Critical Perspectives on European Values: Introduction to the First Issue of Interdisciplinary Review of ValEUs

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The European Union (EU) has committed itself to values such as human dignity, freedom, and equality as well as to democracy and rule of law to such extent that these values have become considered "European values." Commitment to these values has been enshrined in EU law from the inception of Western European integration in the Treaty of Rome in 1957, following the example of other international organizations established at that time. The EU's aspiration to "assert one's identity internationally" has instructed joint trade policy and coordinated foreign policies from the start and forms part of EU law since the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992.[1] However, the vocal assertion of these values as European or EU-specific—as "our European way of life"—, combined with the use of political conditionality as a foreign policy instrument, is a more recent phenomenon related to developments since the end of the Cold War.[2] The first issue of the Interdisciplinary Review of ValEUs (IRV) critically examines the meaning and application of European values in the EU's specific normative-geopolitical constellation. The introduction outlines the subject and agenda of the collection, summarizes shared understandings and provides an overview of the individual contributions.

1) Challenges to the Normative Power Europe

Faced with requests for EU accession by the new democracies that emerged from the post-Soviet world; internal criticisms of a "legitimacy deficit"; as well as transatlantic divisions over the war on Iraq; the EU engaged in a self-asserting, but controversial "constitutional process" in the 1990s and 2000s.[3] In the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union,

it gave credit to human rights principles that member states adhered to, and that had been made part of EU law through the case law of the European Court of Justice. In documents such as the Copenhagen Criteria or the White Book on Good Governance, the EU laid out values that partner countries had to endorse to become associates or members. Some scholars argued this signaled the emergence of the EU as a civilian "normative power" that can change notions of what is to be considered "normal" in international relations.[4] A normative power that justifies external action by reference not only to liberal human rights, but also liberal republicanism and market liberalism.[5] From today's perspective, the EU's stress on liberal values appears as above all a strategy of internal and external legitimation that informs common policies and norm-setting practices. The strategy is reproduced in narratives that construct the EU as a modern-constitutional polity that asserts itself globally as a civilizing power, as a "model to the world." [6]

Yet, the EU's self-conception as a community of values and normative power has become increasingly problematic. This is for two reasons. *First*, on a fundamental level, the very connection of values such as human dignity, freedom, and equality to Europe and to specific norms of the European Union with its footing in postwar Western Europe, is a dubious enterprise. It encourages a Eurocentric, Western-centered and static view of these values where global history teaches us the global (and therefore universal) formation of popular sovereignty, democracy, human rights, etc.[7] Additionally, the imperial weaponizing of freedom, equality, progress, etc. resulting in a colonial ideology of a "civilizing mission" has started to become widely debated in critical historical studies in the last decades.[8] Through the transnational lens of global history, the connection between a certain set of values and Western Europe also seems problematic. It blanks out context-specific appropriations and rearticulations of these values during the democratic transitions and state-building experiences of the European South and East that followed the periods of dictatorship and state socialism. Moreover, the conception of universal values as EU-specific ignores that norms are constantly renegotiated in the European context too. Equality for instance did not have the same meaning in 1957 when the Treaty of Rome was signed as in the early 2000s when equality directives were implemented. Antiracist and feminist mobilizations importantly contributed to this change in meaning.[9] The current contestation of EU foreign policies in a setting of changing global constellations, be they related to the climate crisis, the wars on Ukraine and Palestine, or the global rise of the far right, are further instances of such a renegotiation.

