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Afterword

Claske Vos

Abstract

Key words:

Between 20 and 21 June 2024, the first academic workshop of the ValEUs network "Critical Perspectives on European Values" was held at Université Paris 8. The workshop aimed to explore the prerequisites for a constructive critical perspective on European values. The main objective was to discuss the pitfalls and blind spots that determine the academic landscape around European values and to steer it into new directions. The workshop displayed the sheer diversity of the ValEUs network in terms of (inter)disciplinary approaches, research themes and geographical spread of the participants ranging from Colombia to Kazakhstan. This multidimensionality led to lively discussions about how to revisit research on European values and move towards constructive critical perspectives.

Three observations, which were central to the discussions held, can also be recognized in this collection of the first issue of the Interdisciplinary Review of ValEUs. First, many participants questioned the very concept of European Values. Their efforts in historical genealogy, transnational analysis and decentering laid the groundwork for deconstructing the idea of attributing certain norms and epistemologies to Europe or the West more broadly. Second, participants addressed the prominence of European values in the institutional make-up of the EU and what happens when the EU does not live up to these norm-setting practices in the implementation of its policies. More research is needed about such contestations of European values. It would contribute significantly to the literature that examines the dissemination EU values through policy mechanisms. Third, participants observed that European values are still frequently represented as static while recent research is showing that they are subject to

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reinterpretation. They argue for an expansion of research that is able to capture the fluctuations and reinterpretations of values and how these reinterpretations emerge in specific socio-political contexts.

1) Decentering and Recentering European Values

Concerning the first observation—the acknowledgement of the persistence of rather narrow Western centered interpretations —the participants argued that the conception of European values has been largely determined by academics operating from a particular group of (mainly West) European countries, representing only a privileged group of voices. As such research on European values displays centers and peripheries, categories of us and them, patterns of inclusion and exclusion, and such research reveals asymmetrical power relations. Academic work on European values is determined by Eurocentric epistemologies inscribed in a historiography dominated by notions of cultural superiority which have become diffused, translated and reinterpreted all over the world. Responding to these rather narrow interpretations of European values, several network members called for a decentering and recentering of research on European values by critically examining their Eurocentric epistemologies.

This attempt to constructively deconstruct Eurocentric epistemologies also informs the first three articles of this special issue. While recognizing the value of postcolonial and decolonial theory, all authors call for a further elaboration of these theoretical models. First, Belinda Davis provides an in-depth historiography of constructions of 'the West' as significantly different from the rest of the world. She encourages present-day historians to change these epistemological patterns, move away from the 'West' and come with more inclusive storylines. Second, Thomas Brisson critiques the dominant interpretations of Dipesh Chakrabarty's book *Provincializing Europe* as being depicted as an attempt do decolonize Europe's epistemic legacies. Instead, he argues that the book should be read as a plea for the recognition of 'coeval', global and plural modernities as it both acknowledges and critiques Europe's epistemic legacies. In line with Brisson's critical stance towards current trends to decolonize Western epistemologies, Kolja Lindner finally compares the explanatory power of postcolonial and decolonial theories. He concludes that postcolonial theories provide a sounder framework to critically examine European values as it provides room for dialogue, world-making and world-sharing, which is what the delinking perspective of decolonialism fails to achieve.

Davis, Brisson and Lindner all call for a critical examination of Eurocentric epistemologies and the post- and decolonial theories that emerged in response to these hegemonic frameworks. They argue that different epistemological frameworks need to be brought into conversation with one another and that more room should be provided for

frameworks currently missing in debates on European values. This was also brought forward by others during the workshop in Paris. For example, Cecilia Muzika-Minteer showed in her presentation how European colonial imaginations still determine developmental practices of the Green Economy in the Western Sahara. She addressed the devastating impact of these abstract, idealized and concretized developmental imaginations of the international investors on the built environment in Western Sahara. Furthermore, Muzika-Minteer made a plea for the inclusion of embodied knowledge and memory of the Sahrawi people to expose the erasure caused by these hegemonic systems. As she suggests—which was also confirmed by Laura Leonardi in this special issue—only by drawing on insights from several theoretical frameworks, more critical approaches to European values can emerge. Developing more inclusive epistemologies demand a real effort to bring in other voices than those usually heard. This requests investments in translation of texts beyond the main European languages, openness to use different methodologies and an examination of alternative forms of source material than those traditionally used in Western academic environments.

