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Dilemmas of EU Critique

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Abstract

This essay examines the character and function of scholarly EU critique, distinguishing it from political Euroskepticism and asking when such critique can be productive rather than destabilizing for the EU's democratic project. Mapping critique across four arenas—international organization, economic and social policy, democracy and accountability, and identity—the essay draws on both critical theory and pragmatic sociology (Bourdieu, Boltanski) to argue that critique is substantively grounded only when linked to the lived experience of affected social actors. Tracing EU critique from the Community's early technocratic disputes through the post-Maastricht democratic-deficit debates to today's post-functionalist politicization, it contends that critique in three of the four arenas has grown more moderate, reflecting genuine institutional progress. The identity dimension, however, remains sharply contested: post-colonial critiques challenge the EU's silence on its colonial past and its bearing on migration policy. The essay concludes that EU critique is best understood as a legitimate, largely reformist instrument of reflection, even as the identity arena exposes an unresolved tension between the EU's universalist self-image and its incomplete reckoning with imperial history.

Keywords: EU critique; Euroskepticism; European integration; European identity.



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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the character of EU critique with an eye on the different arenas in which this critique is voiced, discussed and processed.¹ Its main interest lies in answering the question in what forms EU critique is possible without harming core qualities of the European political project. The need to discuss the character of EU critique stems from its different functions in the public sphere in a period when the EU seems to miss many of the value-oriented goals it has established for itself. This credibility is of special interest to European Studies scholars who are both in teaching and publishing involved in the knowledge production of European integration and the EU.

In the first decades of European integration, criticism of the path taken by the European Community did not contain a fundamental challenge. While neo-functionalist authors like Ernst Haas or Leon Lindberg (1963) were largely in favour of technocratic market creation, their neo-realist counterparts valued the nation state and its coherent decision structures in particular with regard to matters of security. The normative content of the term “Euroskepticism”, which was somewhat later attributed to the neo-realist position (see Tiersky 2001), was limited to the character of the international order to which Western Europe belonged.

Starting in the 1990s, Euroskepticism changed its character. Whereas the early political figures of Euroskepticism like Charles de Gaulle or Margaret Thatcher believed in (different forms of) democracy, contemporary Euroskeptics more or less openly propose illiberal democracy or even autocracy. Politicians in France, Hungary, Poland, and many other member states combine anti-EU positions with programs to cut back democratic institutions both on the national and the EU level. In addition, powerful actors from abroad – in particular Vladimir Putin in Russia and Donald Trump in the USA – regularly undermine the EU with hostile rhetoric and action. They started to cooperate with populist and radical actors in the EU whose “post-functionalist” (Hooghe and Marks 2009) Euroskepticism turned into open hostility.

This radicalisation forms the background of this paper. The question which needs to be addressed within the ValeUs network and beyond is in which form EU critique can have a productive function. Where (and how) can EU critique help to improve the realization of fundamental values like freedom, equality, or security? How can this be done without playing into the hands of hard Euroskeptics who in the end aim not only to destroy the EU, but also the fundamentals of democracy?

This paper proceeds as follows. In section 2, several dimensions of scholarly EU and/or integration critique are discussed. In a way, they correspond with the growing depth of political European integration – the more that is at stake in Brussels, the more it can be assumed that political or societal forces feel the impacts and therefore react to it. Section 3 turns to Euroskepticism as voiced by political and/or societal actors. Against the distinction of “soft” and “hard” Euroskepticism (Taggart 1998; Szczerbiak and Taggart 2000), gradual and fundamental forms of Euroskepticism are discussed and attributed to different thematic knots. Section 4 then puts Euroskepticism and EU critique into perspective and develops my core argument: Whereas EU critique is rooted in Euroskepticist thought in the arenas of a) the EU’s institutional setting, b) economic and social policy as well as c) the democracy and accountability dimension, there is a different constellation in d) the identity dimension. Regarding the latter, I argue that the EU – and particular its political and cultural elites – still have to come to terms with efforts of European community building on the one hand and acknowledging the truly problematic parts of European history and the ambivalent effects of the EU’s external action.

In the given text, I talk of EU critique when I speak about scientific discourses about alleged disadvantages of European integration, the European Communities (before Maastricht) and the EU. In contrast, I use the term Euroskepticism when this discourse takes place in the political sphere, often (but not always) by populist or radical forces. Often, these two sides of EU critique/scepticism are used without much distinction. This is particularly true for the early literature, with Ronald Tiersky’s book on “Euroskepticism” serving as a culminating point (Tiersky 2001). At a later stage, there have been further distinctions drawn since then, for example between Euroskepticism and EU scepticism or other forms of selective opposition to this or that element of European integration (Kopecký and Mudde 2002; Beichelt 2004). In this text, I concentrate on the concept of Euroskepticism, which signals an objection to certain universal values like human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights (these are taken from Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union, TEU).

It is certainly not true that the named values are “European” in the sense that they only exist in Europe. They have, however, found their way in international law and international organizations after 1945 through European conventions and organizations. We therefore deal with a strong nexus of universal values as principles and Europe as a place in which these values are seen as core principles of societal self-organization. If I speak of “European values”, I do so in this spirit.

Scholarly EU critique: "Euroskepticism," contestation, and partial criticism

The term "scholarly EU critique" can be used when scholars take evaluative positions regarding European integration and/or the European Union. Implicitly or not, scholarship on the EU often bears a specific normative bias. For example, Michael Kaeding states in a recent publication that "anti-EU feelings" should generally be seen as "negative" for the "project of European integration and its liberal values" (see Kaeding, Pollak, and Schmidt 2021b, xvi-xvii). At least to some extent, EU critique is in this perspective seen as endangering the course of European integration as it is.

