyya, 2018: 37). Palestinians too, no longer needed by Israel as cheap labour, have become such a surplus population, which has to be dispensed with. They 'have gone from serving as a tightly-controlled and super-exploited labor force for Israeli and transnational capital to surplus humanity standing in the way of a new round of capitalist expansion' (Robinson and Nguyen, 2024). Israel's genocide of the Palestinian people in Gaza, thus, provides a 'A Ghastly Window into the Crisis of Global Capitalism'. The disproportional impact of EU austerity policies on women throughout the Great Recession (Picchio, 2015), and the persistence of unequal gender relations within the EU despite liberal 'mainstreaming' policies indicates how the global crisis

of social reproduction (Fraser, 2016) has also underpinned European integration (Bruff and Wöhl, 2016; Cavaghan and Elomäki, 2022; O'Dwyer, 2022). Finally, as elsewhere European integration is impacted by the global ecological crisis reflected in climate change, the overuse of finite resources and a catastrophic decline in biodiversity (Hickel, 2020: 6-16). The 2016 Brexit Referendum and the rise of Euroscepticism are a just some of the reflections of increasing tensions within European societies resulting from these crises. While mainstream European studies literature has started to adopt the term 'polycrisis' (e.g., Zeitlin et al., 2019; Bressanelli and Natali, 2023), the main objective of this book is to provide critical political economy analyses of European integration against the background of the current conjuncture of multiple, overlapping, and self-reinforcing crises. The book, thus, goes beyond conventional narratives of European integration, by delving into its underlying power structures, inequalities, socio-political implications, and its relationship with the global context.

One of the architects of the EU integration process, Jean Monnet, famously argued that 'Europe will be forged through crisis and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises'. Indeed, crises have often been moments of change when EU elites have been able to overcome obstacles and internal divisions to further integration. After the outbreak of the global financial crisis and the Eurozone crisis, EU executives have set up a new economic governance (NEG) regime, that significantly enhanced its power of supervision and intervention into member states' macro-economic policies. EU interventions under the NEG regime have then shaped public services and industrial relations in a commodifying direction (Erne et al., 2024), contributing to deepen the neoliberal character of European integration, while accentuating its 'authoritarian' character (Bruff, 2014; Bruff and Tansel, 2018; Cozzolino, 2018; Wigger, 2018). After the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, EU executives have for the first time agreed over a form of common fiscal policy, through the establishment of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). Yet, the RRF is only temporary, and is

combined with a continued emphasis on the need for member states to enhance commodifying structural reforms (Ryner, 2022; Erne et al., 2024). At the same time, tightened fiscal rules have been re-activated since 2024, after their suspension in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the energy crisis following the war in Ukraine. Increased geopolitical competition with China but also the U.S. has led to new calls for a European industrial policy, as recently reflected in Mario Draghi's (2024) report on competitiveness. Yet thus far this has mainly materialised as a process of mobilisation of private investment backed by public guarantees (Wigger, 2018; Gabor, 2023). 'De-risking' (Gabor, 2023) has also been at the centre of the EU's response to the impending climate catastrophe through the Green New Deal. The European 'green agenda', however, faces now increasing opposition by enterprises and conservative parties, while the mandate of the new 'geopolitical' Commission led by Ursula von Der Leyen will probably focus more on advancing integration on military issues.

Already back in 2010, Barry Gills (2010) referred to the current conjuncture as a triple crisis including a crisis of capital accumulation, a systemic crisis as well as a civilisational crisis, threatening the very survival of humanity. Ten years later, he remarked 'that recent increase in scale and acceleration in the speed and extent of such destructiveness is closely related to the onset and deepening of neoliberal economic globalization over the past few decades, which has been a crucial driver of the climate change and global ecological crisis' (Gills, 2020: 577). To capture the multiple, interrelated and self-reinforcing character of the crises affecting global capitalism and European integration, the term 'polycrisis' - originally coined by the French complex theorists Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern - has become increasingly popular, both among scholars and European elites alike (Tooze, 2022a). Throughout his tenure, the former European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, for example, used the term repeatedly. In 2016, speaking at an event organised by the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises, Juncker listed among the challenges facing the EU the economic and

financial crisis, as well as 'security threats in our neighbourhood and at home, (…) the refugee crisis, and (…) the UK referendum' (Juncker, 2016). The context of Juncker's words could not be more fitting: beyond the Greek roots of the term polycrisis[1], Greece had just been subject to what the former Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis (2015) defined 'a fiscal waterboarding' by the EU institutions, its governments forced to sign successive 'Memoranda of Understanding' committing to austerity policies and commodifying structural reforms in exchange of lifeline loans. At the same time, the Greek executive has been tasked to co-manage Europe's South-East borders in the midst of the 'refugee crisis' arising from raging famines and wars in North Africa and the Middle East, to which the EU contributed (Kouvelakis, 2018).