Second, and more concretely, the EU itself does not seem to adhere to the set values in the proclaimed way. The implementation of EU policies often violates human rights or distributional justice, with EU asylum and migration policy being a graphic example. The EU's double morals are also revealed in its relations with association and accession countries, where member states' economic and security considerations often outweigh the consistent democracy-

promotion. In most member states, we observe tendencies of autocratization that openly challenge the EU's emphasis on liberal democracy, human rights, and societal and market liberalism. While these tendencies are still being contested in most member states, they have become partial government policy in Poland and Italy and are fully state backed in Slovakia and Hungary.[10]

2) Critical Perspectives: The Agenda of the Issue

The first IRV issue "Critical Perspectives on European Values" sets out to explore the ambivalences of European values and their use by the European Union in more detail. The individual contributions emerge from the first workshop of the Jean Monnet Policy Network "ValEUs. Research & Education Network on Contestations to EU Foreign Policy" that was held at University Paris 8 in June 2024, co-convened by Kolja Lindner (University Paris 8, France) and Amelie Kutter (European University Viadrina, Frankfurt/Oder, Germany).[11]

Network members from across the globe came together in order to engage critically with European values from their specific disciplinary and geographical contexts. Participants were asked to interrogate European values along two lines of enquiry. *First*, what do and can European values mean, what are their philosophical and historical underpinnings, and how are they to be reassessed in the current conjunction? *Second*, how are European values constructed in current contestations of EU policies, within the European Union and in partner countries that are involved in the EU's external policies?

Contributors to this issue were encouraged to move beyond the mere criticism of norm violations and policy failures.[12] Instead, they were asked to develop a method of critique that sets out the situation that is to be questioned (diagnostic critique), follows transparent standards of critique (immanent critique) and draws conclusions as to what the analysis means for European values as well as the political situation and the academic debate addressed (prospective critique).[13]

We are proud to present a rich selection of peer-reviewed papers.[14] They engage with European values from the perspective of history, political philosophy, sociology, political science, international relations and law. The papers bring a variety of perspectives to fruition in their analysis of European values, such as conceptual history, post- and de-colonial critique, sociological reflection, policy evaluation, and peripherality studies.

3) European Values: A Nuanced Understanding

This scope of critical perspectives, taken together, allows for a more nuanced understanding of European values. The papers suggest a dynamic and constructionist

understanding of European values: values appear as inter-subjectively constructed social norms that inform self-understandings and policy practice; they gain context-specific meaning while being referred-to in local settings of the geopolitical-normative constellation of the European Union. They may remain vague, invoking social imaginaries such as "the West" (see the contribution by Belinda Davis) or "modernity" (see the contribution by Dániel Mikecz). Or they may be related to specific standards of philosophical reflection that have emerged with Enlightenment and are to be "de-centred" against the backdrop of bodies of knowledge developed in former European colonies (see contributions by Thomas Brisson and Kolja Lindner). Values such as "solidarity," so prominent in debates on the EU's migration policy, can gain practical meaning once official discourses of international solidarity are contrasted to the practice of "cosmopolitan solidarity" that locals develop in encounters with migrants (see the contribution by Laura Leonardi). Values such as "democracy" can relate more specifically to declaratory stances the EU promotes in trade and association agreements. However, when inconsistently implemented, the effectiveness of political conditionality and the imaginary appeal of "democracy" may suffer in inter-regional relations and local processes of transition (see the contribution by Silvana Insignares-Cera and Mariangela Rueda-Fiorentino). Thus, European values should be conceived of as "actants, actively used and reinterpreted to change future perspectives" (see the contribution by Claske Vos). The present collection shows how the critical enquiry of these "actants" can be further developed: by moving beyond static conceptions that equate European values with formal EU norms; by de-centering Eurocentric and Western epistemologies related to European values; and by investigating how values are appropriated and endowed with multiple meanings when the implementation of EU policies is being contested.

4) Individual Contributions: An Overview

Historian *Belinda Davis* (Rutgers University, United States) opens the dance with an analysis of the use various historians have made of "the West." She exhibits a highly eclectic compilation of discourses giving birth to a variable and contradictory concept. The linking of Christian theology, progress, modernity, etc. to "the West" leads to the very formation of the concept. Its use often has been a performative act of asserting dominance. The idea of Western superiority became linked to the ideas of "historical laws," a "civilizing mission," and the challenge of the "Atlantic littoral" as well as to a set of normative claims such as "advanced," "developed," and "progressive." Davis' critical objective is to challenge this essentializing and glorifying notion of the West. In line with postcolonial questioning, she highlights Orientalizing in the discourses about "the West" as well as the effacement of non-European history, or, more precisely of the entanglement of Western with non-Western history. In the end, the question

whether the term "the West" should be used at all gets a pretty straightforward answer: "Societal leaders can aspire to and promote particular values without claiming them as specific to—or consistent with—the West, or as representing any actual, consistent history. The West's 'universal values' ring hollow, all the more again recently as fascist thought (certainly inextricable from European history) has re-emerged so powerfully across Europe and the U.S."

