

# Empire of Graveyards

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**Abstract:** the European Union is understood, in the first instance, to be a bid toward providing a new center for accumulation on a world scale in the waning of the US-centered cycle. This effort has failed, in ways that have helped drive a lurch toward renewed and deadly European ethnonationalism that focuses on borders within and at the frontiers of the Eurozone, and is on the rise both on the right and, in a disturbing development, on the left, identified here as “Fortress Leftism.” The EU has been an effective zero-sum economy at least since 2008, funneling value from peripheral states to core. This limits its capacity to absorb immigration in ways conducive to capital. Consequently the pressures on its borders have intensified, a fact complicated by the historically unique situation wherein the internally differentiated superstate with its own core & periphery serves as core for a larger capitalist system. Immigration from the far peripheries arrives not at Europe’s core but the lumpenized nations of the europa-periphery, with Greece as the example: unable to absorb, compelled to function as Europe’s absorption zone. The essay finally argues, reviewing unimplementable Brexit and the ignored Greek *oxi* vote, that such developments intimate the collapse of the historic left-right spectrum, and of the parliamentary procedures that have accompanied it. From the rubble, the essay argues for a renewed international communism as the only adequate direction.

**Keywords:** Europe, Greece, world systems, ethnonationalism, borders, growth, political economy.

## 1. Europe and Empire

While Afghanistan has truly earned the title “graveyard of empires” where imperial pretensions go to die, is this formula not the most comprehensive description of Europe itself? Dead empires as far as the eye can see, hulking skeletons resting where their once-living bodies fell, bones at varying stages of liquefaction in the continental rain. At some late moment in this cemeterial history, Europe played host to a transformation in the mode that empire would take. In the terms offered by Giovanni Arrighi, this is the shift from “TMT” to “MTM” empires: the former extracting money from its territories in order to expand territory further, the latter expending money to expand territorially only in so far as it would increase the store of money.

The specifically capitalist form of empire, whose colonial imposition of direct domination (while not ignored) is somewhat downplayed within Arrighi’s framework of Gramscian hegemony extended to the scale of the nation-state, will eventually depart the Old World so that the United States can fulfill its historical mission to realize in full this peculiarly European invention. The imperial form in question features a set of internal compulsions, among them the flow of jobs toward low-wage nations and the flow of raw production goods toward high-productivity

nations, the great tidal washes of value and immiseration that found the relation between core and periphery.

While these compulsions produce an uneven landscape of exploitation and extractivism — industrial- and settler-centered dispossessions — they function as well at a planetary scale, as logistics build-outs allow for transnational wage arbitrage, productivity increases that are uneven but generalized, and extractivist regimes that intensify locally as climate and resource pressures develop globally. The TMT empire may have aspired to arrive at the edges of the map, but the MTM empire, even if it begins from a base a few hundred kilometers across, is born global, since in its compulsion to expand it must reconfigure every minute of daily life in every quarter of the globe as it funnels surplus value inward toward the great catchment of the core. For Arrighi, this expansion has two phases: material expansion, effectively meaning growth in systemic profits, employment, and productive capacities; and financial expansion, wherein control over global capital flows yields profits without material growth, with the shift from one phase to the other being both peak and sign of autumn.

It is useful to insist on reformulating this according to value production along the *arc of accumulation*, wherein early increases in productivity generate profits extensive enough to draw in greater capital reinvestment and to expand major sectors at a rate that more than countervails the tendency of productivity increases to expel workers from production. Eventually, these expulsions of labor from productive sectors exclude the basis of surplus value and *discumulation* sets in — Arrighi's financial expansion — wherein accumulation of value wanes and the hegemon is left to arrogate as much profit as possible from the motion of money in the markets.

This arc is the course of empire, contested at every moment, recomposing class and capital along the way. And it is in turn because of this intrinsic drive toward the transformation of life, rather than the simple seizure of territory which in the past could leave local “ways of life” largely unchanged, that such a situation can be passed off as a social phenomenon somehow independent of empire itself and called “modernity.”