Critical Political Economy (CPE) is well placed to analyse polycrisis and its impact on EU integration. Since the relaunch of the process of European integration in the 1980s, CPE scholars have analysed the various facets of European integration, uncovering the complexities and contradictions that shape its development, the power dynamics underlying them and their socio-economic outcomes, going beyond the limitations of mainstream European integration studies and political economy. Many of these contributions have been collected in edited volumes, which have become key references to map the evolution of European integration over time (see Bieler and Morton, 2001a; Cafruny and Ryner, 2003; Overbeek, 2003; van Apeldoorn et al., 2009; Petros et al., 2012; Crespy and Menz, 2015, Jäger and Springler, 2015; Wöhl et al 2019). These books are fundamental to understanding the trajectory of EU integration until the late 2010s. Nevertheless, while the contributions to these volumes were essential at understanding European integration against the deeper dynamics of global capitalist accumulation and included a focus on resistance with an emancipatory dimension of progressive alternatives beyond neo-liberal economics, gendered and racial forms of oppression tended to be overlooked. The latter dimensions are often also ignored by the growing literature on polycrisis (Jayasuriya, 2023). Hence, the more detailed purpose of this

volume is twofold. First, the impact of the polycrisis on the form and content of EU integration calls for a new round of contributions from a critical perspective. Second, this also provides the opportunity of addressing some of the 'blind spots' of critical approaches to EU integration.

This introduction to the volume is structured as follows. First, we will discuss the nature of critical political economy and the need for incorporating dimensions of gendered and racist forms of oppression. In turn, we will provide an overview of the structure of the book.

Polycrisis, European integration and the importance of critical political economy

Critical Political Economy (CPE) analyses of European integration emerged in the 1990s, sometimes referred to as neo-Gramscian perspectives, sometimes referred to as Amsterdam School or transnational historical materialism (Bieler, 2000; Holman, 1992; Holman, 1996; Holman, Overbeek and Ryner, 1998; van Apeldoorn, 2002). This set of approaches was a response to the dominant academic debate between neo-functionalist and intergovernmentalist approaches and their analysis of revived European integration around the 1985 Internal Market programme, established by the 1987 Single European Act, as well as the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht laying out the road towards the EMU (Bieler and Morton, 2001b). Neo-functionalists and intergovernmentalists focused on the *form* of integration in their analyses. While the former emphasised increasing supranational integration via the pooling of sovereignty, the latter emphasised the continuing centrality of member states in setting the pace of integration. By contrast, CPE analyses focused on the *content*, the underlying social purpose of integration. In line with Robert Cox's (1981: 129) definition of 'critical theory', CPE 'does not take institutions and social and power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing' (Cox, 1981: 129). This allowed CPE analyses to reveal that the social purpose of the revival of European integration was to ensure increasing capitalist profitability and the

successful continuation of capitalist accumulation as a whole, predominantly in the interests of transnational capital. This class fraction had emerged as the dominant class fraction at the global as well as European level as a result of globalisation and the related transnationalisations of production and finance. While the neoliberal hegemonic project expressed by this class fraction became dominant with the relaunch of integration since the 1980s, competing hegemonic visions of the EU integration process continued to exist, albeit in a weakened position (van Apeldoorn, 2002; Buch-Hansen and Wigger, 2011). 'Neo-mercantilist' oriented fractions of capital advocated for interventionist industrial policies at the national and European level (Warlouzet, 2018). Moreover, workers and trade unions often coalesced with other social movements to oppose the process of liberalisation (Bieler, 2011; Crespy, 2012; Erne, 2008; Parks, 2015). Thus, Bastiaan van Apeldoorn (2002) identified the emergence of a compromise around 'embedded neo-liberalism': neo-liberal restructuring satisfied the interests of transnational European capital, while various social measures constituted concessions to other class fractions.