EU critique is usually directed against perceived deficits of integration and/or EU politics. Not all EU criticism is based on "anti-EU" intentions, but certain aspects of the European political project are seen with distance on a somewhat regular basis. Among other arenas, the democratic accountability of EU institutions, EU austerity or EU migration policy draw criticism by the larger public and by EU scholars. In an early piece Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart have roughly divided such EU criticism into "hard" and "soft" forms. They did not use the distinction between discursive EU critique and action related Euroskepticism, but their definitions can still be used. Hard EU criticism is a principled opposition to the EU and European integration, whereas the soft variant voices qualified opposition with regard to one or a number of EU policy areas (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2000, 4).

Before EU critique had taken multi-faceted ways, EU scholarship had in the first decades of integration mostly been friendly towards the European project. Against the background of the first half of the 20th century, European integration was seen as a counter-project to the nationalist and imperialist politics that had caused the wars of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945. The values that entered the early years of European integration were linked to peace and progress, whereas the European past of the first half of the 20th century was seen as a realization of backward values. European nations as carriers of war were contrasted with a value system of inclusion and mutual appreciation. Also, real-world developments played a role. The emerging free trade and market creation, certainly a result of the European Community, led to economic growth, allowing national governments to boost welfare spending. These processes supported the development of a trans-European "loyalty" (Haas 1958, 16) or "legitimation" (Bach 1999).

Criticism of European integration and its institutions mainly came up in a disagreement about the best way to establish a European political order. They were

formulated in the debate between neo-functionalism (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970), neo-realism (Hoffmann 1966), and liberal intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik 1991, 1998).

Although writings of Stanley Hoffmann, John Mearsheimer or even Tony Judt have been included in the pertinent collection by Ronald Tiersky (2001), it seems misguided to label them as “Euroskeptics”. Rather, there were two camps with different kinds of criticism towards European integration. On the one hand, neofunctionalism – alongside with many political actors on the EU stage – hinted at “costs of non-Europe”² to criticize reluctance to further integrate. On the other, neo-realism and intergovernmentalism insisted on the relevance of national governments to determine the course of further integration.

After Maastricht, EU critique changed its character. The creation of the Common Market, the establishment of a common currency, the extension of cohesion policy and other developments turned EU institutions into first-order political decision makers. Were they legitimised adequately? In particular German scholars were quick to raise their doubts (Kielmansegg 1996; Scharpf 1996; Offe 2000). They argued that Maastricht had the tendency to create an EU institutional system whose binding decisions compete with the established legitimacy structures of the nation state. These authors did not see the EU equipped with fundamental preconditions to exert the kind of painful decisions that need to be taken in democracies. The EU, they argued, lacked a common language necessary for a democratic public as well as the joint expectation and foundations for trust in order to pursue distribution policies. In addition, core institutions of the EU like the Commission, the Council and even European Parliament were not seen as sufficiently legitimised and/or accountable. In sum, this critique placed the democratic potential of the EU below those standards established in the EU member states of Western Europe.

Once the Common Market had been constructed, the problems of “negative integration” (Scharpf 1999) – market creation without institutions to deal with destructive market effects – quickly materialized. Welfare states and trade unions were directly or indirectly weakened. Some authors were enthusiastic about the idea that market democracies were increasingly run by technocrats and regulations (Majone 1996). Others were alarmed by the decreasing importance of political parties and social organizations, which previously had a strong voice on the national stage. The EU, and in particular the Commission, were identified as major representatives of the *zeitgeist* of neoliberalism. The EU was diagnosed as a post-democracy, that is a polity in which elected officials and democratic institutions were only able to operate within the margins of globalized capitalism (Crouch 2004).

In the eyes of even the moderate left, the EU had turned into a polity which systematically disregarded social interest by delegating important decisions to unelected bodies like the European Court of Justice or European Central Bank (Höpner 2008; Scharpf 2011). The decision-making structures during the Eurozone crisis also drew heavy criticism with regard to policy results. Not only Martin Höpner and Fritz Scharpf, but also Wolfgang Streeck and Yannis Varoufakis (in his function as a political economist) pointed out that a number of groups had to accept massive disadvantages as a result of the combination of the single market, the monetary union and the EU's governance structures (Varoufakis 2017; Streeck 2021).

By 2009, the process of EU building had resulted in the Treaty of Lisbon. This treaty brought along or consolidated further vertical integration. With regard to social, economic, and cohesion policy, many interim solutions of the Treaties of Amsterdam and Nizza had ended. The area of freedom, security, and justice (first established in the Treaty of Amsterdam) was extended and placed in the Treaty of the Functioning of the EU. There, articles 67-89 covered almost all issues of justice and home affairs, including common asylum and migration policies. In about the same period, many intermediary agreements of the enlargement round of 2004 faded out as well. Even if the term itself can be debated, contours of a political union had evolved by the early 2010s. In any case, decisions in the political system of the EU now definitely had a potential to produce material and immaterial losers among citizens of the EU. The social conditions for voicing criticism towards the EU therefore widened considerably.

EU scholarship coined the term post-functionalism to catch this scenario (Hooghe and Marks 2009). The more decision-making power the EU had, the more individuals, groups and non-EU elites would find themselves in situations where they would criticize EU institutions and/or policy outcomes accredited to the EU. The further integration went, the more likely it would be that there will be “fragmented identity, weaker solidarity and less mutual trust” (Schimmelfennig 2020, 17). Again, EU critique changed its function. Even harsh criticism of EU institutions and policies could now be seen as constitutive to the EU's democratic politics, in which political feedback by citizens or groups were completely legitimate – even more so because several EU Commissions from José Manuel Barroso to Jean-Claude Juncker and Ursula von der Leyen insisted on the democratic momentum of the EU's polity after the Treaty of Lisbon.