This particular sleight, wherein a concrete mode of political-economic domination can appear as a span along an abstract timeline, gives sense to the concept of “Eurocentrism” which, often understood as an relative valuation of certain cultures (it is hard not to place all of these terms within the disbelief of quotation marks) or episteme — a sort of Mercator projection for consciousness — is more properly the triumph of this substitution. Let those who worry as to whether we have ever been modern turn to dust; we have passed off the characteristic intensifications of settler-capital as “progress,” have lived through the remaking of daily life according to the law of value or died in its wake, and that is enough to make historical claims.

## 2. Europe as Empire

There is no thought of Europe, all of this is to say, which is not a thought of empire and of accumulation. In seeking to understand the current fate of the European Union, rather than falling into the incommensurations of Schengen and Maastricht, the longstanding differentiations and conflicts according to ethnicity, sovereignty, and far more, it may prove functional to begin from the EU's contemporary status as empire or imperial aspirant, conditioned as it is by the unraveling of United States hegemony, the waning US capacity to center a cycle of accumulation (if not its ability to serve as an increasingly lonely global policeman) and the potential opening thus for a new hegemon. Arrighi's own late calculation imagined three divergent courses, all of them hinged on China's capacity (or lack thereof) to seize the global reins. One of these paths featured an Atlantic compact wherein “The United States and its European allies might attempt to use their military superiority to extract a “protection payment” from the emerging capitalist centers of East Asia,” and thereby bring into being “the first truly global empire in world history.”<sup>1</sup>

Against this, the actual existing wreckage of the European project. This essay understands the EU to be in the first instance an attempt to bring into being a superstate that, even if not centering a global empire on its own, could nonetheless be one center able to drive the restart of accumulation on a global scale and help coordinate a long 21<sup>st</sup> century — an empire forged treaty by treaty for the express purpose of taking the imperial baton pass from the United States at a late moment when no single western nation approaches the necessary scale and population for such a gambit. In train this essay understands the EU's current pathologies to be in many regards consequences of said ambition's grand hollowing.

Another way to limn this analytical framework is to suggest that the internal relations that bedevil the EU at present, notably around economic renationalization, intensified border regimes, and exits of various ilks, can only be understood against the EU's relation to the global politics in which it is situated. Here Immanuel Wallerstein's clear explication of the rationale for hyphenating “world-system” proves useful: “Putting in the hyphen was intended to underline that we are not talking about systems, economies, empires of the (whole) world, but about systems, economies, empires that are a world (but quite possibly, and indeed usually, not encompassing the entire globe).”<sup>2</sup>

Because of this bespoke concatenation of states planned to function as a single empire, we might speak for the first time of two world-

1 Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*, London: Verso, 2010, 381.

2 Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, 16–17.

systems arranged such that one is nested within the other: the European Union, and capitalist world-system more broadly which the EU hoped to center. For the moment we will have to persevere amidst the analytical ambiguities which result from the failure of these hopes. We cannot speak of EU as hegemon, nor of an EU-centered cycle of accumulation; its hopes were not to be realized. We can nonetheless speak of the EU as having its own core and periphery and of being a core of a larger world-system to which other states are peripheral. So in the first case the core is played for the most part by Germany, though states such as Austria and the Netherlands are functionally part of the core, while the periphery is played almost everyone else, most famously by the PIIGS (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, and Spain), in addition to smaller economies such as Cyprus and Malta. And in the second case, the EU operates as a core for surrounding national economies, extending east toward Russia, south into the Maghreb, and to the Mashriq between them. Consequent to the double system, what looks peripheral from Frankfurt may appear as the core from Aleppo or Pristina.

This bears careful consideration for the simple reason that it organizes what is at present the most dramatic, most dramatized, and most dangerous situation confronting Europe as world-system and as part of a world-system: migrant flows set in motion by the imbricated triumvirate of economic failure, civil war, and climate collapse; the border regimes being revised against these flows; and the renewed ethnonationalisms mobilized to enable both legal and extralegal violence against migrants. These matters, which cannot be reduced to political-economic determinations, can nonetheless not be thought without them, and it is here that we return to the conjoined matter of empire and accumulation.