Political scientist *Thomas Brisson* (University Paris 8, France) continues the critical interrogation of "European values" through a transnational lens. How do these norms travel in non-Western contexts and what happens to them on this journey? The author discusses this question based on an analysis of 1940s Japanese intellectual discourses aiming for "overcoming modernity," or rather, for being "modern without being Western." Brisson argues that Dipesh Chakrabarty's seminal work *Provincializing Europe* helps us to grasp what is at stake here: not the rejection of Western modernity, but an analysis of its instrumentalization and uncritical replication attempts in the Global South. Chakrabarty's concept of "coeval modernities" allows an understanding of various conceptions of modernity emerging in different world regions. This is a better way to capture socio-economic and cultural transformations in Asia than the one offered in the "alternative modernities" approach. The Indian historian would give us a sense of a modernity profoundly marked by difference, even though the West remains its main reference point. The intellectual strategy that comes out of this differentiation does not throw away European thought but questions its efficient for analysing non-Western phenomena. Hence, Brisson's opposition to a reading of *Provincializing Europe* as an anti-Western manifesto.

In his discussion of postcolonial and decolonial criticism of "European values," political theorist *Kolja Lindner* (University Paris 8, France) also argues for nuanced criticism. His discussion starts with a distinction between cognitive (virtues of scientific proceedings) and non-cognitive (normative assessments of life-practical settings) levels of values claimed by Europe that are often mixed up in broad critiques of Eurocentrism. Against a delimited concept of "coloniality" supported by decolonial authors of Latin-America, the author shows that Chakrabarty's Postcolonialism offers a serious method for overcoming Eurocentrism. Through critical and social-historical contextualization as well as the analysis of hybridization or vernacularization, a "provincializing" of Europe can be realized. By contrast, Decolonialism throws the baby out with the bathing-tub. Argentine semiotician Walter Mignolo's plea to "delink" from European coloniality of knowledge by exploring thought originating from the borders of Western modernity does not help to understand political and theoretical efforts to overcome Eurocentrism. Lindner closes his argument with the discussion of two examples drawn from Mignolo himself, one dealing with non-cognitive values (the Haitian revolution), the other with cognitive values (Frantz Fanon's writings). Both attempts cannot reasonably be conceived

of as efforts to "delink" themselves from Western traditions; they rather critically rearticulate them thereby revealing Decolonialism's radical claim as unsubstantiated.

Philosopher *Laura Leonardi* (University of Florence, Italy) offers a more practical interrogation of European values. She explores tensions emerging between the official claim to solidarity within the EU and the absence of corresponding official efforts in responses to the polycrises witnessed after 2008. In her reading, it is "cosmopolitanism from below" (Arjun Appadurai) filling this gap. South Italian Calabria illustrates this with emerging networks of migrant support that are often in open conflict with national and European policies. To understand "European values" at stake here would need a decentring from the statist perspective often adopted in European studies to focus on transnational and intercultural levels. The greater plea of this epistemic shift is to conceive of European integration less on the stages of official state policies and national Western actors.

Political scientist *Dániel Mikecz* (HUM-REN Center for Social Sciences, Hungary) investigates the challenges faced by official Hungarian Anti-European discourses. How does Prime Minister Victor Orbán launch his criticism in a context in which the Hungarian population has as strong pro-European sentiment and the country strongly depends on European funds? Through a frame analysis of Orbán's 2020-2022 radio interviews the author shows that Hungarian officials try to not overtly oppose the EU. They rather spread the idea of European elite groups having captured its institutions and call for safeguarding Hungarian interests within the EU. The values at play here are a broad set of ideals such as political freedoms, the rule of law, solidarity, peace, etc. While these may seem uncontroversial in- and outside Hungary, Orbán's rhetoric takes a particular turn through its insistence on civilization and Christianity. It is through these that he can convey an image of failed Western politics regarding demographics and migration and rehabilitate a traditional family model and the idea of national sovereignty. The Hungarian Prime Minister's strategy aims at dissociating the EU itself representing the former set of values from EU's political institutions representing the above-mentioned failure. On this ground, Mikecz argues, "an alternative path to modernization for his voters" may become plausible.