This is the constellation we are in today. EU critique is increasingly seen as a normal element of democratic life. Wolf Schünemann and Marlon Barbehön argue along this line:

Instead of further pathologising EU critique as the strategically motivated arguments of Eurosceptics, it should be perceived and studied as a normal appearance of counter-discourse in democratic politics (Schünemann and Barbehön 2019, 5).

In this context, a few arenas stick out in which EU critique is (or has been) particularly fierce. One of them concerns the debates around the Eurozone crisis. While previous concerns had addressed lacking legitimation for concrete non-elected bodies and distribution effects, the ongoing crisis turned into general doubts about the polity of the EU. The Eurozone had been constructed according to German wishes in the late 1990s, and its effects led to the German Ministry of Finance and the Chancellery as de-facto veto players in the EU's austerity policy. The EU was consequently criticized as having become an institutional order for Germany as the EU's hegemon (Beck 2012; Bulmer and Paterson 2019). Alongside with this dominance, the EU's cultural and political diversity was judged to be in bigger danger than ever before (H. M. Enzensberger 2011). The just named publications were remarkable not only with regard to their arguments, but also because their authors certainly did not belong to the traditional camp of Eurosceptics.

Another arena in which EU critique is very visible was migration and asylum policy. Way before Lisbon, many scholars had been sceptical about the European approach to immigration (Geddes 2000). "Fortress Europe" became a metaphor for a European polity in which both national governments and the EU were said to fail. One argument was that European governance of migration did not react adequately to the needs of refugees, in particular at certain EU border regions. Here, EU critique is convinced that the EU does not act according to its own legal standards, as laid down in the Charter for Human Rights and other documents (see, among many others, Kasperek 2019). The EU border is in this perspective associated with discrimination and violence towards non-EU nationals (Austermann 2023).

A related argument aims at the continuous failure of the EU to formulate a coherent migration and asylum policy. Even if the Council has come to the formula to "manage legal migration flows, process asylum requests and return illegal migrants"³, the according procedures are allegedly not consistently applied. Many member states and their government do not comply with EU law, leading to a patchwork of rules with regard to regular and irregular migration (Dickson 2022; Reece 2022). Not only the failure of the EU to bring non-compliant member governments in line with EU legislation, but also the ineffectiveness of governing migration in this perspective adds to a general distrust in EU politics. This obviously does not only concern native populations, but also migrants and migrant

communities. In this context, fundamental doubts about the readiness of the EU to face its colonial past have been raised (Kundani 2023).

These arenas, and more could be named, form a reservoir of discontent in the EU's populations and has allegedly added to populist movements all over Europe (and beyond). As is well known, this populism is in its core illiberal (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Müller 2016). With its orientation towards the Common Market and its principle of legal regulations, the EU obviously forms a classic liberal polity and is therefore a main target of populists in the EU and its member states (see next section).

The growth of populism has turned post-Lisbon EU critique into an ambivalent endeavour. On the one hand, the status of EU integration demands extensive criticism of those institutions and actors in power. It is quite clear that constructive EU critique has served to identify shortcomings and improve EU policies; environmental policy might be an example at hand (see Jordan and Gravey 2021). On the other, many populists adhere to political extremes. Their intention is less to change the EU incrementally, but to lead their member states out or to dissolve the EU altogether. Engaging into EU critique therefore demands a balance between different goals. The task is to “differentiate between problematic, acceptable and even desirable forms” of EU critique (Schünemann and Barbehön 2019, 5). In order to get closer to this goal, I now turn to the notion of critique on a more theoretical level.

Gradual and fundamental critique in EU Studies

In order to gain a better understanding about the potentially constructive and non-constructive elements of EU critique, it is helpful to discuss what theoretical fundament for critique is used. A general definition is provided by Rahel Jaeggi and Tilo Wesche:

The question of the conditions and the possibility of critique always arises where circumstances are analysed, judged or rejected as false. (...) Insofar as it is directed at social conditions, critique questions social values, practices and institutions and the interpretations of the world and associates with them based on the assumption that these do not have to be the way they are (Jaeggi and Wesche 2016, 20).⁴

Criticism of objects or constellations therefore does not unfold of its own accord, but in the comparison of a (subjective perception of a) real state with an unrealised state. In the case of the EU, this presupposes a distinction between a EU as could be and the EU as observed in the real world. The unrealised state defines a gap between an ideal and the materialized European polity and/or European social order. In complex social situations, it cannot be assumed that observers draw the standards for their evaluation solely from experience, i.e.

from an individual life experience. Rather, constructs are used for this purpose, the (un)desirability of which has crystallised in social discourses (Roch 2019). These constructions can be described as ideas or world views: certain states are regarded as desirable in a collective imaginary world. If there is an agreement that they are not desirable, this leads to social criticism.

This concept of critique is closely linked to the Frankfurt School. The School, which is today seen composed of different “generations” of scholars and renovations of basic theories, was in the early days characterized by Marxist criticism of capitalism in connection to psychological considerations of humans in modernity. Since it developed under the circumstances of capitalism (in particular around the Great Depression both in Weimar Germany and in the USA, where many members of the Frankfurt School emigrated to after 1933), this critique needed to be categorical. In the 1920s and 1930s, market capitalism had not yet developed safeguards for those who had low wages, let alone for those who were not able to be part of the work force. Therefore, small reforms of capitalism were seen as insufficient, what was needed from the perspective of Marxist critics was a general change of system.