### 3. Europe and Settler-Capitalism

Aimé Césaire assessed the bifurcation within the European imperial innovation decisively in his *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955): “The fact is that so-called European civilization — “Western” civilization” — as it has been shaped by two centuries of bourgeois rule is incapable of solving the two major problems to which its existence has given rise: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem.” These two problems are often registered as fundamentally distinct political economies, “capitalism” and “settler-colonialism,” and treated as if some speciation, asynchrony of development, or originary basis has left them too distinct to be grasped within a single framework or global unity (hence the recent vogue for pluralizing “histories of capitalism”). Understanding Césaire’s two major problems as *different, but one* — dialectically, that is to say — strikes me as a primary demand for thought at the level of the world-system. Though it is the nature of empiricism and of the micropolitical that ever more finely grained analysis will inevitably reveal ever more variegated local particulars until finally every instance is unique and models are revealed

as nothing more than abstractions useful or otherwise, capitalism and settler-colonialism might be less differing modes than differing geographical and temporal inflections of a single mode of production. In any regard they are more properly identified as co-constituting the political economy in full of what Glen Sean Coulthard has usefully called “settler capitalism” — the European style of empire which has depended on both.

Their orienting forms of dispossession are, as noted, exploitation of labor and extraction of natural resources respectively. In the terms drawn from the critique of political economy, we might say they are centered on command over labor power on the one hand, or variable capital; and command over means of production (particularly raw materials) on the other, or constant capital. Needless to say, both are always present; we speak here only of balance or orientation, shaped by and setting the terms of how it will be placed within any larger world economy. Just as a single capital must bring labor power and means of production together toward the highest level of productivity, so must empire at the level of the world-system and eventually the planet.

We might further clarify these inflections of political economy, perhaps toward circling back to their initial nominations. A political economy oriented by exploitation is necessarily one of *absorption*, in the sense of seeking to absorb labor inputs indefinitely toward material expansion, managed according to the discipline of the wage. A political economy oriented by extraction is necessarily one of *coloniality*, wherein the dispossession of Indigenous populations means their removal from traditional lands with neither promise nor threat of employment, left to be managed by forms of direct domination from genocide to apartheid to incarceration and other policing.

We might say, among other things, that the absorptive mode is that most attended to by the Marx of *Capital*, while mode of coloniality finds a leading thinker in the Frantz Fanon of *Wretched of the Earth*. Marx discloses with sustained care the ways that industrial and manufacturing economies absorb the dispossessed into a class of actual and potential laborers who are differentiated internally to allow for growth at the lowest possible wage level (hence reserve army of labor et cetera). Compassing nations colonized by the competing capitals of Europe, Fanon writes of how those dispossessed in this manner, “forced off the family land by the growing population in the countryside and by colonial expropriation, circle the towns tirelessly, hoping that one day or another they will be let in” — a veritable image of non-absorption.<sup>3</sup>

These differences go a good distance toward explaining, for example, why Marx and Fanon were able to reach such different conclusions regarding the nature of the lumpenproletariat, the structure

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<sup>3</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, (1963) 2004, 81.

of revolution, and the relation of the two; they offer not so much different interpretations of a shared situation as a shared interpretation of distinct situations where different relations are in play. Moreover, neither absorption nor coloniality is adequately explanatory of the history of unfree labor, the necessary third term of slavery — which features both immiserating labor exploitation and brutal direct domination, and whose role in accumulation remains fiercely contested, though no one disputes its role as pedestal for European empire:

Direct slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have not cotton; without cotton you have not modern industry. It is slavery that has given the colonies their value; it is the colonies that have created world trade, and it is world trade that is the pre-condition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance.<sup>4</sup>

One might note that the global success of United States rested on its arrangement of all three: its historically specific admixture of wage discipline and direct domination toward an empire “founded on the lash, the land grab, and the Lowell System.”

Because the imperial core comes to feature large-scale absorption (as in the image of workshop to the world and so on) that often effaces bloody histories of land struggles on which it is overlaid; because it appears to be *where accumulation happens* rather than where the lion’s share of value is captured for which the full ensemble of relations that constitute a world-system is requisite<sup>5</sup>; and thus finally because the core’s character appears to be an explanation for, more than a beneficiary of, accumulation at a global scale, the central and inescapable feature of wage-labor exploitation is often given an exaggerated role in understanding systemic accumulation (including, arguably, in Marx). As corollary to this, the framework of core and periphery, and dependency theory in particular, is regularly understood to efface class politics (see for example Brenner, “The Origins of Capitalist Development”), despite

4 Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Moscow: (1847) 1958, 125.

