Chapter 4
A Marxian Analysis of the European Construction II: Contradictions

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Abstract Analysing the post-World War foundations of the European Union and following in detail the history of this construction until today, Jean-Christophe Defraigne focuses, in two chapters, on class domination, the absence of the European working class, and the conflicts between the elite classes of different European nations as well as with the American bourgeoisie. The major advances of the institutionalization of the European Union and the Eurozone corresponding to the regression of worker movements, Defraigne argues that it has ended up favouring reactionary and extreme-rightist "solutions" to crisis scenarios, aligned with a rampant euro-scepticism symbolized by Brexit, that prevents the creation of a supra-national European State with the capacity of resolving at least some of its internal contradictions.

Keywords Marxism · European Union · Political economy · Eurozone · Crisis · Brexit · Working class

This chapter builds on the analysis of the previous chapter to highlight, from a Marxian angle, the contradictions of the European economic construction. It begins with the Treaty of Rome, which established the European Economic Community (EEC), and goes on to analyse six decades of deepening and enlargement of the EEC and the European Union (EU). The aim is to shed light on the obstacles, limits and impact of this process of economic integration, which has marked the history of Europe and is part of the transformations of globalized capitalism.

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4.1 1953–1973: The Return of Rivalries Between National Bourgeoisies and European Deadlock

As the political situation stabilized with the end of the Korean War, the death of Stalin and the retreat of the Stalinist parties in Western Europe, the threat of the overthrow of capitalism no longer seemed imminent. With the reconstruction of European national economies and the end of the Marshall Plan, Europe's national bourgeoisies resumed their protectionist attitudes. They used the privileged ties they maintained with their national state apparatus to defend themselves against their US and European competitors, notably by reducing the powers of supranational institutions they were not sure they could control in the face of lobbying from their European competitors (Defraigne 2004). Thus, the employers' associations of ECSC member states managed to resist the High Authority's attempts to rationalize production capacity, and Monnet, who was appointed to head the High Authority, was unable to make full use of the powers he had on paper (Lister 1960; Joly 2007), in particular the possibility of carrying out transnational mergers within the ECSC. The supranational institutions of the 1957 European Community no longer had such powers.

During the first 30 years of its existence, the Common Market was hampered by numerous barriers erected by member states to protect their national firms – a policy of "national champions" rather than "European champions". The national bourgeoisies are able to obtain subsidies to counter foreign competition, to erect technical barriers to trade, and to obtain virtually exclusive access to procurements from their national state. The Commission denounced such practices, which violated the "Community acquis" (the set of EU rules),[1] but failed to get member states to put a stop to them. As a result, the Common Market is unable to match the degree of integration of the US domestic market, which is detrimental to the competitiveness of European firms, and is even making certain new sectors such as IT and pharmaceuticals considerably lag behind. As for the European defence, the same fear of losing control of the foreign policy that protects their imperialist interests is preventing the French, German and British bourgeoisie from seriously considering the creation of a European army. It's hard to see the German bourgeoisie supporting French colonial wars, when its economic interests are virtually non-existent in the French colonies, given the preponderance of French imperialism.

[1] That is, all the supranational rules in force in the EEC and then the EU.

4.2 The Crisis of the 1970s, Capital's Offensive Against Workers and the Acceleration of European Integration 1973–2006

The capitalist system experienced a serious structural crisis in the early 1970s. Reconstruction and the generalization of Fordist production methods, the driving forces behind the postwar European growth, ran out of steam at the end of the 1960s, as new producers of manufactured goods emerged in East Asia. Full employment in the 1960s and the high level of militancy among the working class in imperialist countries led to upward pressure on wages, which rose faster than productivity gains in Europe. The development of state intervention in the economy, through the nationalization of ailing industrial sectors and the development of social security systems, increased the tax burden on capital and limited the scope for capitalist investment. The rate of surplus value fell rapidly from the end of the 1960s in the USA and the early 1970s in Europe (Duménil and Levy 2011; Mandel 1985).