In order to catch this point, which was a defining element of the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer in 1937 differentiated “critical” from “traditional” theory. The latter was in Horkheimer’s view not in the condition to fundamentally change the circumstances of living for the broad masses. What was needed was a system change, and therefore “traditional” theories that wanted to change only certain aspects of capitalism and/or market economy were not seen as sufficient. Theories, in contrast, that (like Marxism) were aiming at thoroughly overcoming the “distress of the present” in order to reach a “reasonable state” (“vernünftiger Zustand”) were to be used (Horkheimer 1993 (1937), 233–34). “Critical theory”, as Horkheimer writes, “has no specific authority for itself other than the interest in the elimination of social injustice” (ibid.: pp. 259).⁵

If critical theory then has the task of creating “the image of the reasonable state” (Bittner 2016, 138), it is the theory, or rather the discursive interplay of theorists, that categorises a certain state as unreasonable and contrasts it with an ideal “social structure” (ibid.: 139). In Horkheimer’s analysis, this distinguishes critical theory from traditional theory. Traditional theory identifies negative conditions *within* a given social order and ultimately remains bound to its normative framework. With the focus on the European social order, a relevant critical theory would therefore have to have the following building blocks: a) a comprehensive critique of a current state of affairs, b) an alternative, theoretically founded

and therefore reasonable image of society, and c) a reference to material and discursive elements of power that support the current (but criticisable) state of affairs.

Before we can turn to the question of which desirable and undesirable conditions can be considered as a reference for a critique of European politics, we must realise that the contemporary theory of critique is two-pronged. The more widespread form of social critique is orientated towards insights from social theory. The first and second generation of the Frankfurt School drew on psychoanalytical criticism of modernity and capitalism. In general terms, the School formulated a social criticism which refers to “the question of the good life, or more precisely: in the question of the social conditions under which a successful human life is possible – or is thwarted” (Rosa 2016, 24). In order to find answers to a question formulated in this way beyond the individual (or private) good life, certain authorities are needed to work out the conditions of success for social orders that are perceived as good. Social theory criticism therefore suffers from a latent asymmetry between (supposedly) knowledgeable theorists and the recipients of knowledge; it is hierarchical in nature.

A solution to the asymmetry problem, which led to the second strand of social critique, was developed in French sociology. Pierre Bourdieu, who was an imminent critic of orthodox Marxism, expanded his critical sociology to a critique of social practice. In Bourdieu’s thinking, critique should not be formulated from a theoretical point of view, but with reference to socially rooted forms of life and their context. Sociological observation and the practice of criticising become “intertwined” (Boltanski 2010, 35) and form a pragmatic sociology of critique. Criticizing from a sociological perspective then means “first and foremost, [to] observe, describe and interpret situations in which people exercise critique” (ibid.: 46). The presence of those affected forms something like a necessary condition for the formulation of critique. Without affected actors, theoretical critique remains detached from its object: “The gap between theory and practice can (...) only be closed by the actors themselves” (Celikates 2009, 216).

Critique in this perspective is characterized by two voices: a state of affairs is considered problematic within the interpretative horizon of an affected actor or group, whereas scholars provide the public with reference frames to explain or overcome the status in need of improvement. In other words, practice related critique is directed towards the identification of a difference between real and desirable order from the perspective of those who are affected (Boltanski and Thévenot 2014).

Against the double background of critical theory and pragmatic critique, it is now possible to reconsider the arenas of EU critique which have been mentioned in section 2. In this light,

EU critique only holds if critical theoretic views can be linked to pragmatic views of disadvantaged actors or groups. EU criticism can thus be reformulated as belonging to different theoretic-pragmatic arenas:

- *International organization dimension:* Neo-realism of the 1960s disapproved of the fuzzy accountability of agencies like the Commission, which blurred responsibility for the potential exercise of “high politics” (Hoffmann 1966). By moving the EC away from an international organization, European integration was in some circles seen as a stumbling block for traditional foreign policy, in particular with regard to security policy. The carriers of this criticism beyond academia were national elites; some of their voices are printed in Tiersky’s book (most pertinent de Gaulle 2001).
- *Economic and Social Policy Dimension:* After Maastricht (1993), Eastern enlargement (2004/07) and the Eurozone crisis (2008 onwards), the economic model of favouring “negative integration” over adjusting the European dimension of the welfare state (Scharpf 1999), have increased considerably. Authors were worried not only about the consequences of the Common Market including the Eurozone, but also about the lack of political conflict around economic and social issues. When EU Commission President Jacques Delors and politicians like Tony Blair or Gerhard Schröder moved social democracy into the direction international market liberalism, they withdrew welfare state policy from the political sphere – leading politicians from various camps openly stated that there is “no alternative” to following the rules of international finance. This has been a major catalyst for the rise of leftist academic Euroskepticism since the late 1990s; their ideological frame was resistance against neo-liberalism (Streeck 1998; Mouffe 2000; Crouch 2004). Its societal carriers were civil society groups like the Occupy Movement or trade unions.
- *Democracy and Accountability Dimension:* Despite various steps to strengthen the European Parliament, the Lisbon Treaty in a way sharpened certain democracy deficits of the Maastricht Treaty (as noted by Kielmansegg 1996 and many others). In particular, member state governments saw a further erosion of actually preventing decisions that strongly went against their interests. Examples are Troika decisions during the Eurozone crisis with regard to Greece and migration policy decisions with regard to Hungary or Poland more recently. The politicization of these and other issues did not lead to a coalescence of a truly European political public. In contrast, confrontative – “postfunctionalist” – debates arose and to some extent paralysed the

supranational institutions in formulating coherent solutions in the fields of budget, migration, and other policies. Therefore, disappointment with the democratic efficiency of the EU now forms an important issue of contemporary EU scepticism (among many others Krastev 2017). Social carriers of Euroskepticism on the grounds of the EU's democracy and accountability deficits are quite relevant parts of populations in EU member states which partly support populist right-wing or left-wing parties.