5 One notes the analogy, at a different scale, to the insight of Marxist-Feminist value theory: that while the male wage laborer appears to produce value and thus “deserves” to be paid for rendering this service to capital, this production is in reality a collaborative effort toward which unpaid, feminized reproductive labor in the domestic sphere is a necessary component. This analogy is useful in three ways: it distinguishes between the apparent localization of value production and the systemic character of accumulation that is veiled by this appearance; it shows the necessary unity of the dispossession that is wage labor and the dispossession that is exclusion toward accumulation; and, in analogizing the hidden value-work of feminized labor and that of the racialized colonial dispossession, it discloses the ways that a strong distinction between sites where value appears to be produced and sites where it appears not (work and home, metropole and colony) enables a specious opposition between class and identity that bedevils Marxism to this day, and about which there is much more to say outside the confines of this essay and/or Europe.

the fact that class operates in every moment and at every scale within the world system.<sup>6</sup>

This confusion is further enabled in part by the illusion that, because land and habitation are transhistorical, land struggles retain an autonomy from historically specific modes of production; it is enabled further by the substitution of *working class* (haunted always by the figure of 19<sup>th</sup> century factory workers in the coal smoke-shrouded metropole) for *proletariat* (designating all of those without reserves including those excluded from wage labor). All of these factors sum up to the evident absurdity that the dispossession of wage exploitation, and opposition thereto, might be treated self-evidently as class struggle, while dispossession of people from traditional lands in the peripheries and hinterlands, and opposition thereto, seem often difficult for Marxists to decipher as class politics — when such opposition is in truth a doubled struggle against local class power and against the international division of dispossession which in part constitutes settler-capitalism.

All of that said, exploitation-based accumulation is an axiomatic feature of the settler-capitalist empire and in its fortunes a telling sundial regarding empire’s passage. When systemic accumulation wanes, when the end of real growth arrives, which is to say, when a hegemon reaches the point when it can no longer expand materially through internalizing further labor power, the hour is late.

#### 4. Europe as Zero-Sum Game

The neo-imperial dream of the EU arose from the end of growth for the United States and waning accumulation across the US-centered world-system, or at least the end of growth adequate to displace the volatility to which capital is heir (David Harvey and others suggest 2.5% as a minimum). This is the circumstance in which Arrighi’s original question about a next cycle, and the possibility of a concatenated Atlantic hegemon, are posed.

Since the US cycle’s decline first visible in the sixties and bursting into bloom around 1973 — comprising a series of internal crises, international failures, and ongoing imposition of austerity conditions — we have seen something like a shift, within the early-industrializing nations of the capitalist core, away from the absorptive capitalism that characterized the Long Boom and arguably the larger period beginning with the Industrial Revolution, and toward something like coloniality or neo-coloniality, as deindustrialization hurls laborers into a service sector that (even while suffering from internal limits to productivity increases, Baumol and Bowen’s “cost disease”) can absorb them only incompletely, leading to an absolute and relative increase in populations surplus to the needs of surplus value production. With shocking prescience, James

6 Robert Brenner, “The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism.” *New Left Review*, no. 104 (1977): 25–92, 91.

Boggs captures this trajectory in the United States as early as 1963, the year of *Wretched of the Earth's* translation into English: "Today in the United States there is no doubt that those at the bottom are growing in numbers much faster than the system will ever be able to absorb," he suggests, concluding that "America is headed toward full unemployment, not full employment." Absorption again, and its limits.

But of course even the formally wageless, or those driven into precarious underemployment, must still engage in some sort of activity toward food and shelter (outside of the historically rare times and places of full unemployment insurance). This informalization of labor proceeds unevenly at a global level. "That is due to three things," notes Aaron Benanav, "first, to the continued entry of large numbers of people into labour markets, particularly in L[ess] D[eveloped] C[ountries]; second, to a persistently low demand for labour, especially for unskilled, manual, and routine labour; and third, to governments' unwillingness or perhaps inability, in the face of economic challenges, to make full employment...a major policy priority."<sup>7</sup> Benanav here narrates increasingly generalized conditions that both signal and derive from discumulation, the downward slope of the arc of accumulation.