Drawing on concepts such as hegemony, historical bloc and organic intellectuals, initially developed by the Italian communist leader Antonio Gramsci, this set of approaches nonetheless was firmly rooted in a Marxist understanding of the fundamental importance of the social relations of production for an understanding of structural change. Thus, 'the focus on the materialist foundations of all social life and production is another core element of CPE' (Jäger, 2022: 55). European integration is, therefore, analysed within the restructuring of the capitalist social relations of production at the global level around the transnationalisation of production and finance. Key agents are therefore social class forces, which operate within a set of capitalist structuring conditions. The main focus of explanation is the analysis of class struggle, in which capitalist structure and class agency are internally related (Bieler and Morton 2018: 36-50). When focusing on class struggle, it is however not enough to analyse the struggle

between capital and labour. Instead, the focus has to be on inter- and intra-class struggles involving a number of distinctive class fractions including nationally-oriented capital labour, internationally-oriented capital and labour, i.e. fractions engendered by domestic production structures, as well as transnational capital and labour resulting from sectors where production has been organised across borders (e.g. Bieler 2000; van Apeldoorn 2002).

The focus on the social relations of production, therefore, allowed CPE approaches to understand the revival of European integration since the 1980s against the background of a process of transnational class formation, with transnational capital emerging as new dominant class at the global level. CPE scholars employed this analytical framework also to explain the neoliberal character of the process of EU enlargement throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, first towards North and then towards East (Bieler, 2000; Bohle, 2006). This analytical focus on class struggle(s) and on capitalist structuring conditions also differentiates CPE approaches from liberal interpretations of the current 'polycrisis', approaches that emphasise instead the 'diversity of challenges without specifying a single dominant contradiction or source of tension or dysfunction' (Tooze, 2022b).

At the same time, CPE approaches implicitly include an emancipatory dimension 'that sides with the exploited and the oppressed, showing the need for transforming the capitalist mode of production and going beyond it' (Jäger 2022: 52). Hence, the focus of CPE analyses has increasingly been not only on the role of capitalist class fractions, but also on class fractions of labour and their struggles against capitalist exploitation and for an alternative future beyond capitalism (Bailey et al., 2017). This included an investigation of the broad mobilisations of counter – neo-liberal forces within and around the various World and European Social Forums during the 2000s (e.g. Bieler and Morton 2004) as well as the role of labour and trade unions within European integration (Bieler, 2006; Erne, 2008; Horn, 2012).

As pioneering as these approaches were in comparison with mainstream neo-functionalist and intergovernmentalist theory through their focus on class struggle between capital and labour and exploitation of the latter by the former at the workplace, they nonetheless included a number of blind spots. As Angela Wigger (2022: 190) has noted, 'the accumulation of surplus capital through exploitation lies at the heart of social struggles; yet, in addition to the capital-labour nexus, exploitation can also become manifest alongside sex, gender, age, race, ethnicity and people with different abilities or sexual orientation'. In fact, capitalist accumulation does not only depend on exploitation at the workplace but equally on expropriation of unpaid labour resulting from patriarchal and racist forms of oppression. As social reproduction feminists have pointed out, for example, for workers to present themselves ready for work every day, a lot of often unpaid work has to go on in the sphere of social reproduction, including cooking, washing clothes and general care (Picchio, 2015; Bhattacharya, 2017; Ferguson, 2020). Harry Cleaver ([1979]2000), therefore, speaks of the social factory, which includes both the spheres of production as well as social reproduction.

Furthermore, slave labour was crucial, starting from the 16th century and especially in the 18th and 19th centuries for the expansion of capitalism. Slave plantations in the America provided with cotton and sugar the essential raw materials for the shift from agricultural to industrial capitalism first in Britain and then other European countries. Moreover, today too unfree, bonded forms of labour remain an essential part of capitalist accumulation. As the ILO (2022: 2-3) reports, there were 49.6 million people in situations of modern slavery in 2021, including 27.6 million in forced labour and 22 million in forced marriage. This includes 4.1 million people in forced labour in Europe. Moreover, racist forms of oppression are also reflected in the continuing expropriation of indigenous land be it for mining rare minerals, be it for the construction of oil pipelines such as in North America (Estes, 2019). European industries are directly linked with these forms of racist oppression due to their dependence on

raw materials from the Global South. To understand the complex dynamics underpinning the polycrisis, these different forms of exploitation and oppression need to be taken into account. As LeBaron et al point out, 'when IPE scholars miss the centrality of colonialism in early capitalist development, they also get the central political economic concepts of class and labor wrong by ignoring the foundational role of colonial subjugation, and how this problem persists in representations of later stages of capitalism' (LeBaron et al, 2021: 285). It is one of the objectives of this book to tackle the blind spots of past critical political economy analyses of European integration. Finally, capitalist accumulation does not only depend on exploitation in the work place and expropriation in the spheres of social reproduction, but also on the expropriation of 'cheap natures'. As Jason Moore (2015) has argued, in order to increase constantly capitalist accumulation, production requires ever more access to cheap natures as input. Whether it is water for mineral extractivism such as tar sands or new land for soy plantations fuelling deforestation in the Amazonas and elsewhere, capitalist production relentlessly expands into nature, leaving wholesale destruction in its wake. In many respects, capitalism's reliance on access to cheap fossil fuels has been the driving force underpinning climate change.