- The *Identity Dimension* is composed of two different strands. The first evolved early in the process of European integration and is marked by a hesitant identification with Europe in contrast to prevailing national identities (Kaelble 2005, 2009, 2017). Social carriers were those large parts of EU member state population which insisted that they identify themselves more (or exclusively) with their nations, usually they formed large minorities. Often more in the intellectual than in the purely academic sphere, this constellation was accompanied by a pledge not to push for European identity too strongly (H.-M. Enzensberger 1987). The second strand called for caution from a different angle vis-à-vis European identity. Post-colonialism had rarely been focused on European integration in a narrow sense (an important exception is Hansen and Jonsson 2015), but concentrated on the colonial powers and its consequences (Gutierrez Rodriguez, Boatcă, and Costa 2016).

Table 1 summarizes these different strands of EU critique. When looking at them, one hesitates to link them to categorical rejections of the EU model of European integration, as Horkheimer's vision of critical theory would suggest. The reason is that critical EU studies have usually not taken clear positions to overcome the European Union, but indeed to reform it. EU critique is, as we find it in the literature, usually nuanced and rarely fundamental. Even if this is the case, there is usually no alternative model suggested (as was the case in the critical theory of the early Frankfurt School). The most evident model counter model consists in a return to the nation state to value its potential in democratic integration, identity preservation, and welfare state building. However, even this path has usually not been recommended without reservation, in particular with concerns about dangers of nationalism and/or economic backsliding (Mouffe 2013, 43–64; Streeck 2021, 331–505).

Table 1: EU critique from a theoretic-pragmatic perspective

Arena of EU critique	Main argument of critique	Social agents of critique	Theoretic/normative frame of reference
<i>International Organization dimension:</i> Institutional form of European integration	Neofunctional mode of integration weakens sovereignty of nation states	Political actors/parties with preference for national sovereignty	International relations; neo-realism
<i>Economic and Social Policy Dimension:</i> Mode and consequences of the Common Market	Negative integration hollows out welfare states and weakens protective capacity of political sphere	Losers of market integration, unions, actors/institutions of national welfare states	Critique of neoliberalism
<i>Democracy and Accountability Dimension:</i> Mode of decision-making in the EU political system	Brussels bureaucracy and supranationalism weaken democratic accountability	Elected bodies on national and sub-national levels, actors/groups who are negatively impacted by high degrees of bureaucratic regulation	Theory of liberal democracy
<i>Identity Dimension:</i> Feelings of Belonging in Europe and its member states	a) National identities are a hindrance to the formation of a truly European society b) Europeans have not faced the atrocities of colonialism, resulting in misguided migration policy	a) Highly educated and mobile actors, groups, and milieus b) Many migrants, groups, and their milieus	a) Theory of cosmopolitanism b) Postcolonial theory

One major reason for this is obviously the fact that “hard” positions (Taggart 1998) against EU integration or the EU itself have been taken over mainly by right-wing radical forces, mainly with regard to national sovereignty and identity issues. Hard Euroskepticism is

therefore often formulated in direct violation of important normative foundations of the EU, for example with regard to democracy, individual and economic freedom, or the relevance of certain legal rules in the regulation of conflicts. Rejecting them outright would lead into the justification of national autocracies, which is until now not a position to be found in European studies.

In sum, the main argument of this section is therefore that EU critique is today most relevant in the form of nuanced variants of traditional (Horkheimer) variants. They are layered along different tropes that have been developed during certain periods of EU integration. Even if some of them are older than others, they have all remained relevant. Their potential to point the way into a more “reasonable” (“vernünftig”) future, as could be expected against the background of the Frankfurt School, is limited to paths of understanding imminent to the EU polity, not beyond.

Consequences for the scholarly practices of EU critique

Two steps have been taken so far. First, the field of EU critique has been mapped and divided into four subfields. Second, the notion of critique which can be used in the EU context has been constructed as one which needs both a theoretical and real-world practical foundation. EU critique – criticism of the EU and its policies voiced by scholars – can on this basis be reflected, in particular with regard to its function as being productive or detrimental. EU critique can thus have an impact not only on EU integration, but (more importantly) on the realization of values the EU builds upon – values like human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law or the respect for human rights.⁶

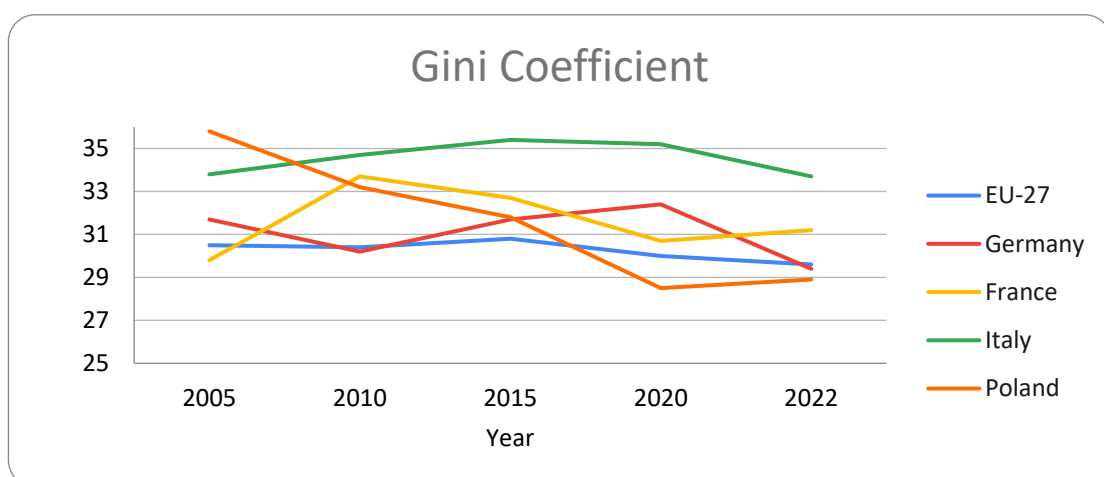
If we follow the four subfields established in the previous section, EU critique can under certain circumstances be seen as a legitimate aspect of an evolving EU polity which defines itself as democratic. Pointedly, any kind of “soft Euroskepticism” – see above: “qualified opposition with regard to one or a number of EU policy areas” (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2000, 4) – needs to be seen in a different light than before the Lisbon Treaty. Even if the EU has not developed into a fully democratic polity, various articles of the TEU have a clear reference to the EU’s aspiration to fulfil the promises of accountability, responsiveness, and transparency. In any of the established subfields, discourse fragments can be found that reflect the contingency of open developments that are inherent to democratic politics:

- *The international organisational dimension:* While the neofunctionalist/neorealist debate covers the mode of European integration, its arguments also cover the status of national governments in international politics in general. Against the background of an

underdeveloped Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), both the Commission and the member state politicians regularly meet in an arena of the EU where national interests are in friction. This friction can easily be identified by the provision of unanimity in CFSP (Articles 22 and 24 TEU), which symbolizes the high value of national sovereignty, and the broad catalogue of aims of European external action (Article 21 TEU) and the formula that “the Union's competence in matters of common foreign and security policy shall cover all areas of foreign policy and all questions relating to the Union's security” (Art. 24.1 TEU). Any EU critique on the international organisation dimension can start with hinting at the incoherence and inadequateness of these provisions.

- In the *economic and social policy dimension*, there is a certain contradiction between the far-reaching concerns of the neoliberal-skeptic literature and real-world developments. As can be seen from graphs 1 and 2, inequality and public spending have not been skyrocketing in the last 20 years. Rather, the Gini coefficient in the EU-27, a measure of income inequality, with higher values indicating greater disparity between a country's richest and poorest, has slightly decreased, whereas public expenditure oscillates around 50% (with a temporary rise during the COVID pandemic). In general, these high figures give little support to a major claim of the neoliberalism debate: The state, or quasi-state institutions in the case of the EU, have not withdrawn from economic and social policy on a large scale.

Graph 1: Gini Coefficient development in the EU, 2005-2022

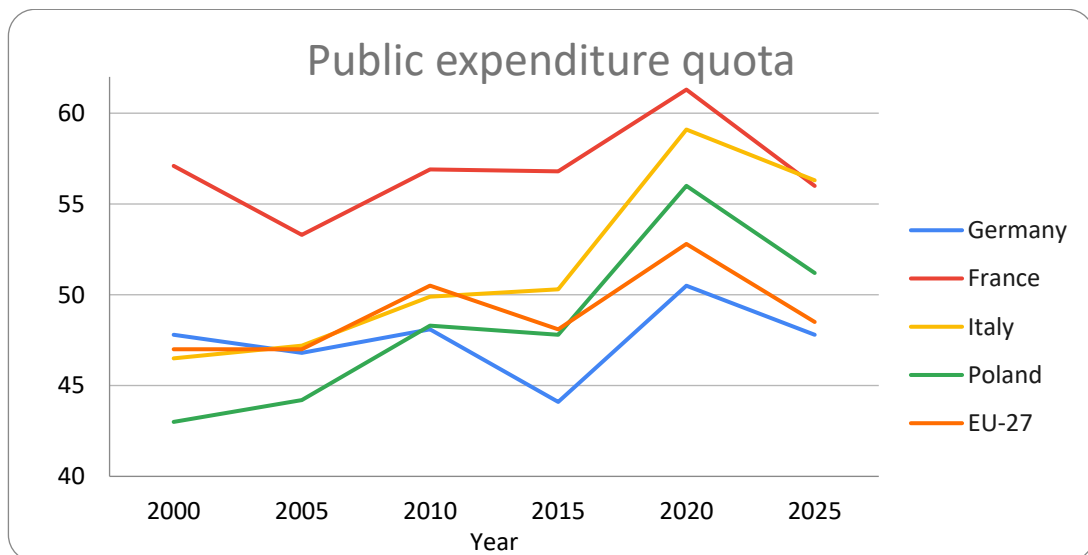


Statista. (2024). *Europäische Union: Einkommensungleichheit in den Mitgliedstaaten nach dem GINI-Index 2023*. Europäische Union – Available online at [Europäische](https://www.statista.com/deutschland/10000/einkommensungleichheit-in-den-mitgliedstaaten-nach-dem-gini-index-2023)

Union - Ranking der Einkommensungleichheit in den Mitgliedstaaten nach dem GINI-Index 2023| Statista

World Bank. (n.d.). *Gini index*. World Bank Open Data. Available online at **Gini index | Data**

Graph 2: Public Expenditure quota in the EU, 2000-2025



Data: Bundesministerium der Finanzen. (2024): *Staatsquoten im internationalen Vergleich* (BMF-Monatsbericht Februar 2024). Available online at **BMF-Monatsbericht Februar 2024 - Staatsquoten im internationalen Vergleich**

These observations, and many others, put the general critique of the economic and social policy dimension into a certain perspective. However, it does obviously not exclude academic debates on the guise of European economic and social governance. Often, they develop along the two camps of public-spending versus stability oriented economists (Hacker 2023; Fuest 2023). They are characterized by different understandings of the role of public institutions – governments, central banks, regulation agencies – in the framework of economic policy. With the stability pact and in general with EU economic governance, the institutional set-up is today much more complicated than a few decades ago. Against this background, it is surprising to see that EU critique still unfolds between the visions of interventionism on the one hand and fiscal stability on the other. In any case, the majority of EU critical interventions

with a focus on social and/or economic affairs does not display eurorejectionist positions.