To defend their accumulation capacities, the bourgeoisies embark on a series of manoeuvres aimed at raising the rate of profit (Kolko 1988; Mandel 1985). The first is to resort to increased automation and industrial relocation to Third World economies where exploitation can be intensified, first in East Asia (the Asian tigers) and then in the vicinity of imperialist countries (Mexico, Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean region, ASEAN and China). The second is to use the loopholes in the international monetary system, notably the Eurocurrency market, to set up a system of offshore financial centres, with the support of governments, which will enable the de facto development of greater freedom of capital movements and large-scale tax evasion via transfer pricing mechanisms (Helleiner 1995; Shaxson 2011). These new opportunities for tax evasion will permanently weaken the tax resources needed to finance social security, thereby weakening wage-earners and the small self-employed by reducing their access to or level of alternative income (unemployment benefits or pensions). The third is to structurally weaken workers' ability to fight (reducing the right to strike, using the civil code against the labour code, with bailiffs), and to deregulate or "flexibilize" the labour market to make workers more precarious (temporary work, bogus self-employment, fixed-term contracts, zero hour contracts, etc.). An ideological offensive – some call it neoliberal, even though it is basically a step backwards – is developing on a massive scale, via think-tanks, universities and the press, calling into question state taxation and social transfers, public enterprises and public services, trade unions, financial and labour market regulation, and all forms of intervention (Halimi 2004; Harvey 2005).

The working class actively defended itself during the last three decades of the twentieth century, as indicated by the frequency of strike days, but was dragged along by its organizations in a purely defensive and sectoral perspective, aiming to preserve their status quo in terms of living standards. This inability to play a decisive role in the face of the forces of capital, when it had succeeded in doing so at other times in its history, can be explained by the existence of social stabilizers (unemployment benefits, early retirement schemes) which plunge them into poverty but not into misery comparable to the situation in the nineteenth century, or by technological change which catches them off-guard, or by employers' strategies of dividing workers according to their nationality or status (temporary work, fixed-term contracts versus permanent contracts).

However, in addition to these socio-economic factors, there was another determining factor of a political nature. This was the disappearance of strong organized revolutionary currents, in contrast to the situation that prevailed in the labour movement before the 1930s.

The reformist drift of social democratic organizations, trade unions, political parties and associations continued throughout the twentieth century, and they ended up supporting political leaders such as Mitterrand, Schmidt, Prodi, Renzi, Gonzales, Blair and Di Rupo. Not only do these politicians support the maintenance of capitalism, they also ended in cooperating with employers in their offensive against workers. Reformist left-wing organizations, which have abandoned the classical Marxist analysis of class and state for decades, are completely surprised by this offensive, which began in the 1970s, as the social and institutional framework in which they had been accustomed to operating since the end of the Second World War is gradually being dismantled: social security, regulation of the labour market, trade union rights and "social concertation", high taxation of high incomes and companies. As workers' living conditions worsened, these organizations suffered a loss of credibility, a haemorrhage of activists and a change in social composition, gradually losing their working-class identity.

The revolutionary communist parties and trade unions inspired by the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 became appendages of Stalinist foreign policy during the purge waves of the 1930s and 1940s, imposed by the Stalinist bureaucracy via the Comintern (Broué 1997). Afterwards the communist party leadership became conservative, even reactionary, and suspicious of any workers' movement it could not control, a far cry from the origins of the revolutionary Marxist current. With the growing discredit of the repressive Stalinist society (especially after the revelations of Stalinist crimes at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of Soviet Union in 1956), these parties gradually lost their influence among the working class. Those of their bureaucratic leaders who chose to distance themselves from Moscow (like Berlinguer in the Italian CP) did not return to a revolutionary Marxist vision, but followed the path and evolution of reformist social democracy. Revolutionary currents (Trotskyists, Maoists until the Deng Xiao Ping turning point, or anarchists), other political currents or non-revolutionary syndicalists who advocated social struggles rather than electoral prospects were still very much in the minority, and did not have enough of a foothold to form mass parties capable of altering the balance of power in favour of the workers.