2) Norm Setting Practices and Decision-Making Processes

Regarding the second observation—the need for more insights in the effects of EU norm-setting practices and decision-making processes—many participants of the workshop argued that transfers of norm-setting practices frequently lead to friction in the contexts in which these are implemented and reveal discrepancies once implemented. For example, Silvana Insignares-Cera and Mariangela Rueda Fiorentino point at the inconsistencies involved in the promotion of democracy as part of trade and association agreements the EU struck with countries in Latin America. As their research reveals, while formally, democracy lies at the heart of the EU's international relations, in its actions—and particularly in the decision not to sanction democratic transgressions—the EU is prioritizing economic and trade interests over democratic standards negatively impacting on the mutual reinforcement of democracy and trade. In their contributions to the workshop, similar discrepancies were observed by Nina Sajić and Aleksandar Vranješ concerning the endorsement of European values. In their examination of EU involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, they conclude that EU's involvement in the Peace Implementation Council confirms Bosnia and Herzegovina's subordination to international governance structures which as they contend are frequently undemocratic in nature. As Sajić and Vranješ argue, the relevance the EU attributes to the evaluations of the Office of the High Representative for the assessment of the accession preparation process, stands in stark contrast the core values of the EU related to self-determination and democracy.

They inspired us as a network to explore the inconsistencies and contradictions at play in the implementation of EU values by means of its legal frameworks, which impact negatively on the norm-setting practices of the EU. It is a valuable insight that in order to maintain its position in the world, the EU frequently prioritizes rational choice over more constructivist considerations inspired by normative practices. In other words, the EU's search for security, stability and economic gain, tends to overrule adherence to values such as democracy, freedom and human rights. This was also confirmed by Laura Leonardi who observed that EU investments in interstate solidarity tend to focus more on "competitive solidarity" than on a balanced protection of fundamental rights. Vice versa, several of the actors in powerful positions at state levels of governance do not prioritize investments in European values and face difficulties implementing these values due to their challenging political and socio-economic contexts. As Insignares-Cera and Rueda Fiorentino show, political will might be lacking concerning the application of democratic clauses because these clauses interfere with notions of sovereignty. Additionally, as Sajić and Vranješ demonstrate, contradictory norm-setting practices sometime mean further destabilizing already fragile political systems.

These studies show that the norm setting practices of the EU reveal power asymmetries caused by the interdependencies of the commissioners and the recipients of EU policy interventions. In her contribution to the workshop Amelie Kutter addressed EU enlargement policy and added another dimension to these interdependencies. Kutter asked us to consider that EU interventions and their norm-setting practices do not only display power asymmetries, but also reconfigure socio-spatial asymmetries. In other words, while accession conditionality and its emphasis on EU values mobilises aspirations for a better future, it also justifies projections of superiority and inferiority, placing the Western Balkans in a peripheral position in relation to the rest of Europe. During her presentation at the workshop Cecilia Muzika-Minteer revealed similar patterns of peripheralization caused by international interventions in the Western Sahara. She showed how international organizations imposed their own and often value driven agendas on a part of the world which they still treat as subordinate. As she demonstrated, the Western Sahara is still treated as a former colony that can be exploited by the modernized West.

The persisting asymmetries addressed in the workshop and taken up across these articles, as well as the dissonances between norm setting practices and decision-making processes, expose a contradiction which lies at the heart of EUropean values. On the one hand, these values are meant to foster inclusivity, solidarity and mutual respect. On the other hand, contradictions, persisting power asymmetries and peripheralization lead to exclusion, interdependence and a transfer of norm-setting practices which come into friction in the contexts in which these are implemented. Contestations are a natural result of these inconsistencies and contradictions at play. As many of the participants during the workshop argued, there is a need for more research

that exposes such contestations of European values. While there is a growing body of work that critically assesses 'EU actorness' in international relations, there is need for additional interdisciplinary studies that can expose the reception, reappropriation and contestations of European values in the settings in which these come to rest. This will provide useful insights in the EU's self-ascribed role as normative power in the world, a power which is not self-evident, but increasingly scrutinized due to its contradictory nature.