- *Democracy and Accountability Dimension*: In comparison to the 2000s, the EU left many shortcomings of its democracy deficit period behind. Art. 10.2 of the Treaty of Lisbon attributes the direct representation of EU citizens to European Parliament and the representation of member states to “governments, themselves democratically accountable”, in the European Council and in the Council. The principle of double legitimation may not be organized adequately, not coherently followed by many political actors and not be sufficiently underpinned by further institutions. Still, the vast legitimation gaps of the pre-Lisbon period (Held and Koenig-Archibugi 2005; Blühdorn 2009) are allegedly fixed: the extension of competencies, including (shared) budgetary sovereignty for the EP, the double majority in the Council in combination with institutionalized consent in the European Council (and in CFSP) have considerably strengthened political accountability. Consequently, the literature on deficits of the EU now mostly appears in the context of the post-functionalist idea that identities and interests – and not the institutional order – is at the root of Euroskepticism (Krastev and Holmes 2019).
- Also for this reason, the field where EU critique has sharpened considerably, is the *identity dimension*. The idea that territorial (and functional) integration weakens regional feelings of belonging and thus community belonging, had in fact been a general argument for social spaces that underwent functional diversification (Lipset 1959; Rokkan 1970). It needed to be weighed against the strong economic development that went along with market creation – something authors like Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1987) did not consider to be all too relevant. The post-colonial critique, however, has become more and more outspoken and generally turned EU-skeptic. For example, Hans Kundnani has recently argued that the focus on the EU’s own history has brought along a “civilizational turn” that systematically suppresses the EU’s potential for fair and reasonable internal and external politics (Kundnani 2023).

In sum, this discussion leads to the first main argument of my manuscript. EU critique – criticism by scholars – is in the current state of the European polity a legitimate and often necessary instrument of reflection. In the arenas of international organizations, economic and social policies as well as in democracy and accountability, the tone of EU critique has in recent years mellowed down considerably. With regard to the international dimension, this

has to do with a deeply transformed nature of the international order, with major changes in the foreign policy Russia and the United States – both leading to major shifts in the self-understanding of the EU and its CFSP actors. With regard to the social/economic policy and the democracy/accountability dimensions, the more moderate approach in criticizing the EU is linked to the fact that the EU has made progress in several fields that had been subject to hard criticism before.

As a consequence, these three arenas display a clear rift between EU critique on the one hand and Euroskepticism – voiced by actors with political agency – on the other. The hard Euroskepticism brought forward (mainly) by radical right populist actors is rarely mirrored in the European Studies literature. Quite on the contrary, many publication can be named that treat Euroskeptics and their parties as imminent dangers both for “Europe” and core values like democracy, freedom, or human rights (Mudde 2007; Kaeding, Pollak, and Schmidt 2021a). While this may be justified politically, the *Brandmauer* approach sometimes beclouds important phenomena which might have caught scholarly attention under different circumstances. For example, the strive of contemporary conservative political actors to re-establish “traditional” European values – as, for example, propagated by the European Conservatives and Reformists Party (Steven 2020) – might have been identified as a welcome impulse to establish a European “community” before the liberal-cosmopolitan frame became predominant in viewing the European project (Judt 2010).

Things are different in the identity arena. Here, critique to the functioning of the EU has sharpened in the last decade, and the EU has only partly been able to respond in adequate manners. The dimension where such answers have taken place is the heightened respect the EU shows for its sub-regions, in particular to the nation states. Since the 2000s, national parliaments have been strengthened in order to ensure subsidiarity (Calliess and Beichelt 2015).⁷ In a similar vein, the Council continues to show high respect to deviating government positions: 97.2% of all votes are in support of legal acts despite double majority provisions of Art. 16 TEU (Wimmel 2024, 199). By strengthening the second pillar of the double legitimization principle of Art. 10.2 TEU, the EU has not only consolidated its accountability dimension, but also prevented moderate national politicians to complain about an excessive loss of national political identity. Together with the – albeit with certain exceptions – realization of the freedoms of the Common Market, that the national and European identity pillars are not really in conflict with each other. I argue that this is the reason why the pessimistic outlooks on the incapacity of Europeans to form a political community (Kielmansegg 2003; Offe 2003) have not become true.

With regard to relations of peoples to governments of third countries, cultural studies have become more and more sceptical about the EU's capacity to adequately react to Europe's colonial heritage. European colonialism has usually been dealt with as a heritage of single European powers, not as a collective European phenomenon (Osterhammel and Jansen 2021); one reason is that European countries were actively competing against each other during its colonial period. This view, however, was challenged in Peo Hansen's and Stefan Jonsson's book on "Eurafrica", which demonstrated the extent to which the European Community for Coal and Steel and later the European Economic Community leaned on the exploitation of African countries (Hansen and Jonsson 2015). This insight created a bridge between EU Studies and the post-colonial literature, which bases its consideration on the global south (Castro Varela and Dhawan 2015).

The issue has been drawn together in Hans Kundnani's book on "Eurowhiteness" (Kundnani 2023). His argument is that the EU should be seen as a regionalist project which has much in common with nationalism, "but on a larger, continental scale" (ibid. 2023, 3). This nationalism, according to Kundnani, has been based on a construction of enlightened Europeanness in explicit contrast to Europe's colonial regions. The idea of a civilizing mission of Europe therefore does not have its roots in the after-war period, but in Europe's external history. The EU in today's shape is therefore based on a highly selective construction:

The emerging official narrative of the EU was based on the internal lessons of European history, i.e. what Europeans had done to each other, but not the external lessons, i.e. what Europeans had done to the rest of the world (Kundnani 2023, 94). This "imperial amnesia" (ibid. 2023, 153) solidifies a European project that is, according to Kundnani, built as a "white fortress" (ibid. 2023, 160). Ursula von der Leyen's decision to create a commissioner responsible for the "European Way of Life"⁸ is in this context yet another sign for an oblivious EU that builds cultural barriers to the outside. In this post-colonial branch of EU studies, the EU's restrictive migration policy and its growing status in international politics are two sides of the same medal: the EU's incapacity to live up to the values it has established as a frame of reference for its own behaviour.