Thus, the acceleration of European integration between 1980 and 2000, with the creation of the European Single Market and the single currency, took place during a period of retreat for the workers' movement. The latter had no influence on this process, leaving the field free for capital's lobbyists to influence the evolution of the EEC-EU. In this context of employers' offensive and retreat of the working world, this integration is used by the European bourgeoisie as a tool to reinforce the domination of capital. Of course, this offensive has a structural cause independent of the European integration process, and extends beyond the EEC/EU to all imperialist and Third World economies, the latter hit by the debt crisis and notorious structural adjustment plans during the 1980s–1990s (Kolko 1988; Panitch and Gindin 2013; Harvey 2005). Contrary to certain sovereigntist discourses that claim to be left-wing but have no desire to call into question the foundations of the capitalist economy, namely private ownership of the means of production and profit, it is not European integration that is the cause of this offensive against labour (it is indeed the re-establishment of the rate of profit necessary for the continuation of capitalist accumulation). Nor is it the only means of pursuing this offensive, as witnessed by the setbacks suffered by the American and Japanese working classes at the same time.

The crisis of the 1970s intensified international competition. There were also a few protectionist impulses, but nothing like the crisis of the 1930s, since no imperialist power thought of challenging the United States' position as leader of the capitalist camp, or of military expansion as a way out of the crisis, given American military superiority and the fear of a USSR still perceived as powerful (Defraigne and Nouveau 2022). Faced with the Soviet threat, which was overestimated following the victory in North Vietnam and the USSR's geopolitical advances in Africa and the Middle East, and faced with the rise of a discourse emanating from Third World countries calling for a new world economic order, the imperialist countries chose not to confront each other too harshly on the trade front (Kolko 1988). However, the American government took advantage of its hegemonic position to impose unilateral measures that harmed the economic interests of the European and Japanese imperialist powers, such as the Trade Act of 1974 and the unilateral abandonment of the dollar's gold convertibility and fixed exchange rates between 1971 and 1973. We are reminded of a unilateralism that prefigures the "America First" of the Trump era with Treasury Secretary Connally's quip: "The dollar is our currency, but it's your problem" (Panitch and Gindin 2013). The EEC remains open to international trade, but is subject to Washington's unilateral policies. What is more, the meteoric transformation of Japan's economy has made it a major competitor, whose commercial expansion is as frightening to European chancelleries in the 1970s–1980s as China's has been in this last decade.

The transition to the electronic age and differentiated mass production (what some have called post-Fordism or Toyotism) calls for an increase in firm size that challenges the status quo of the Common Market fragmentation through national champion policies (Defraigne 2004; Boyer and Durand 1998; Piore and Sabel 1984). Against this backdrop of crisis and heightened competition, Europe's major corporations are seeking greater integration of the European market to eliminate their weaker European competitors, rationalize production capacities at the European level and facilitate the transition to post-Fordist production. Even non-EU multinationals operating within the Common Market, such as Volvo (Sweden), Nestlé, CIBA Geigy (Switzerland), IBM or United Technologies (USA), were in favour of removing national barriers within the Common Market. In the spring of 1983, with the support of the European Commissioner for Industry and the Internal Market, Etienne Davignon, Volvo boss Pehr Gyllenhammar and Dutch Philips boss Wisse Dekker set up a lobbying group of major European firms in favour of greater EEC integration (Dinan 2005; Gillingham 2003). This led to the creation of the European Roundtable of Industrialists, which brought together some 20, then 40, large firms from member states and elsewhere operating within the EEC (Dinan 2005; Green Cowles 2007; Moravcsik 1998). This lobby had a decisive influence on the creation of the Single Market in 1993, and even drafted parts of President Jacques Delors' 1985 White Paper, the document that paved the way for the Single Market (Gillingham 2003; Defraigne 2004).

Some fractions of the national bourgeoisie still resisted, fearing that abandoning the protections afforded by their national state would expose them to devastating competition, but other fractions, which included most of the very largest firms, supported the ERT, battled and prevailed in favour of the creation of the Single Market (Defraigne and Nouveau 2022).

In parallel with the creation of the Single Market, a process of monetary integration began with the fixed exchange rate system introduced at Bretton Woods with the Werner Report (1970), and continued with the European Monetary System in 1979, culminating in the single currency in 1999. Monetary integration had several objectives: to ensure greater fluidity in the EU market by limiting exchange rate risks and fluctuations; to facilitate the integration of financial services; and to provide an alternative to the dollar, thereby strengthening the balance of power between European states and US monetary policy (James 2012; Marsh 2010).