It is in this context that we may think about the Eurozone awoken from its dreams of hegemony by the failure of European growth, at least "real" growth in the sense of material expansion. In the terms of the economists Will Bartlett and Ivana Prica, "The Core countries have suffered from secular stagnation as their economies have matured and the autonomous part of their growth has diminished. Their economic growth has been propelled by exports to the rest of the EU leading to structural imbalances within the Eurozone with a trade surplus in Germany and the Core countries, as the countries in the Periphery and super-Periphery are consumers of Core country exports."<sup>8</sup> This formulation is useful for its clarity regarding relative and absolute economic conditions: Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands, e.g., can occupy an advantageous position in the Eurosystem while at the same time suffering from what bourgeois economics calls secular stagnation and what heterodox political economy might identify as secular crisis.

*Different but one*; this is the dreamworld and catastrophe of the Eurozone. Germany, it is worth noting, achieves and preserves its advantage in part through its success in driving down domestic wages alongside high productivity to increase its exporting power, but this operation itself depends on financial expansion. As detailed by Galina Hale and Maurice Obstfeld, Germany has been able to borrow from

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<sup>7</sup> Aaron Benanav, "The origins of informality: The ILO at the limit of the concept of unemployment," *Journal of Global History* (2019), 14: 1, 107–125, 109.

<sup>8</sup> William Bartlett and Ivana Prica, "Interdependence between Core and Peripheries of the European Economy: Secular Stagnation and Growth in the Western Balkans" (February 8, 2016). *LEQS Paper No.* 104, 7.

global financial centers outside the Eurozone at 2% and loan this same money to the Europeriphery, notably Greece and Spain, at 5.2%, even as the integration of the Monetary Union has decreased transaction costs.<sup>9</sup> This has the double effect of generating a profit from the carry trade, and provisioning on credit the periphery's capacity to continue as a set of importing nations: "In particular, as Germany is a strong exporter," note Bartlett and Prica, "she has run structural current account surpluses, while the peripheral countries such as Greece, Spain, and Italy have run structural current account deficits."<sup>10</sup>

Another way to formulate this: Germany now serves as a catchment for value throughout its near world-system; its surplus depends on the deficits at the periphery of the Eurozone. Much of this value capture is accomplished via financial vehicles indicative of the shift from, in Arrighi's terms, material to financial expansion: "financialisation was also a product of the tendency towards secular stagnation, as the provision of consumer credit was an important way in which the Core countries were able to stimulate demand and overcome under-consumption tendencies. The phenomenon of financialisation has also spread to the peripheries, making them vulnerable to the additional financial effects of crisis."<sup>11</sup>

In some sense this is only to say that, notably in the last 12 years, the Eurozone has become a zero-sum system; Wolfgang Streeck, to whom we will return, describes it as an "asymmetric fiscal stabilisation regime."<sup>12</sup> In Matthias Kaelberer's virtuously simple formulation, "someone's surplus [was] someone else's deficit."<sup>13</sup>

But such deficits are not themselves stable. This contradiction has long been obvious, but its implications are still unfolding, ceaselessly expressed *within* and *among* national political economies. What is not yet broadly recognized, and thus the point to which I cannot help but return, is the extent to which this contradiction was to be managed via accumulation within the Eurosystem, and the extent to which its morbid symptoms arise from the ruination of this plan. Zero-sum, to repeat (for it proves to be the fatal point) means non-absorptive.

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<sup>9</sup> Galina Hale and Maurice Obstfeld, "The Euro and the Geography of International Debt Flows," *Journal of the European Economic Association*, vol 14(1), (2016), 115-144.

<sup>10</sup> Bartlett and Prica, 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Wolfgang Streeck, "Rise of the European Consolidation State," MPIfG Discussion Paper 1/15/2015, Cologne: Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Matthias Kaelberer, "Sovereign debt or balance of payments crisis? Exploring the structural logic of adjustment in the Eurozone," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 16(4), 2014, p. 420.