Legal scholar and political scientist *Silvana Insignares-Cera* and political scientist *Mariangela Rueda-Fiorentino* (Universidade del Norte, Colombia) investigate how the value of democracy is used in trade relations between Latin America and the European Union. They examine the application of "democracy clauses" in trade agreements struck between the EU, on the one hand, and individual Latin American countries and the Mercursor, on the other. A "democracy clause" conditions cooperation on the respect of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. It can be used to encourage adherence to democratic standards and human rights through increased trade and development aid, or to penalize non-compliance by suspending,

modifying, or conditioning such collaboration. In their comparative assessment, Insignares-Cera and Rueda-Fiorentino show that this instrument is, however, selectively, and inconsistently applied by the EU. While trade and aid were maintained with Venezuela, Brazil, and El Salvador despite human rights violations, they were suspended with Haiti, even after the institutional crisis had been resolved. The authors see this to result from a complex interplay between values and pragmatic considerations in international relations. However, they also call for public monitoring and accountability mechanisms in partner countries, as well as greater involvement from the European Parliament and civil society, in order to make "democracy clauses" more effective.

In an afterword, *Claske Vos* (University of Amsterdam, Netherlands), synthesizes the whole of the workshop discussion around three axes, Decentring and Recentring European Values, Norm Setting Practices and Decision-Making Processes as well as Reappropriations of European Values. Vos clarifies what the critical operations carried out by the different contributions consisted of. She argues that a contextualizing, self-reflexive, constructivist, dynamic, plural and pragmatic conception of European values can be drawn from the research presented at the workshop. And that this seems to be the background against which further research could productively emerge.

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Notes

[1] For the trajectory of values evolving with European integration, see Foret/Calligaro, "Analysing European Values."

[2] Between 2019 and 2024, the Commission's General Directorate in charge with human rights, legal and home affairs was entitled "Our European Way of Life".

[3] The "Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe" ratified by 18 member states was eventually rejected in referendums held in France and the Netherlands in spring 2005. In this document, member states' common values such as human dignity, freedom and democracy were combined with concrete policy aims such as armament which played an important role in its rejection (see for the French case Lindner, "Soziale Bewegungen und autoritärer Populismus," 461-463).

[4] See Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?"

[5] See Rosamond, "Three Ways of Speaking Europe to the World."

[6] Kutter, "A Model to the World?"

[7] See for instance Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914* and Conrad, "Enlightenment in Global History."

[8] See for example Fischer-Tiné/Mann, *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission*.

[9] On renegotiations of gender equality see Auth/Hergenhan/Holland-Cunz, *Gender and Family in European Economic Policy*; on racism and antidiscrimination see Bell, *Racism and Equality in the European Union*.

[10] See Lührmann/Lindberg, "A third wave of autocratization is here."

[11] First ValEUs academic workshop "Critical Perspectives on European Values", University Paris-8, June 20-21, 2024. https://valeus.eu/news/critical-perspectives-on-european-values/.

[12] We are convinced that the sole confrontation of norms and their potentially distorting reality does not warrant an emphatic social criticism. The later rather consists of an ambitious intellectual enterprise ridden with numerous prerequisites. Therefore, critique needs to give an account of its standpoint, its normative standard, the relationship it establishes between the existing and the imagination of something new as well as the connection it conceives between its analytical moments and critical practice (see Jaeggi/Wesche, "Einführung: Was ist Kritik?", 8-9).

[13] See for this understanding of critique Kutter, *Legitimation in the European Union*, 67-68.

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