While some authors credit Delors presidency with a social vision that saw the integration of markets and currency as a step towards a social, market-regulating Europe, this presupposes a degree of autonomy that European technocrats have never enjoyed (Gillingham 2003). The Single Market and the single currency were accompanied by severe market deregulation and considerable social regression in the 1990s and 2000s.

4.3 The Single Market as a Tool for Strengthening the Control of the Bourgeoisies of the Major European Imperialist Powers

The European Single Market generated a wave of mergers on a scale unprecedented in European history, enabling the emergence of large firms comparable in size to American firms in several sectors (Defraigne 2004). This dramatic industrial concentration took place at the expense of the national champions of smaller member states. Firms such as Société Générale de Belgique, Skoda (Czech Republic), Dacia (Romania) and Seat (Spain) were absorbed by the giants of the larger member states, such as Suez, VW and Renault. This process, which continued for three decades, strengthened the hold of the major groups of the largest European imperialist powers within the Single Market. It transformed certain small national bourgeoisies into comprador rentiers. The smaller member states ended up with fewer and fewer world-class firms, while the share of French and German firms in the group of European firms belonging to the Global Fortune 500 grew.

The strengthening of competition policy was supported by ERT and the big firms, as it limited the ability of states to save their inefficient national firms and drives the privatization of public companies. These companies either went bankrupt or became absorbed by larger competitors. Under the pretext of creating European champions through transnational mergers, which will have better economies of scale and be able to offer services at lower prices, governments have carried out numerous privatizations of public companies in telecoms, electricity, water distribution, transport and financial services. The result is large companies that benefit from economies of scale, but which are essentially national, not European: they retain a strong national shareholding and national commercial law. Most small member states find themselves in a situation analogous to that of Third World countries, where foreign multinationals control the bulk of capital-intensive services, with a small proportion remaining in the hands of the national comprador bourgeoisie.

4.4 The Single Market and Its Enlargements as a Mechanism of Social and Fiscal Competition for the Benefit of Business

The European Single market of 1993, with its four major freedoms of movement (goods, services, capital and workers), enable companies to fully exploit competition between workers in different member states, and between governments, to generate a race to the bottom in social rules and corporate taxation. The position of Business Europe, the European employers' association, is to oppose European fiscal and social harmonization. Indeed, companies have the freedom of establishment between member states, which enables them to relocate to obtain the most advantageous social and tax legislation, and to more easily blackmail relocation to obtain lower wages or public subsidies (Defraigne and Nouveau 2022).

Enlargement towards Eastern Europe greatly accelerates this process. The Countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CCEEs) are in a very fragile situation at the time of their accession negotiations. Many of them are heavily indebted and need access to external markets to repay their debts with exports. The European Commission estimates that 70% of their companies have obsolete technology incapable of coping with international competition (Berend 2009). Dependent on aid from international organizations controlled by the big imperialist powers (IMF, EBRD, European Commission), their governments accept transition programs that result in closures and privatizations of national champions taken over by EU multinationals. Unlike China's transition to capitalism, during which the state maintained a developmentalist policy to modernize its national champions, CCEE governments are following the Washington Consensus of the IMF, World Bank and EBRD and their neoliberal agenda.

The CCEE adopt the Irish “Celtic Tiger” model. To attract multinationals wishing to relocate their labour-intensive activities, CEE countries offer cheap labour with modest social contributions and very low corporate tax rates. Like Ireland, they use EU aid to modernize the infrastructures that multinationals will use. Public money is thus used to facilitate the creation of production zones to drive down the production costs of multinationals, mainly from the EU‘s most developed economies, which are already raking in billions in profits. EU aid to the CCEEs is actually quite limited, given the enormous technological and social cost of returning to the fold of Western capitalism. Whereas the Mediterranean countries had a GDP per capita averaging 50% of the EEC level when they joined, the figure drops to 25% for the new member states from Central and Eastern Europe (Defraigne and Nouveau 2022). Yet they receive half as much aid per capita for their accession (Boillot 2003; Michalski 2006). In reality, the CCEE have the characteristics of so-called emerging economies, but they remain underdeveloped. Labour costs are five to ten times lower than in Germany or France. Without sufficient financial aid from the EU to ensure real catch-up in the medium term, and without a sufficient tax base, social security coverage in the CCEE is being dramatically reduced, and mass unemployment is rising to twice the level of the EU of 15 old member states (Eurostat, 2021). With unemployment benefits insufficient to live decently, the working population of the CCEE has to sell off its labour force, either by working directly or indirectly (subcontracting) for local subsidiaries of multinationals, or by moving to the old member states to take any available job, mainly in construction, road transport, tourism, catering, home services and agriculture as seasonal workers (Defraigne and Nouveau 2022).