3) Reappropriations of European values

The final observation made—which is in line with the above observations—has to do with the recognition that European values are not static, but actively moderated and reappropriated by diverse actors on several levels. Hence, European values are not only contested due to contradictory norm-setting practices of the EU, but also actively reinterpreted and reconfigured for different purposes by different actors. For example, quite a few participants at the workshop referred at current trends—often related to the rise of the far-right—in which European values are reinterpreted in such ways that they represent a white, Christian, European community fostering distinctions between those that supposedly embody and those that allegedly undermine European values, in particular Muslims. During the workshop, Veronica Federico provided a telling example of such reframing practices. She presented several instances of the misuse of gender equality and women's rights by populist radical right parties in different European countries as a means to tighten migration rules and oppose the idea of multicultural societies. As Federico shows, such depictions in which migrants are portrayed as a threat to European values, became used as a motive to exclude migrants from the European community. Similar opportunistic reconfigurations of values as a means to fulfill right-wing populist purposes were observed by Daniel Mikecz. His article reveals how Hungary's illiberal regime uses Eurosceptic rhetoric to mobilize voters despite consistently high public support for EU membership. Mikecz shows how Victor Orbán presents an alternative path to modernization for his voters by highlighting perceived failures of Western policies, particularly regarding demographics and migration. Stressing Hungary's traditional family model, and anti-immigration sentiments, Orbán emphasizes the resilience of Central Europe and how it upholds "authentic" European values despite historical challenges, and continue to defend Western Europe, as it has in the past.

While Federico and Mikecz primarily emphasized reinterpretations of European values by the far-right, other reinterpretation of European values were also discussed during the workshop. Partially in response to these populist attempts to reconstruct European values, some

participants in the workshop showed how movements emerged that actively counteract the polarization caused by these rather xenophobic reinterpretations of European values. As Leonardi's article illustrates, the migration policy crisis in Italy has led to a renewed focus on solidarity that actively acts against the current populist Italian government and EU migration policies. It led to the emergence of new transnational communities of NGO's and citizen associations that actively started to contest Italian and EU interventions and provide new, more inclusive meanings to European values. Such expressions of what Leonardi calls "cosmopolitanism from below" have become powerful forces that tackle the inconsistencies and discrepancies of EU actions and its polarizing repercussions such as those that emerged in Hungary. Returning to the need to revise existing epistemologies, Leonardi concludes her article with a strong plea to anchor cosmopolitan solidarity in the EU institutional framework and consider it in EU decision-making on migration policy. She argues that more attention should be paid to the ways in which concrete practices and local initiatives operationalize solidarity at the societal level. This, Leonardi contends, necessitates a cultural shift within the epistemic community studying European values, as room should be provided for the ways in which European values are actively reinterpreted by those working with these values. There is a need for research that is able to capture the reinterpretations of values examining under which circumstances such reinterpretations occur. This will provide insights in the polarizing and unifying forces of the reinterpretations of European values and how to respond to these.

4) Concluding words

How to move forward now that the pitfalls and blind spots of existing academic work on European values have become clearer? Based on the first observation that it is necessary to decenter and recenter research on European values, key is to rethink the current structures that are in place and to consider the legacies of those structures. There is an urgent need to turn matters upside down, change persisting Western Eurocentric epistemologies and include insights from other disciplines and parts of the world. This asks for openness towards different methods, datasets and interpretative models and for the inclusion of non-Western academic accounts on European values. Concerning the second observation, there is a need to expose and critically examine the EU's struggles in living up to the values it presents to its members and the world. This means exposing the discrepancies at play in the implementation of EU norm-setting practices and the repercussions of such discrepancies. Furthermore, it means unveiling the several asymmetries at play in EU policy making processes and how persisting imbalances, including those related to the EU's colonial past, still impact on EU (foreign) policy

interventions. By exposing the reception of European values in the settings in which these come to rest, useful insights will be provided in the effects and contestations of the EU's norm setting practices. Finally, the third observation—how European values are actively reinterpreted in different socio-political contexts—underlines the importance of research that unpacks how European values become reconfigured—when, by whom, for what and in which contexts. It means considering European values as actants, actively used and reinterpreted to change future perspectives.

What this special issue of the Interdisciplinary Review of ValEUs shows is that in our attempts to work towards a constructive critical perspective on European values, the starting point is awareness about the existing academic shortcomings. Based on these shortcomings, steps can be taken to broaden perspectives, which will allow us to fully grasp the nature of European values. In this process, the idea is not to turn a blind eye to existing interpretations of European values, but to re-imagine them in more constructive ways.