## 5. Europe and Civil War

If Germany has a single other in the Eurozone it is Greece. We can see already, if we may again risk the drawing of analogies between nation and individual (knowing full well the limits to such parallels, as for example in the misbegotten idea that states benefit from balancing their books in the same way as do households), that in relation to capital at the core, Greece as a nation is forced into the position of the informalized worker, whose superexploitation is premised on paying them less than the cost of reproducing their labor. This is the basic goal of austerity economics, producing a gap between income and the cost of reproduction which must then be bridged with debt, to be financed by an enervated capital for whom debt has become the crucial vehicle for profit. This strategy is guaranteed to result in crisis after crisis as debts come due (hence my preference for the term “Long Crisis” over the term “Long Downturn”). So we can describe austerity dynamics, which is to say crisis dynamics, as again having a double character: Greece is compelled to apply austerity to its residents even as austerity is applied to Greece and other peripheral nations by the institutions of the European core.

Moreover, if we can push this suggestive analogy just a bit further, we might restate the double character of the crisis — which is to say, of the end of absorption — as follows: that it presses a larger fraction of each national population into proletarianization and indeed lumpenization, while also pressing fractions of the Eurozone itself, that is to say, states within the superstate, into the position of the lumpen. One is the measure of the other: the production of lumpen populations in Greece measures the hyperproletarianization of Greece itself, which is to say, measures the end of absorption in the EU more broadly. Again, while it may at first appear that these contradictory doublings arise from the dangerous analogy between individual and nation as political-economic units, in truth the doubling arises from the contradictory existence of the Eurozone as a supranational capitalist system comprising national economies disciplined by a shared currency.

The internally peripheral nations of the Eurozone, and particularly those mentioned earlier (Greece, Italy, Spain, Cyprus, Malta), thus find themselves between the proverbial rock and a hard place. They are caught up in a disaster conditioned by the unique historical relation arising from the nesting of an internally variegated superstate unified by a single currency within a larger world-system to which the superstate plays core. These nations’ frontiers are always two frontiers, both their own and Europe’s. Migrants arriving from Asia and Africa as well as from the European superperiphery hope to enter the EU but they are of course entering specific intake nations. Forced into permanent deficit according to the zero-sum character of the Eurozone, these nations are compelled to function as *if* they have a surplus, serving as the superstate’s border control and absorption zone both, without the

concomitant capacity. Should these refugees succeed in entering, they immediately enter into the hyperproletarianized masses of the Europeriphery’s lumpen nations. That is to say, while it may be in the end a desirable outcome for them, they can only enter into the cascading structure of superfluity resulting from the end of absorption.

So we can see three cuts made by the blade of crisis, which intensifies the antagonisms within each Eurozone nation, among nations of the Eurosystem, and between the Eurosystem and the nations of outmigration. To continue with the Greek case as an example, or as an instance within what we might call spectrumatic proletarianization (that is, happening at all levels and scales): when I speak of hyperproletarianization or the production of surplus population in Greece (whose rates of both overall and long-term unemployment remain second-highest in the OECD and easily the highest in the Eurozone) I speak of among other things what are sometimes referred to as the riots beginning in 2008. Such struggles should not be construed as a simple response to the stimulus of unemployment, but rather are conditioned by exclusion from production such that any social struggle will perforce take the form of direct conflict in the sphere of circulation, in the agora, the plaka, and so on. These are the subjects of Chapter 25 in the first volume of *Capital*, surplus to capital’s capacity for value production. Indeed, this narration of the end of absorption arises from an attempt to restate Chapter 25 in ways that can describe the conditions and trajectories of national and supranational economies in ways that inflect political decisions. The riots continued persistently as unemployment moved toward its 2013 peak, persistently enough that it is not clear to me that we should *not* use the term civil war in Greece, albeit quieted somewhat for now.