Millions of CCEE workers migrate to the old member states, driving down local wages in certain sectors. As workers from CCEE compete with those from the old member states, fear and even anger against EU rules is on the rise. This was symbolized by the “Polish plumber” controversy during the French referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005. This labour race to the bottom was a key factor in the rise of euroscepticism, which led to the failure of the French, Irish and Dutch referendums, strengthened xenophobic far-right currents and pushed Great Britain towards Brexit.

Following the failure of the referendums, the openly neoliberal version of the EU labour and services market advocated by the European directive drafted by European Commissioner Bolkenstein (from the Dutch liberal right) is legally amended. The Bolkenstein directive advocated using the labour market laws of the country of origin of a worker providing a service in another member country. Thus, a Polish worker from a Polish firm providing cleaning services in France was not entitled to the benefits of the French labour code, but had to make do with Polish rules, which were much more favourable to employers. The amendment tabled by the parties of the European reformist left impose the principle of using the social legislation of the country of destination... but with an exception for posted workers providing a service of less than 1 month, in which case the legislation of the country of origin would apply. Whether these parties were naïve or duplicitous does not change the fact that millions of workers from the CCEE and Southern Europe are exploited on temporary assignments of less than a month (but often de facto repeated) under the social legislation of the country of origin. In the 2010s, for example, Bulgarian workers took on assignments for firms in the meat-cutting sector in Germany at a wage of 3 to 4 euros, i.e. over 50% below the German minimum wage (Monty 2013).

These circumventions of the law, which offer cheap labour to capitalists in the north-western part of the EU, are legion, and member state governments consciously choose not to employ enough labour inspectors to systematically enforce the law. When, by a happy coincidence, a company is prosecuted, the procedures are very slow and the penalties negligible. For example, it took 9 years to convict the French company Bouygues, which had subcontracted 460 Romanian and Polish workers on its Flamanville sites, without paying social security contributions, granting paid leave or offering social protection. On appeal, the French giant was ordered to pay a fine of 29,950 euros, while the loss of earnings for the State amounted to between 10 and 12 million euros. As journalist Dan Israel of Médiapart points out: "a very precisely chosen amount: a fine of 30,000 euros would have prevented it (Bouygues) from gaining access to public contracts for several years, as the president of the Caen Court of Appeal himself had pointed out, highlighting the risks for the employment of construction workers" (author's translation, Israel 2021). In its Laval and Viking rulings, the European Court of Justice revealed the extent to which the European Treaties were designed to enable firms to compete with EU workers, thereby driving down wages and levels of social protection (Defraigne and Nouveau 2022). This race to the bottom has been reflected in a steady fall in corporate taxes and a decline in the share of wages in EU GDP, two mechanisms that boost the profit rate of capitalists.

Another area where oligopolistic capitalism plays on differences in national legislation is competition. If capitalists wish to operate freely throughout the EU, they do not wish to be subject to centralized regulation at EU level. So, until the Banking Union was established in 2014, the national banking authorities of member states had no clear view of the activities carried out by their banks' subsidiaries located in other member states, where banking regulation may have been more lax. This phenomenon encouraged the creation of real estate and financial bubbles in certain member states, such as Ireland. In the telecoms and energy sectors, there is no real European market, but 27 national markets within which oligopolies operate, facing regulatory authorities of widely varying powers, rather than a centralized European authority. This allows firms operating in different member states to impose prices that are sometimes very different and bear no relation to actual production costs, as illustrated by the fact that prices for telecoms and electricity within the EU can vary by as much as double. In Belgium, for example, the Commission de Régulation de l'Électricité et du Gaz has publicly admitted its inability to obtain the cost structures of the French multinational Engie, which holds a dominant position in the Belgian energy market and charges much higher prices than in France (Belga 2011). Some multinationals, particularly in the services sector, find themselves in the comfortable position of oligopolistic rentiers facing small member states with weak, underfunded regulatory institutions, and have no interest in developing genuine European integration, which would nevertheless be more efficient in terms of production costs.