Conclusion

Euroskepticism is in three of the four arenas above characterized by political forces that are – often for ideological reasons – not willing to acknowledge the EU's responsiveness to criticism. Scholarly EU critique has therefore sided with mainstream political positions that

values like democracy, freedom, the rule of law and others may not be completely realized in the EU, but are addressed by political forces that have to face value conflicts (like the one between freedom and equality) in real-world settings. I find it hard to identify areas where EU critique might run into the danger of encouraging right-wing populist actors in their reasoning. They rarely have to offer plausible alternatives to EU integration: singularized nation states would be less powerful in a crisis-struggled international order (Schimmelfennig 2021), the level of economic development and the potential market correcting power of the political sphere would be lower without the EU (Wagener 2009), and democracy and accountability problems would be even bigger in non-structured globalization (Rodrik 2012).

In the post-colonial identity arena, EU critique and Euroskepticism interact in more complex ways. On the one hand, the arguments brought forward in the post-colonialist framework are shared in other fields of European studies. In addition, they come from different sides: On the one hand, the EU is criticized because it “direct[s] migrants towards more dangerous routes of entry and to provide a powerful stimulus to the people-smuggling industry” (Geddes and Scholten 2016, 3). On the other, the migration of Muslims into Europe supposedly induces a “strange death of Europe” (Murray 2018) – which means that the language of hard Euroskeptics is present in the scholarly and/or public debate. The positions of the post-colonialist strand of European studies are in contrast reflected by some political forces in the populist left. For example, Spanish Podemos or the German Die Linke have consistently criticized the EU for violating migrants’ rights on their way into the European Union (Custodi 2021; Kunath 2023). This position is objected to by other politicians from the left-populist camp like Jean-Luc Mélenchon (France) or Sahra Wagenknecht (Germany).

If we remember that EU critique, in order to be socially relevant, has to be viewed as a practice-oriented (pragmatic) dimension, the identity arena is deeply contested not only among political forces, but in the broader public as well. The scholarly sphere is not an exception, it is characterized by an EU critique that pushes the EU to show more and less solidarity with migrants at the same time. Enriching a European identity with political meaning has produced losers outside of the newly created community of Europeans. The “new [European] dream is for what one might call Nativia” in which European “democracy has begun to operate as an instrument of exclusion, not of inclusion” (Krastev 2017, 14–15). It is possible – or even necessary – to remember that any community building goes along with growing alienation between the in-group and the out-group (Coser 1956). The peculiarity of the European project, however, consists in the fact that most actors who propagate Union building insist on a self-image that fosters universal and not group-specific values. In a way

then, EU scholars face the problem of coming to terms with the European way of life in political terms which has been at the core of European Studies for decades. This agenda consists in democracy and community building, but comes at the expense of coming to terms with Europe's colonial past and the global inequalities that are one reason for mass migration to Europe. It seems inherent that, in order to create a tolerant and open-minded community, EU elites have to be much more aware of (and act according to) past European crimes and contemporary injustices.

In sum, I have tried to argue that the perception of EU critique as being problematic for EU integration falls short of the mark. Even if EU-skeptic arguments are also sometimes by right-wing populist politicians, there is enough room for differentiation when it comes to issues of democracy and socio-economic governance. In terms of identity, however, the European debate about the consequences of political unification is still ongoing, and we find plausible arguments both for and against a further deepening of European integration. The dilemma of EU scholars consists in the fact that they have to make normative choices that cannot be brought to a common denominator without contradictions.

Notes

¹ The paper is part of a debate within the Jean Monnet Policy Network [ValEUs](https://valeus.eu/). This research and education network deals with contestation to EU foreign policy by looking at the alleged gap between the values the EU prescribes and the way these values are realised in policies of the European Union. The Research & Education Network on Contestations to EU Foreign Policy is a Jean Monnet Policy Network within the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission. It has started its three-year long activities in January 2024. The venture involves 20 partner institutions from 17 countries across five continents. For further information see <https://valeus.eu/>, approached 23 February, 2025.

² This was the title of the famous Cecchini Report in 1988, see SEC (88)524 final. When writing the report, Paolo Cecchini was Deputy Director-General for Internal Markets and Industrial Affairs at the European Commission.

³ See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-migration-policy/>, download March 15, 2025.

⁴ As is the case with other citations from German language, the translation is provided by the author of this manuscript.

⁵ German original: „Die kritische Theorie hat [...] keine spezifische Instanz für sich als das mit ihr selbst verknüpfte Interesse an der Aufhebung des gesellschaftlichen Unrechts“ ((Horkheimer 1993 (1937), 259).

⁶ We might ask if EU critique – voiced by scholars – has an impact on the real world of European integration and of EU affairs at all. This paper works on the assumption that scholars within the ValEUs network, which often work at Centers for European Studies, have such an impact by forming future actors (sometimes elites) of European politics. We should also remember that the link between polity building and scholarly texts have been particularly close at certain stages of European integration. For example, “The Uniting of Europe” ((Haas 1958)) was both a text about a theory of integration and a kind of handbook of running the European Community through the *Monnet Method*. The discussions on the federalisation of Europe in the early 2000s may be cited as another example where academic debates and EU polity making were interconnected ((see, for example, Verhofstadt 2006)).

⁷ It went largely unremarked that this move, which has its roots in the Treaty of Lisbon, nationalized the subsidiarity clause which had originally been intended to ensure sub-national agency within the EU.

⁸ See https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life_en, download June 20, 2025.

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