Hence, when analysing European integration from a CPE perspective, it is essential to include a focus on patriarchal and racist forms of oppression as well as capitalism's relentless expansion into nature. The various contributions to this volume are, therefore, not only exploring the different ways the polycrisis has impacted on European integration. They also go in the direction of combining a focus on exploitation and class with feminist, decolonial and ecological perspectives, thereby expanding CPE.

Overview of the volume

The book is divided into four parts. After this Introduction, Part I investigates the critical political economy of the EU's polycrisis. Here, the contributors focus on the current migration, fiscal, industrial, corporate governance and housing policies of European integration. Nikolai Huke's chapter showcases the political and analytical importance of including questions related to migration, borders and racism in academic debates about the current political conjuncture in the EU. He, thus, reveals blind spots of CPE debates on European integration to date, which have systematically neglected these issues and the way they are at the very heart of the European political economy. Magnus Ryner employs a state-theoretical perspective to analyse the reforms to the European fiscal governance regime. He highlights how – after the suspension of the supranational fiscal constraints during the Covid-19 pandemic – the reformed fiscal rules are now even more complex and opaque, further increasing the European executives' arbitrary powers, at the expense of democracy. As Angela Wigger explains, this hollowing out of democracy is also a feature of the new European industrial policy. Being centered on financial instruments backed up by EU resources to attract private investments, with no social conditionalities, the EU industrial policy is primarily geared towards the interest of capital. Riccardo Fornasari and Vincenzo Maccarrone focus on the EU's attempt to regulate corporate's behaviour along global value chains through the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD). While the stated objectives of the directive are progressive, introducing the principle of corporations' liability for violations of human rights along their value chains, their analysis of the CSDDD from a perspective of unequal exchange reveals its major limitations. Giuseppe Montalbano and Lindsay B. Flynn analyse the neoliberalisation of housing in Europe. Their chapter shows how a new form of financialised housing rentierism emerged as a dominant trend across Europe, leading to the rise of hegemonic coalitions dominated by the real estate finance industry, short-term rental services, and small landlords' interests.

In Part II, four chapters focus on the implications of EU level policies within different domestic contexts and sectors. Employing a social reproduction lens, Stefanie Wöhl illustrates how the neoliberalisation of housing is becoming pervasive even in Vienna, a city historically characterised by decommodifying residential policies. Costanza Galanti and Stella Christou assess the implications of the EU's coercive interventions on healthcare policies of Greece, Italy and Romania through bailout conditionality and the European Semester, revealing how they contributed to the commodification of healthcare. Through an analysis of the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan, Darragh Golden shows how – even as EU fiscal policy became more expansive in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic – the orientation of EU prescriptions on local public service remains geared towards commodifying structural reforms. Studying garment production in Southern Italy and Albania, Francesco Bagnardi reveals how European production sites have increasingly become integrated in global production networks. Importantly, however, this does not result in industrial upgrading, but rather a downgrading to labour-intensive suppliers. Informal employment in sweatshops and homeworking arrangements are the result in Europe's periphery.

Part III is dedicated to the analysis of the EU's efforts to address climate change with its new green policies. Ewa Dziwok and Johannes Jäger employ a regulationist perspective to analyse the various strategies in European green finance. While their analysis highlights the existence of competing projects of green finance - neoliberal, reformist, and progressive-transformative – it also stresses that the neoliberal project remains dominant. In turn, Rosalind Cavaghan analyses the EU's Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy, comparing the strategies before the European Green Deal in 2020 with the strategies afterwards to assess to what extent social reproduction has been taken into account. Importantly, post-EGD, humans and social dimensions are at the heart of economic policy. Concerns for social reproduction and its importance for the economy are, however, cosmetic at best. There is some new commitment to

redistribution to counter the negative impacts on various countries and regions, but this is not extended to social reproduction, even though it is acknowledged that Covid-19 had affected women and men differently, also precisely because of differences related to unpaid social reproduction work. No correcting policy measures are put into place. Hence, Cavaghan concludes that the crisis in European social reproduction is set to continue. In his contribution, Ruben Vezzoni identifies a shift in the EU Energy Union from a focus on dismantling national energy monopolies, thereby ensuring competition in the energy market in the 1980s and 1990s, to a stronger emphasis on guaranteeing energy security in the wake of the Ukraine war. Thus, he identifies a new capitalist accumulation strategy based on pooled state sovereignty for the purpose of de-risking private investments in low-carbon energy systems. This includes the more frequent and ad hoc granting of derogations for the pursuit of strategic objectives. Unsurprisingly, the environment often loses out in this new set of priorities. This chapter also provides a good transition to the next part of the book and a focus on EU foreign political economy.