By the same token, the ongoing if deferred question of Grexit, alongside the tragicomedy of Brexit which has for the moment supplanted the Greek case in the global imagination, should be understood as moves within a developing civil war in the Eurosystem. The argument that the nation-state must again be strengthened daily gains adherents not just on the right but on the purported left. Denmark’s *Socialdemokraterne*, having come to power in 2019, forwarded during the election vitriolic anti-immigration policies formerly the preserve of the hard right *Dansk Folkeparti*. The argument, increasingly common, was that such policies were needed to protect the vestiges of the Scandinavian welfare state, pitting a national working class against migrant “invaders.” Left parties across Europe have increasingly come to borrow the rational and rhetoric of right wing nationalists, calculating how and how much to express xenophobic beliefs and policies to earn the support of a working class ideologically constructed according to race and ethnicity (and here we must admit that the US left has scarcely been immune to this lure, as select representatives of the renascent democratic socialist movement have affirmed the need for supporting

hard borders toward wooing the national working class).<sup>14</sup>

If the Danish case is exemplary, its cognate in Germany is more worrisome to the exact degree that Germany has been able to impose its interests on the EU. We cannot avoid the morass of *Aufstehen*, the movement founded by among others Sara Wagenknecht, parliamentary chair of *Die Linke*, as well as the nominally left theorist Wolfgang Streeck, who at present understands strong borders as the last line of defense against both against the “monster” of financialized global capital and against the violence of immigration, a conflation that demonstrates all too clearly the affinity between abstractly economic re-nationalization and authoritarian xenophobia. In Streeck’s own words, “One result of [the migration of foreign workers and refugees] is another migration — the migration of the violence that is destroying the stateless societies of the periphery into the metropolis, in the form of ‘terrorism’ wrought by a new class of ‘primitive rebels’ that lacks any vision of a practically possible progressive future.”<sup>15</sup> This passage, as noted in Jerome Roos’ extraordinary and detailed study of Streeck’s political itinerary, engages in “directly reproducing the Islamophobic trope that ‘mass migration’ leads to terrorism.”<sup>16</sup> Streeck is hardly the only formerly left intellectual to indulge such crudely prejudiced frameworks; Slavoj Žižek’s interventions regarding the need for migrant assimilation to European values spring to mind. Streeck’s passage, however, is (perhaps unknowingly) more illuminating for how it also reproduces the new logic of a zero-sum empire: absorption of new citizens into the national economy, once constitutive of economic progress and political progressiveness, is now a threat to “a practically possible progressive future.” Economically impossible, it may be dispensed with as a political goal. Progress and the taking in of strangers now find themselves irreconcilable.

Germany’s position, as noted early on, is peculiar. Because it profits from asymmetrical power within the EU for as long as it can exploit the proletarianized states of the periphery (which, it should go without saying, still have their own internal relations of exploitation) and dragoon them into serving as absorption zones, it has an interest in trying to stabilize the EU’s contradictions, alongside the competing interest in renationalizing. This tension is not unique to Germany but is condensed

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<sup>14</sup>That most careful studies of the effects of immigration suggest a minimal impact on wages has made little difference to the left ideologues of border control purporting to protect a national working class; it is hard to dispute that this set of beliefs transcends the empirical. For one summary of the literature, see Alan de Brauw, “Does Immigration Reduce Wages?,” which features a useful bibliography despite its own political predilections. <https://www.cato.org/cato-journal/fall-2017/does-immigration-reduce-wages>

<sup>15</sup>Wolfgang Streeck, “The Post-Capitalist Interregnum: The Old System Is Dying, But a New Social Order Cannot Yet Be Born,” *Juncture*, 23, 2, 2016: 68–77, 73.

<sup>16</sup>Jerome Roos, “From the Demise of Social Democracy to the ‘End of Capitalism’: The Intellectual Trajectory of Wolfgang Streeck,” *Historical Materialism* 27(2), 2019, 248–288.

there, the underlying contradiction of the politically incoherent “fortress leftism” for which that nation is laboratory. The contradiction, however, is unlikely to be stabilized, hence the civil war in Europe: the superstate is premised on a model of growth now unavailable, and the perceived need to husband national resources cannot help but set individual states against one another, though this antagonism will be prosecuted for now not by national armies but through the renegotiation and eventual hollowing of membership agreements.

We should not mistake this for a pacific resolution, however; current, ongoing, and ascending border violence against migrants is, among other things, the violeent expresson of this civil war. While we should resist reducing racial and ethic animus to simple economic determinations, we might also recognize the profound entanglement wherein the end of absorption means xenophobic border regimes and renascent ethnonationalism across the political spectrum.