4.5 European Institutions Under the Control of Large Capitalist Firms

As the pace of European integration accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s, the major multinational corporations strengthened their influence in Brussels, which became home to the largest number of lobbyists in the world, ahead of Washington DC. Specialized "public affairs" agencies developed the techniques used in the US to defend the interests of large corporations (Laurens 2015). The complexity of European institutions and policies is conducive to opaque decision-making. Industrial, health, environmental and social standards are decided behind closed doors. Although consumer associations, NGOs and trade unions may be included, the presence of big business is preponderant, and some proposed European directives include passages directly drafted by private firms. The so-called "revolving doors" mechanism between the European civil service and the private sector is encouraged, with opportunities for repeated career breaks to "facilitate" experience in the private sector. This obviously helps private interests to penetrate the European civil service. For example, a Commission official might work on car pollution standards, then go to work for a car company, only to return to work on these standards. Revolving doors can be seen at the highest level. The case of European Commission President Barroso, who went to work for Goldman Sachs Bank after his term of office, or that of Mario Draghi, who became ECB President after having been a director of Goldman Sachs Europe, are emblematic but by no means exceptional. Some members of the European Parliament belong to companies, while at the same time legislating in areas of interest to those companies. For example, the CEO of Tiscali, one of Europe's leading telecoms operators, was a member of the European Parliament, as was former Belgian Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene, who sat on the boards of Dexia bank and beer multinational Inbev (Defraigne and Nouveau 2022). Of course, these phenomena also exist at member state level, or in the US and Japan, but they are more exposed to criticism and public opinion than at the level of European institutions, which are more complex and less familiar to the general public. Numerous NGOs working on these issues, such as Corporate Europe Obervatory, note the near-total stranglehold of big business on the European decision-making process (CEO 2017).

4.6 Where Is Europe Headed?

Marxian analysis of the European construction provides essential keys to understanding the chaotic and incomplete nature of this construction, as it does not shy away from analyzing the links between national bourgeoisies and their state apparatus, and considers that the driving forces of societies are the development of productive forces and class struggle (Marx 1994). An analysis that takes these elements into account helps us to understand that, from the beginning of the twentieth century, Western European economic integration was seen by European economic and political leaders as necessary to reach the level of competitiveness of US firms, by adopting Fordist production methods and benefiting from the economies of scale generated by the technological innovations of the second industrial revolution. But the rivalries of the national bourgeoisies held back the creation of supranational institutions to drive forward this integration, despite two bloody conflicts, as each national bourgeoisie feared it would not have the same control over them as it had over its traditional national state apparatus. Contrary to what prevails in certain superficial analyses by the media and certain European technocrats, it is not so much the populations, supposedly driven by strong nationalist sentiment, who have blocked European integration in order to preserve their political sovereignty, but rather the national bourgeoisies who have used their state apparatus to defend their interests.

These rivalries between national bourgeoisies did not prevent them from using the process of European integration as one tool among others to contribute to the wider general offensive of the bourgeoisies of imperialist countries against the workers, in order to raise a rate of profit so low in the early 1970s that it threatened the continuation of capitalist accumulation. European integration has been used to promote competition between workers and between states, especially since the enlargement to the East in the 2000s. The result has been a race to the bottom in social standards and corporate taxation. This social deterioration has encouraged the emergence of eurosceptic sovereignist movements, particularly on the far right. Where can a capitalist Europe go, weakened by rivalries between national bourgeoisies and gradually losing its legitimacy within a growing proportion of the population, other than towards more contradictions that push it towards reactionary or revolutionary outcomes?

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