Part IV is opened with Julia Eder and Jakob Rammer's analysis of the dynamics underpinning EU energy transition via green hydrogen relations with Chile. As the authors make clear, because Chile depends on foreign capital and technology to develop this sector, it becomes locked into a situation of dependence. Moreover, lacking domestic demand for this comparatively expensive type of energy, it is completely dependent on exports to the EU. Regulations contained within the Chile – EU Advanced Framework Agreement of 2023 ensure further that Chile remains in a subordinated position of unequal exchange within that particular global value chain, exporting green hydrogen for advanced technology and finance. This situation of unequal exchange is also analysed in Andreas Bieler's exploration of the EU – Mercosur free trade agreement. The Mercosur countries Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay become locked into a relationship of unequal exchange, in which they

predominantly re-focus on the export of primary commodities such as minerals, soy and beef in exchange for manufactured goods in the automobile sector and pharmaceutical industry. While transnational capital is set to profit from the deal in Mercosur and the EU alike, it is workers in Mercosur, European farmers and the environment, who will lose out. Women in Mercosur are especially negatively affected from the deal. In their chapter, Alan Cafruny and Vassilis Fouskas demonstrate that especially Germany but also the EU as a whole have lost out economically within the global political economy as a result of the war in Ukraine. While the US is strengthening and attracting European companies with mercantilist type policies, European countries are experiencing a process of deindustrialisation against the background of rising energy costs and intensified Chinese competition. In the last contribution to this Part, Elif Uzgören highlights that while formal Turkish membership in the EU is off the table, there is increasing informal integration of Turkish production sectors especially as a result of near-shoring following the pandemic. Additionally, she highlights the fragmentation of Turkish social class forces over EU membership against the background of polycrisis, making it difficult to reflect on progressive alternatives in Europe's periphery.

The final part of the book is dedicated to analyses of the rise of the far right in Europe. In the opening chapter, Owen Worth discusses the rising fortunes of the populist European radical right party family. Interestingly, while these parties have succeeded at creating greater divisions within European societies through their discourses around immigration, multiculturalism and via conspiracy theories, they have failed to engender any more fundamental transformation. Most importantly, perhaps, they are lacking a clear economic alternative. While some appeal to protectionist measure to shield their core constituency against the ravages of an integrated global political economy, others push a radical marketising strategy. Perhaps, these parties are more a symptom of the polycrisis, while being completely unable to provide any coherent alternatives? In turn, Daniela Caterina, Adriano Cozzolino,

Gemma Gasseau and Davide Monaco warn us against analysing Giorgia Meloni's government of the far-right party Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) simply in its contemporary context. Rather, this shift has to be analysed against the background of wider historical developments and here the phenomenon of Berlusconism and the drastic neoliberal restructuring in Italy from the early 1990s onwards. In other words, the current conjuncture of the rise and consolidation of far-right parties across the EU has to be examined in a historically grounded understanding. The legacies of Berlusconism have clearly facilitated Meloni's rise to power. The final chapter of this part by Jasper P. Simons, Miklós Sebők and Ilona Szabó analyses the construction of a transnational illiberal counterhegemonic project around Hungary's Victor Orbán against the background of the polycrisis engulfing the current embedded neo-liberal hegemony. Drawing on neo-Gramscian theory, they compare current far-right developments with the construction of the compromise of embedded liberalism in the wake of World War II. While they demonstrate how illiberalism has been successful to some extent via the four mechanisms of platforming, financial support, trade and investment as well as safeguarding, undermining EU values and aggravating the polycrisis in the process, it has not yet been able to establish a cohesive transnational political class with continuing differences over the Ukraine war, economic policy and European fiscal integration. They, thus, echo Worth's findings that the far right offer a programme for people to vent their frustrations, but they do not offer a coherent alternative to neo-liberal capitalism.

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[1] 'Poly' means 'many', while crisis come from the verb 'Krino', which means 'to judge'.