## 6. Europe and the End of Politics

I am not here arguing for the preservation or support of the EU as a world-historical political project (the seeming impossibility of exit even when it is a popular desire is surely the best argument against its continued existence). I am simply noting the constraints that shape the particular form taken by the inevitable collapse of the EU, still in progress. It is manifestly true that the will toward hard borders, against free movement within the Schengen Zone, is a structurally violent social tendency enabled by the global division of labor and oriented by racial and ethnic subordination. It remains difficult for this to yield the conclusion that therefore one must be in favor of the EU, given that it is the political economy of the EU itself — the superstate at the end of accumulation — that assures such social tendencies will arise and find both popular and political adhesion, and thus that support for the EU is support for more of the same.

*In sum, racial, ethnic, and religious exclusion and border violence will continue as a necessary feature of the EU, not despite it.*

Meanwhile, this particular contradiction among many brings into relief once again the absolute imbrication of class and race politics, disclosed as a unity wherever borders are asked to function as protections of the right to be exploited. Efforts to think class and race in opposition, or as competing claims, should be resolutely opposed, no matter the direction from which they arrive.

All of this is politics. Consequently, any idea of the end of politics will sound curious. But a certain kind of politics may be reaching its limits. While much has been said about the rise of openly ethnonationalist state and street politics in various places including the EU, and about the concomitant degree to which left or social democratic parties have come to tarry with policies traditionally associated with the right, all of this inextricable from waning accumulation, such attentions risks

concealing the extent to which the left/right spectrum itself, with us since the Assemblée Nationale of 1789, seems to be losing its efficacy. The designations “right” and “left” seem no longer able to predict political directions at all.

This is true most dramatically at the frontiers of the EU, in the slow-motion turbulence of its dissolution. While there are evident limits to the comparison of Greece and the United Kingdom, foremost among them the relative autonomy of the pound and the far better if still dire economic circumstances in the UK, the two nations’ dramas usefully bracket the range of this disturbance. The final and draconian imposition of the core’s austerity program by SYRIZA, rather than seizing the opportunity to depart the EU, is scarcely the lone example. In the UK, after all, the Labour and Tory parties both were unable to marshal their members in a single direction for the Brexit referendum, both parties splitting unevenly. This has turned out to be a sort of original sin which cannot be erased, leading to the protracted irresolution, the fragmenting of the parties, the birth of new ones, and so on. As long as the Leave/Remain axis does not align with the left/right axis that orients the major parties, parliamentary solutions are out of reach and will be imposed from without (this is what “No Deal” means, no less than a deal written in Brussels).

In train of this, voting seems to be losing its efficacy as well. SYRIZA’s great yes to the troika followed immediately on the electorate’s great *no*; never has there been a more glorious moment for democracy from above, wherein the will of the people, supposedly sovereign, counts only if it affirms its masters. The UK, meanwhile, lurches ever closer to a second referendum, whether in the original terms or reformulated according to ensuing events. Rip it up and start again! This is in no way cavalier; what else to do when the previous vote has proved literally impracticable? And yet it is a short leap to other votes proving to be similarly nonbinding. This would be the end of politics as we know it, of the liberal-parliamentarist compact between people and state, nominal as it often appears. Perhaps that is fitting, as that politics is an artifact of accumulation anyway, of the need to manage ongoing absorption at the core; it has to go sooner or later.

Two examples do not a historically decisive pattern prove. The current arrangement may stagger on a few more decades, and may be unmade far more directly by the same climate collapse that sets more and more migrants in motion. However, as this essay has hoped to suggest, these instances of crisis in Europe cannot be written down to contingency or coincidence. For all their real differences, these examples express the pathologies of Europe’s late bid for restored imperial status, of its last chance to be a center of accumulation, and that chance’s wrack and ruin — pathologies compelling an imagined opposition between national working classes and the international proletariat, between Europe and its dialectical others. This is the very inversion of communism: fortifications at the edges of empire, refortification of individual nations, internal

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fortifications against the growing lumpen classes of each nation. All those fortifications! And all of them in the end against those who cannot be absorbed, cannot be internalized, who are met with violence at every border, every frontier a potter’s field, Europe an empire of graveyards.

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